

## ***Tappyness* Interview Transcript**

Matthew Greenberg, Erin Alys Persons, and Genevieve Wagner  
September 2020

### **Genevieve Wagner**

Okay, thank you to everyone who is joining us this afternoon. My name is Jenny Wagner. I'm an exhibitions intern at Urban Art Space. And I'm very excited to facilitate this conversation with Erin Persons and Matt Greenberg. Their show *Tappyness* will be online at UAS From Home starting on September 21st through October 2nd.

And you can access the show by heading to [uas.osu.edu/events/tappyness](https://uas.osu.edu/events/tappyness) and this show is a part of the Hybrid Arts Lab, which is a new multi-venue teaching lab presented by Urban Art Space and Hopkins Hall gallery. So, to begin, can you both provide viewers with a brief overview of your performance?

### **Matthew Greenberg**

I'll grab onto that! So, Erin and I are working on a piece called *Tappyness*, which is a play on the word happiness. And we sort of devised this piece as part of our composition class with our professor, Janine Thompson. And it came out of a theme; each week we had a different theme to devise with and the theme of that we would dance choreography. And so, I was really interested in using dance as more than a visual movement storytelling medium and how we can sort of relate to dance and arts to current events and take what's very seemingly externally viewed and making it more internally viewed.

And luckily, we got Erin Parsons to sign off and, you know, be game to sort of work as a solo in this project and this class is sort of usually ensembled devised work. So, we sort of worked together to create this tap-dance-theater-mental health advocacy piece that, you know, just simply a moment where we can sort of, you know, unpack what it means to "stay in time" and "fall out of rhythm, trying to fall back in rhythm." And I think that tap dance as a medium is really excellent at that. We're seemingly right and knowing when you're in count and off count and how that sort of juxtaposes everyday life and the mess that it is.

### **Erin Alys Persons** (she/her/hers)

So, I am not a tap dancer -- Matt is. And he is the choreographer of this projects. And so, learning tap in this piece and the character in this piece is really struggling to just keep up with everything around her. We put the initial first draft together in this class in a matter of like four hours tops, just like two class periods, I believe. And so, it's been such a treat to revisit it and bring it back and be able to share it with other people here. It's really interesting.

I don't know if this is revealing too much, Matt, but it's using the song "Tomorrow" from *Annie* and where we're at right now with COVID-19 and just really not knowing what tomorrow is, or we're all really thinking about the future, but there's so much uncertainty.

It changes meaning through bringing it into to this moment that we're in right now. So, I'm interested to see how the audience reflects back consuming it at this moment.

**Matthew Greenberg**

Yeah, and you know because of COVID sometimes there's a fear of leaving our houses right now and being safe. And this character, this woman's journey, is all about trying to find the courage to overcome depression and anxiety to leave and how she may feel trapped in her room. And so, there's kind of this double entendre meaning that COVID-19 and making my art in this time sort of expresses. It's a new way of looking into the work and mental health work as well.

**Genevieve Wagner**

Yeah, definitely. Thank you very much for providing that foundational explanation. The analogy that you made in your artist statement, which can be found on the Hybrid Art Space website, between the Irish jig and mental health is really fascinating. So, can you both expound upon this a little bit?

**Matthew Greenberg**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, hopping on path. You know, when we were trying to figure out, like a medium for it, there's this, you know, I went back to this dance-survey-history class that I learned in my undergrad about tap. And tap is sort of like a weird thing where it comes from like English step, Irish jig, and African rhythm and shuffling, and popularized to Juba and Vaudeville and there's sort of a, you know, kind of like uniquely American feel that tap dance has stolen from all of these other like cultures and you know made it a Vaudeville Americanized tap which now is in our music theatre as we know it.

The Irish jig, sort of, came out as we say from the feet down as English passerby soldiers walk by, they were very stiff up top of were able to express under the surface and same with, you know, the Juba and, you know, having to dance at these nightclubs in Harlem and, you know, sort of, you know, out of sight, out of mind. And I think there's that correlation to mental health and depression that we don't talk about it; we sort of keep it under the surface too. We don't really express how we are really feeling because we put on that brave face and sort of push it all down, which is how the foundations of tap dance sort of came about as they've been expressed over time and through you know vaudeville minstrelsy into how we sometimes perceive show tap or precision tap dance.

**Genevieve Wagner**

Thank you. Yeah. Cool, and a little bit about movement. So, you are both MFA students and the Department of Theatre, so I'm assuming you've had some experience with dance, but mainly you act. This piece, it really relies heavily on dance. So how does movement differ as an actor versus as a dancer?

**Erin Alys Persons** (she/her/hers)

Oh well, I just want to say we don't take dance classes as a part of our program here. So, it really is acting base, although we do a lot of movement with Janine Thompson,

who is our movement specialist in the theater department. I would, as I said at the beginning, would not consider myself a dancer.

And I think that's because dance seems to have a very specific, uh... There seems to be a right and a wrong with dance, particularly with tap as we're going through these rehearsals, Matt has been helping me find what the right moves are. There are very specific moves that needs to be done.

Um, but movement is really just understanding how what you can do with your body and what your habits are as well, what we gravitate towards just as an individual human that moves and how we navigate our way through life. And so, it's really, um, it's just the story telling. In this piece, tap is throughout, but it's really about the top half of wanting to go out of this bubble, trying to get out. So, the tap is happening underneath with the feet, but it's really about like the storytelling up here (motions to the top half of her body). I don't know if that's answering your question, really.

### **Genevieve Wagner**

Yeah! Thank you. Matt, would like to add anything to that?

### **Matthew Greenberg**

Yeah, I mean I would just add that I'm not the world's best tap dancer either. It's a challenge for me too, as a choreographer director. When I've done tap dance and show I've had to go to dance classes and be like, "please, please help me." I think tap dance is like when you're choreographing to music; there is a right rhythm and arguably a right rhythm. So, it's interesting to play off that and leaning into that and leaning out to that.

I don't think either of us are incredibly technically trained dancers, but it's a great challenge for both of us. And as Erin said, you know, I think dance and movement at its core is, you know, full body storytelling. Expressing -- telling a story with your body -- and tap dance, it's so localized to the feet sometimes. So, Erin brings this rich inner life that works from her feet to her hair follicles and to really bring this human, this character to life, when there are no words and I think that also plays into the stigma of not speaking about mental health, depression, and anxiety, but really showing that story in your body. I don't think there's anybody else who I think could tell this story, in this moment, as effectively as Erin because she uses both her acting and her movement training to combine them. If a dancer doesn't have anything underneath, it's pretty, but there's still so much rich storytelling that she draws out in this work. That makes it both dance and theater working harmoniously.

### **Genevieve Wagner**

Yeah, I really appreciate that, like, you know, the way you can tell stories and communicate through movement without using any words. Um, so question for you, Erin. As a dancer and as an actress in this piece, there's something powerful about you engaging in this physical and mental journey alone on the stage, as opposed to be a member of like a larger company or larger cast. So, how did you and Matt make the decision to have just one dancer and one choreograph or in this piece?

**Erin Alys Persons** (she/her/hers)

So, the isolation aspect of mental health is so prominent that it really feels like we're going through this alone. Whatever the struggle, it really is an isolating situation. I think that's where it's sprouted into a solo piece and this was a project that Matt came up with on his own and really sprouted out of his own imagination. So, I think it was, it was really great that it was just one person as a choreographer and one person learning the moves and creating that solo story because it really is about that isolation and feeling alone and communicating, just with the two of us.

**Genevieve Wagner**

Yeah, yeah. Um, and Matt, a question for you: as a choreographer, what was it like to work with just one dancer and explore this personal journey with this one dancer, as opposed to working with the larger company or cast?

**Matthew Greenberg**

Yeah, I mean I think they both have value. I think it's just a unique opportunity for both of us. Our training program here at Ohio State is really an ensemble based devising program, so it just gives us another opportunity to sort of apply our ensemble training was just a two-person ensemble too. And what does that sort of bring or, you know, have challenges, but I think as Erin said, there's that great personal aspect of working one on one. And I find that, because we've, you know, thankfully had such a great working-relationship doing solos for each other, we can sort of understand, you know, what we need, how we can offer feedback in a productive way, that brings out the best performance. Because at the end of the day, I'm not on stage, you know, I'm not going to be, you know, archived in this performance. So, how can we work symbiotically -- even as a director and choreographer -- instead of thinking of it as, you know, like a director and actor dynamic, but rather really incorporating a feminist pedagogy and tilting the triangle on an equal playing field. And I think we both found work, where Erin, as the performer, has been able to give feedback and useful information, to me of what she needs in that moment to readjust and bring the best work forward.

**Erin Alys Persons** (she/her/hers)

I want to note that in another class later I did a solo project with Matt as well, sort of switching roles -- not dance based. But I feel like Matt and I have a very open communication and just a really good mode of working. I think we work very similarly. So, to just take that, finding people that you work well with and growing that communication and relationship and fostering that because there's a lot of projects I think come out of finding a network of people that you work well with.

**Genevieve Wagner**

Definitely, totally. I think an exciting thing about Hybrid Art Space and all these shows they are having fall is a lot of them are based on collaboration -- and in different mediums too! So, we see a lot of just like fine arts pieces coming in, but it's so exciting to see theater and dance as well and explore the different ways you can collaborate, you know, through different mediums. And then also, like physically or through telling stories and communicating verbally and seeing this diverse way of collaboration. So

yeah, a question kind of about collaboration: so throughout the project what perspectives have you gleaned about the successes and the troubles faced when collaborating from afar?

**Erin Alys Persons** (she/her/hers)

It's so totally different. It's obviously going to be so different. I think as a whole, the theater community is all practicing this virtual rehearsal and different modes. I mean, before COVID-19 you would get in the room together and you would figure it out together and we of course are not able to do that now. So, everyone's sort of learning tricks of how to make this work. I think we all are getting more organized in vocalizing our ideas because there's not like an energy or getting-up-and-trying-it that you can do the same over zoom as you would be able to do in the room. It's been hard, especially at first, but we picked up this project in the last month or so. And so, I think both Matt and I have learned how we work virtually over Zoom and what we need and then vocalizing and advocating for ourselves of how to communicate best through this medium.

**Matthew Greenberg**

Yeah, I would totally echo everything Erin said, and I also think we're in a privileged position where we are sort of remounting something that was live in a classroom space. So, we had that experience of figuring things out in the moment. And now, you know, instead of starting from scratch, it's sort of live here (gestures to the left) and now we're taking it here (gestures to the right). So, we know the form, the function, the parameters, but how we fill that in, is new and exciting too. The thing incredible opportunity about the Hybrid Arts Lab has offered us the ability to present live work right now. I know how hungry we both we both are for an opportunity to create in this moment in time.

**Genevieve Wagner**

Definitely, yeah. So, do you feel that that piece... Oh, go ahead.

**Erin Alys Persons** (she/her/hers)

It is so, so special that we get to make something right now and that we get to perform right now it's truly a gift, when we all are just missing that in this moment. So, so thank you for having us! Just wanted to send our gratitude.

**Genevieve Wagner**

Of course, yes. I'm so glad to hear that. I'm really glad to hear it. Have you felt that the piece has changed form, with it being something that we're going to watch online now as opposed to something that you would have performed in class?

**Matthew Greenberg**

I think yes and no. I think we're using the space and what exists, sort of, leaning into the site-specific aspect of being in a tent and how much our imaginations can really take us when we accept that we are not in a theater and we are watching something and still expect to be transported. This experience, you know, how does that change when we're sort of like in our kitchen watching a performance? But I think the structure and the

heart that Erin brought to this the first time is still there. If anything, it is being amplified because we're sort of using the circumstances that exists presently and extending the space, by like adding new props. As Erin said, we sort of worked through it in a week. And that's part of the fun of that excitement. It's like, get it up quickly and go. And trust that we can make great things in a short amount of time. And now that we've been given this luxury of a month, we can sort of go back and experiment and play and add, you know, useful sounds and storytelling devices that we didn't think about the first time.

### **Genevieve Wagner**

Wonderful. Yeah, yeah. Um, thank you for explaining that I'm, I'm really glad that we've been able to provide you with this time to really sit with the piece and experiment with it. Wonderful. A closing question also related to your artist statement: so as pondered in the artist statement, how can we hold each other up through art? That's a broad question. There are many answers to this, but if you'd like to share some thoughts on the question, that would be wonderful.

### **Erin Alys (she/her/hers)**

It's really interesting now that we, again, are, are not watching things live in a theater. We are watching them on screens. There's this new element of the chat box that I've seen in a lot of live performances. Which, of course, if you're in a live performance, you turn your phone off. You would never be giving feedback throughout, but it's encouraged with virtual performances and I know for the Hybrid Arts tent we're not going to be streaming this live, but there's this aspect of sending people to go watch something digitally, and then like leaving comments and connecting with people all over the world, you know, the internet can go anywhere. So, there's actually like a larger net of connecting humans that way. And even though you're not sitting in the same room, you can write something very specific and more people can see it and comment off of that and connect that way. So, it's very different. But in a way, it's, it's a larger reaching connection because of that.

### **Genevieve Wagner**

Yeah.

### **Matthew Greenberg**

Yeah, I mean, the first time we sort of did this piece, 10 eyeballs -- 20 eyeballs -- got to see it. (Laughs) *Math*. You know, that's why we're in theater and dancers. You know, and there's a great push. I think that theater is making to become more accessible for, you know, for any audience member. And I think that's something we can do initially to hold people up you know because Theatre can be, and has felt, very elitist sometimes. And how can we hold everybody up? That is something that I think we're sort of playing around with and to not hold up an experience the people, who are in a select room or theater space.

At its core, I think Erin and my work is about telling the story of this, the human being, being alone. And I think a lot of us are spending time alone right now or feeling trapped. I think now, more than ever, we sort of relate to this message that Erin so beautifully

portrays. At its core, it's storytelling and it is desire that want to step out and through depression and anxiety I think we know that we want those things, but also show how hard and debilitating it can be to simply open a door and step out. I think a lot more people are having those thoughts now. Do I step out and go to the bar? Or do I not? Do I go on to campus? Do I not? Do I go to the grocery store? And those thoughts are really amplified in this work.

To hold each other up, I think we just have to lead with care and kindness. I think by Erin doing such a beautiful job telling this story, it reflects back to me as an audience member when I watched her work that it's okay to have these feelings, to not have the answers, to be okay with falling out of rhythm and falling out of time, and being frustrated at getting out of sequence, and wanting to go back to bed and not save the world.

It humanizes these feelings, because even though it's not physically being stated, it's being stated with her whole body and energy that sort of radiates through this whole space. And I think there's an acceptance that comes with that, which is why I'm so drawn to theatre, because I think art is reflected back to us on stage and watching somebody else go through that journey says to me it's okay that I go through that journey. Somebody -- I'm watching somebody doing that. And I feel like that too. I know I'm not alone. And I think that sense of community, an ensemble -- even though a solo -- is something really incredible that Erin is working right now. And so, I think that's how we hold each other up.

### **Genevieve Wagner**

Most definitely. Thank you very much, Matthew, for that wonderful, wonderful response and Erin as well. I think this piece, the honesty and the emotion in it is going to provide a lot of comfort for people. So, thank you both for your hard work in this piece. And thank you so much for your thoughtful answers during this interview. It has been wonderful! That concludes our talk today. So, thank you so much, Erin and Matthew, for taking the time to talk this afternoon and thank you everyone who has been watching.

### **Matthew Greenberg**

Thank you, thank you! Thank you all! Thank you, Genevieve! Thank you, everyone.

### **Erin Alys (she/her/hers)**

Thank you!

### **Genevieve Wagner**

This show will be accessible on the UAS From Home website on September 21<sup>st</sup>. Once again, you can access that at [uas.osu.edu/events/tappiness](http://uas.osu.edu/events/tappiness). And once again, this show is a part of the Hybrid Arts Lab, which is a collaboration between Urban Arts Space and Hopkins Hall Gallery. So, thank you again and have a great rest of your day.

### **Erin Alys Persons (she/her/hers)**

Thanks Genevieve!

**Matthew Greenberg**

(Signs “thank you” in American Sign Language)

**Erin Alys Persons** (she/her/hers)

Bye!

**Genevieve Wagner**

See ya.