

## **On The Other Hand: Performance as Embodied Gesture**

**Lou Sydel, Class of 2022.5**

This summer I expanded on research for my senior project in Theater, Dance, and Anthropology. My main focus engages the relationship between gesture studies and performance. How can the study of nonverbal communication inspire the development of a theatrical piece? Likewise, how can performance illuminate academic text written about the body? My work this summer was shared at two events: the first was a presentation at the International Society of Gesture Studies Conference in Chicago, and the second was a performance of an excerpt of my solo work at the Celebration Barn in South Paris, Maine.

The title *On The Other Hand* derives from the concept that the human body is a framework for how we understand the world: if we had eight arms, we might say “on the eighth hand!” As we only have two, my explorations are centered on binary modes of thinking both in performance and academia, as well as the gender binary. Inspired by this notion, I have been weaving together an evening length work that combines elements of dance, theater, mime, and clowning. I began the process by composing short-form vignettes featuring connections to gesture: drawing mainly from my experience as a trans, nonbinary performer navigating the world of gendered body language.

I then began to transform this work into a conference-style poster presentation examining the relevancy of theatrical practice in academia. It was an exciting challenge to translate movement into text and theory to see where the two overlapped. I focused mainly on a cross-disciplinary look into similarities between movement-theater pedagogies and foundational gesture theory (Adam Kendon, David McNiell). It was an enlightening experience to participate in the gesture conference, especially within this niche subject. I had the opportunity to network with scholars and listen to panels of prominent researchers presenting on topics such as language acquisition, deaf studies, cognitive psychology, and much more. I also interacted with graduate and PhD students from around the globe, learning first hand about their careers in academia.

My time at the Celebration Barn Theater was memorable and empowering. On the first day I arrived, I participated in a full day of theatrical devising — an ensemble technique used to create original material — with some of the theater’s most acclaimed collaborators. It was an honor to be a part of the lineage of this historical performance tradition, in a place best described as a “world-renowned hotbed of physical theater” (The Portland Press Herald). Moreover, it was thrilling as an artist to show my work beyond Bowdoin’s campus: after the performance I received personal feedback from an audience of fellow artists, directors, and patrons. At the Celebration Barn I learned the power of building relationships as a working artist. Sharing stories around a campfire after a day of rehearsing was meaningful and informative, and I left the Barn with a new sense of community.

When I first began my journey at Bowdoin, pursuing an interest in physical theater and the anthropology of gesture, I never would have imagined opportunities such as this summer research grant. As I reflect on my Bowdoin experience, I can say without a doubt that the close mentorship I’ve received from my professors has been a highlight of my academic career. Thank you to the Micoleau Family as well as the Bowdoin Dance, Theater, and Anthropology departments for this generous support.

**Faculty Mentors: Davis Robinson and Willi Lempert**

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Lou Sydel     Bowdoin College     Advisors: William Lempert, Davis Robinson

**Artist Statement**

I am a choreographer and theater-maker interested in what movement reveals about culture. I aim to explore and explode binaries within performance and academia. I draw from lived experiences of transness in my work.

**Main Aims**

Juxtaposing concepts of gesture and gender within the practice of performance

Engaging dialogues between performance pedagogies and key concepts of gesture theory

**Gesture Lessons**  
 Drawn from key concepts of gesture theory (Kendon, McNeill)  
 Multimodal: engaging audio, visual, kinaesthetic  
 Categorical resemblance between McNeill and theatrical Viewpoints Technique

**Gesture Memory**  
 Autoethnographic approach to gender journey  
 How gender is embodied through timing, direction, space, proximity, etc.  
 Relationship between queerness and ephemera (José Esteban Muñoz)

**Generating New Meaning**  
 Gestural concepts serve as a score to build choreography  
 Movement techniques deconstruct knowledge beyond original structure  
 What alternate forms of embodied theory can arise from this approach?

