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The Entertaining Art of Dance Engagement

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THE ENTERTAINING ART OF DANCE ENGAGEMENT

by

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“THE ENGAGING ART OF DANCE ENTERTAINMENT”

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ABSTRACT

In the world of dance, choreographers face a divide between creating choreographed works which fulfill the artistic vision of the artist and creating works which can engage the widest audience base. What are the elements that make choreography either artistic, or commercial? To research this I I looked at what other authors have to say on the idea of artists working and creating within a capitalist free-market economy. I also look specifically at how the pioneers of modern dance approached the creation of their work in a culture that did not yet have an understanding of dance as art. Finally I detail how this research influenced the ways in which I created *Heritage Journey,* my MFA in Dance Dissertation Concert.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

In the world of dance I see two constantly warring sides of the performance: the artistic endeavor, and the desire to engage the audience. As a choreographer, I want to create things that interest me and fulfill my need to create, but I am also aware of the proposed audience who may pay for those seats in the house. I want the audience to enjoy the performance and I want the audience to understand what I am trying to communicate. Where is the line between creating art solely for the purpose of creating it, and pandering to the desires of the masses? Can a choreographed performance hold artistic meaning while maintaining engagement with the widest possible audience base? How great is the gap that exists between creating something meaningful to the artist, and creating something solely for entertaining the viewers? I intend to explore these questions, and the many others that accompany them, by looking at what other writers have to say about the connection between the artist and the public. I will then look at how famous modern dance choreographers have dealt with the dilemma of creating their art, while living in a capitalist culture. And last I will describe how this research influenced my process and decisions in creating *Heritage Journey*, my Masters of Fine Arts Dissertation Concert.

Chapter One: The Modern Artist and the *Daemon* of Financial Success

How does an artist transition between the creative mind and the business mind, without allowing one side to color the other? Rudolf Arnheim says more than other artists, dancers seem better at balancing these two differing sides of an artist's life, possibly because dancers deal with the abstract form of their bodies on a daily basis and so better understand how to separate emotion from logic.

> . . . all artists are subject to a double style of managing their affairs. On the one hand, they are worldly citizens dealing with personal and business matters shrewdly, intellectually, conventionally. On the other hand, they are artistically selecting, organizing, and directing compositions as they organize shapes, colors, sounds, or, indeed, body motion. (130)

He goes on to say separating these two sides of an artist's life is very challenging due to the artistic experiences and visions constantly bleeding into the business areas of life. I find this an interesting statement, as all other authors I read seem much more concerned with the business, and free-market of finances over influencing the art being made. Arnheim also says that the past three centuries have worked to remove the performing arts from their natural context, which is the everyday connection to people's lives. He sees dance and music as being born within each of us and they grow with us as we age and are an integral part of our daily pursuits and rituals. But this has changed through the centuries.

> This social isolation of the arts, which holds true for the arts in general, has also distinctly influenced the style of the productions by removing them from the

> needs, activities, and responses of the population and turning them into a specialty for the connoisseurs. (127)

As dance techniques and performance expressions have progressed toward the abstract, the average person has been removed further and further from what is displayed on the stage. Now only those "connoisseurs" who are a part of the inner art community can claim to understand these displays of artistic dance. Arnheim implies that the population at large needs the arts and would enjoy art as a more daily activity but that something has actively removed art from daily life, placing it squarely in domain of an elite audience. Productions of the performing arts, including dance concerts, have become less accessible to the average population, because of the separation of the "doer from the watcher or listener" (127). I believe this separation has been caused by an economically-driven society placing a monetary value on the art. By trying to make art an economically viable way to survive in a free-market economy, has the artist actually restricted his possible audience?

Arneheim also seems to say that if more people participated in dance and music, their understanding of these performances would grow. While I agree with this, it does seem to put the responsibility of being an educator into the corner of the dance artist. This means that in addition to creating the art and finding a way to market the art for financial stability, the artist now must also educate an audience about how to view his art. That is a lot of responsibility for one individual. The idea of educating the audience for just such a purpose will come back later in this paper when I discuss Ted Shawn and the other modern dance pioneers.

Authors David Bayles and Ted Orland address the fears that often beset artists when creating the art they love in the book *Art and Fear.* The question arises, how much should the artist care about the opinions of the critic, or the public? If he spends most of his time worrying over how it will be received, the artist may never get around to actually creating. Or if he does finally create something, how much of the artistic inspiration really came from him, and how much came from society?

> Only those who commit to following their own artistic path can look back and see this issue in clear perspective: the real question about acceptance is not whether your work will be viewed as art, but whether it will be viewed as *your* art. (Bayles and Orland 45)

Spending too much time and effort on whether the creation will be enjoyed by anyone but the artist distracts from the actual making of the art itself. But is it possible to create a work which engages both the elite theater goer, as well as the average population that might attend the performance? There needs to be an acknowledgment of a balance between the artistic side of dance and the practical side of filling those seats and keeping a dance company, program, studio, or what have you, financially afloat. All too often I see the "starving artist" holding so tightly to their high ideals, with no audience to watch them, while pointing a finger at the "sell-out" who incorporates different movement styles, or themes in their work which appeal to a broader audience base.

Bayles and Orland go on to say, "Artmaking. . . grants access to worlds you may otherwise never fully engage. It may in fact be the engagement – not the art – that you seek" (108). Could this also be said of the audience, and not just the artist? A person may

attend a dance concert more for the interest in engaging with other humans, than for the joy of watching movement. As our society continues to decrease the ways in which people interact in person, through the use of cell phones, email, telecommuting, and social media, is it possible that live performance could become a stronger way for individuals to connect with others? Without the artist being at least marginally aware of the audience members they have an opportunity to engage with, that connection could be lost. How does an artist create work that holds artistic integrity but also can engage an audience looking for human interaction?

In Lewis Hyde's book *The Gift*, he argues that artists have to make the hard decision of how to create their work while living in a capitalist, free-market economy. He states there are three ways that artists have resolved the issue of making a living. They can take a second job (or as most of our society sees it, "a real job"), they can find a patron willing to financially support them in their artistic endeavors, or if the work they create is marketable enough they can live on the income it generates (359). He contends that only art that is created without the market in mind, remains as true art and labels anything "created in response to the demands of the market" as commercial art (360). What defines "commercial art"? The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines commercial art as art that is applied to a commercial purpose. There are examples of commercial dance in daily life: the series of television commercials for The Gap which ran in 2006-2007 advertising khaki pants. While no one can deny these examples require skill to both create the movement and great skill on the part of the dancers to perform, their commercial purpose makes them simple to view and straightforward to categorize

and most people would not consider them art. But what about something which seems to blur that category? The popular television programs *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing With the Stars* showcase the technical skills of the performers and choreographers involved in the productions. Can the work produced in these programs be considered artistically sound, or are they a result of the free-market dominating the creation?

To go back to Hyde's statement that art created for the demands of the market become purely commercial, the question that arises in my mind when reading this is: If there is a demand for a particular form of art, why is the quality of such "commercial art" deemed any less valuable than something created purely for the enjoyment of creating? Perhaps this line of thinking is the result of growing up in a capitalist culture, but if people value it enough to pay for it, doesn't that mean it has artistic value as well as monetary value? The khaki dancing Gap commercials are created specifically to interest the audience in buying a product, but what about choreography for musicals, or the choreography produced and performed on cruise ships? Some would say these also fall under the category of commercial dance. Are they not artistically sound? Hyde says that creating true art means the artist must serve at the leisure of his "genius." This means that the artist is not in control of what he creates, but receives his gift from some higher place, or internal "*daemon*" (the Greek idea of a personal *daemon*, or guiding spirit) and must sacrifice to the whims of the art. He says that if the artist is creating something with the market in mind, it is like trying to serve two masters. The ultimate creation was not inspired by the inner genius of the artist, but by the external demands of the market (67-

68). This implies that if sacrifice isn't made to the genius of the artist's talent, then he is less of an artist. Does this mean he can only be considered a legitimate artist if he sacrifices financial stability? Or only if he has true genius will his art be discovered and become marketable after the act of creation? Though these thoughts are certainly related to what Bayles and Orland said previously, it seems somehow much more cynical coming from Hyde.

The premise of most of Hyde's book is that the arts belong in a gift based culture, one that values the creativity of the artist and does not see the art as a commodity to be bought or sold. He views the gift of art in two ways: the first is the gift of talent that the artist (painter, writer, dancer, choreographer, musician) has in their possession. This can also be referred to as the gift of genius. The second way in which art is a gift is when it is given to someone else, or to the public. As soon as a value is assigned to the art, it is no longer a gift, but an item of commerce. Suzi Gablik, art critic and historian, comments:

> . . .modern Western society does seem to be unique in regarding its art as a commodity to be sold in exchange for money, prestige, and power. The idea of making art for profit appears when spiritual, moral, and economic life begin to be separated from one another with the development of foreign trade, and it marks the distinction between a gift-giving society and a market society. (57)

When given as a gift, art can work to create a sense of community by commenting on, or visualizing, a group of shared ideas. The value of the gift is known by all who experience the sharing of it and the gift will continue to grow so long as it continues to be given. As soon as a monetary value is attached to the art, it ceases to be thought of as a gift. In the

introduction of his book Hyde states:

> Any object, any item of commerce, becomes one kind of property or another depending on how we use it. Even if a work of art contains the spirit of the artist's gift, it does not follow that the work itself is a gift. It is what we make of it. (xvii)

The moment a ticket to a dance concert is purchased, and monetary value is assigned to the theatrical production which will be viewed, there is a kind of contract made between the audience member and the choreographer. The contract is that the viewer will receive something they want in exchange for that ticket purchase. However, if the dance concert were to be presented free of charge, the performance viewed by the audience would be given to them as a gift, holding no monetary value, and the choreographer is beholden in no way to produce something pleasing to the audience. Do both parties really view this contract (or lack of contract) in this way? The choreographer has created something she wishes to share with an audience. She has spent time and money to produce her work in a way which fulfills her artistic vision, and in her view this entitles her to be compensated in the viewing of it. The audience member conceivably works hard to earn the money he possesses and should receive something of equal value in return for the monetary exchange. As Hyde said, “It is what we make of it” (xvii). The choice to place a monetary value on the art is either made by the artist, or by the culture in which she resides.

What does all this mean for a dance artist? Unlike writing a book, or creating a painting, or sculpture, a choreographer makes action with human bodies. It only exists in the performing of it. It isn't something to be bought by a collector and added to the wall of a gallery. The only commercial trade available to the choreographer is the moment of

performance which happens when there is an audience in the space and the dancers enter to perform the choreographed work. Without public interest in what the choreographer has created, there is no one to watch the performance. Is the dance concert considered more artistic when there is no one there to see it? If the choreographer hopes to draw an audience to her event, she must market it to create interest. Or she must find someone to market it for her. This could mean that she has sacrificed to her *daemon* and created something with the help of her guiding genius, and only after the creation is complete, she must garner the market interest of an audience. In this way she has still made Art, but might also find a way to be financially successful within her chosen field.

There has been an ongoing conversation in the modern art world of whether the creations' existence itself is reason enough, or whether art must serve a purpose in order to be valued. In Suzi Gablik's book *Has Modernism Failed?* she states,

> Those who defend modernism claim that art need not serve any purpose but should create its own reality. . . Aesthetic experience is an end in itself, worth having on its own account. (30)

In times before the age of modernism, most of the art that is prominently noted by us today served the values and moralities of the church, and the monarchs of the time. The artist was concerned with creating that which had been commissioned by his patron more than if what he was creating fulfilled his need to be creative. Before the modernist movement “all art had a social significance and a social obligation” (Gablik 34). Now that the artist is free to create what he will, he is also free to ignore the desires of the public. Gablik spends a good deal of her writing in discussing the modernist rebels,

creating art for the cause of social change, and to move away from the establishment of the art world. While she seems to be in agreement with much of the ideals of this movement, she also says,

> Socialist art deprives us, on the whole, of formal and aesthetic qualities, being strong on message but often weak as art; whereas formalism obliterates meaning and purpose, often to the point of transforming meaninglessness itself into a primary content. (43)

This means that art created solely for being different, or fighting against the established norms, isn't enough, while art created in a traditional way (or perhaps with the audience or viewer in mind?) becomes boring and superficial. Why do we have this divide of what is Artistic (with a capitol A) and what is merely entertaining? Are the classifications of artistic dance versus entertainment dance truly in the eye of the beholder, or is there a more legitimate claim to be made? These questions are not completely new.

> From the 1860s to the turn of the century . . . dancing became a legitimate topic of consideration in respected journals and books. Authors criticized the current state of the art: acrobatic entertainment, tra-ra-ra-boom-de-ay skirt dancing, and the ballet, with its ever-shortening tutu. (Daly 24)

There is a fine line to be found between creating something that can only be enjoyed by the artistic elite, or creating something that is so straight forwards that the physical entertainment is all there is to be seen. During this time dance was just starting to find an understanding in the art world and wasn't yet saying much. Even before modern dance had fully entered the world stage, the discussion of whether dance could be more than

just entertainment had already begun. These critics were not content with dance that was merely fun to look at, or that showed a lot of leg. They were seeking something intellectual to stimulate their minds, something which would speak to the changing climate of society during the industrial era. Critics, at least, were ready for what modern dance would bring to the stage.

How do we define art in our society? In what ways do we classify what is High Art and what is lesser art? Suzi Gablik writes, “There is always a correlation between society's values, directions, and motives and the art it produces” (61). In response to the atrocities experienced in World War I, artists could no longer approach making art in the same ways. When there was so much death and despair, how could the art world not document this? It was in this era that the modernist dance movement began. How could a ballet movement vocabulary communicate these larger ideas? A new form of movement had to be found, a new style of dance which could speak this new language of art. A movement form which comes from inside the dancer, which was less concerned with the external focus of performing in cold technical clarity, or in portraying fairy tale stories. The modern dance pioneers I am about to introduce boldly stepped into this gap to create movement that would speak to the ever changing world in which they lived, telling the stories and sharing the experiences that an average population could relate to and understand.

Chapter Two: Choreographers Views on Art and How to Live Creatively

Isadora Duncan is the original American barefoot aesthetic dancer. In addition to removing her shoes, she removed her corset and other layers of unnecessary garments to enable the female body to breath and experience a full range of motion. Inspired by nature, Duncan focused on movement that came from the internal inspiration of the individual. In her manifesto, *The Dance of the Future*, she writes,

> There will always be movements which are the perfect expression of that individual body and that individual soul; so we must not force it to make movements which are not natural to it . . . (127-128)

She was most interested in creating dance which freed the mover from social constraints and allowed a return to nature. The idea of "nature" embodied much more than just plants and landscapes for Duncan. It was ". . . metaphorical shorthand for a loose package of aesthetic and social ideals: nudity, childhood, the idyllic past, flowing lines, health, nobility, ease, freedom, simplicity, order, and harmony" (Daly 89). The ideal of natural movement became a quest for the "transcendent joy" of all that was true, good and beautiful (Daly 100). At a time when the world was becoming increasingly industrialized, and women were fighting for the right to vote, Duncan's message of independence, a return to simpler things, and (let's face it) no more corsets, peeked the interest of the public.

Duncan focused on the beauty and healthful movement of the female form.

> It is not only a question of true art, it is a question of race, of the development of the female sex to beauty and health, of the return to the original strength and to

natural movements of a woman's body. (Duncan 128)

She denounced the ideal body of the ballerina, insisting that under the skirts and tricots were “dancing deformed muscles” and “deformed skeleton[s]” (125). She insisted that true art expresses the “highest and most beautiful ideals of man” (125). And that the art of dance was “in the form of woman in her greatest and purest expression” (129). Duncan considered the beauty of the healthy dancer, and the wonders of nature theme enough to create dance. There was no storyline in her dances, just the light and joyous forms of natural movement. “More than this, dancing like any art of any time should reflect the highest point the spirit of mankind has reached in that special period” (128). The death of her two children in 1913 brought a change to Duncan's choreographic style. Her choreography centered more around stronger, sharper movements that were grounded, as opposed to the lightness and airiness of her earlier works.

While Isadora Duncan was removing corsets and dancing in nature, another form of new dance was being created by another innovative American dancer. In many ways I find Ruth St. Denis to be an interesting mix of the artistic minded choreographer, and the savvy business woman. While she clearly had a very distinct vision for how and why she created things, she also produced them on such a scale that her company was financially successful for a period of time. She is most known for her work with Ted Shawn in the creation of the Denishawn Company. Together, they created epic spectacles, bringing the traditions and styles of the far east to audiences in America and throughout the world. They marketed the company in such a way as to appeal to a wide audience base. They also founded the Denishawn School, from which the next generation of American modern

dance creators would receive their initial training.

For St. Denis, dance was a spiritual experience, both for the performer and for the audience members. She wrote, “In this Dance of Divinity we become instruments of expression for that inner radiation of wisdom which is both our true life and our true art” (St. Denis 34). As a choreographer, she had a message of beauty and love to communicate to her viewers. St. Denis goes on to say that the Divine Dance is divided into three acts. The first act is “beholding the vision of beauty and power that the soul needs.” The second act is the time and training the performer endures in order to master the medium (the human body). The final act is performance through the medium of dance. “Our radiation as artists gives forth of this light through the various time and space lenses of beauty” (St. Denis 35). It seemed enough for her that the audience be present to witness this “radiation” and to take from it a greater sense of the spiritual world that surrounded them. It is apparent that St. Denis truly believed in the destiny of the artist. She believed in the idea that an individual is born to do a great thing and must only travel the natural course set for her life in order to fulfill her purpose in this life.

For St. Denis the purpose of dance was to create and celebrate beauty and spirituality. To accomplish this, the performer and the viewer must be fully immersed in the thing which was happening at that exact moment. The deeper meanings of spirituality seem to be left somewhat vague, to be filled in by the eye of the beholder. What is important is that the performance be aesthetically pleasing and enjoyable to perform. “The Divine Dance should reflect what is good, inspiring and beautiful of any age and race” (St. Denis 48). In distinctly different ways, both Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis

were interested in communicating an idea of beauty to their audiences. For Duncan beauty was connected to health, natural form, and an internal strength and vivacity of the dancer. St. Denis's sense of beauty focused on an ephemeral quality of spiritual bliss to be discovered through the performance of ritualistic movement. Neither Duncan, nor St. Denis found much success in America until after first being hailed in their European tours. According to Doris Humphrey, "The European art world in general fell into ecstasies at their feet, and only then did they come back and capture America" (*The Art of Making Dances* 169).

For all of her high-minded ideals, the Denishawn Company spent their share of time in vaudeville, in what could be considered the lesser art of dance. In *Doris Humphrey, An Artist First*, Humphrey discusses her reasons for leaving the Denishawn Company after spending a decade training and performing with them. She described a meeting held with Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis in which she criticized them for their involvement in the *Ziegfeld Follies* and the acts performed that she felt pandered to a lower class of performance. Specifically she noted that many of the costumes were shortened by four or five inches (just like those shorter tutus that were mentioned earlier) for these productions (Humphrey 62-63). Though these performances may have been considered as pandering to a lower class of audience by some, and even lowering the artistic standards of the company, it was what helped the company be financially successful enough to support such a large number of performers during the mid to late 1920s. So, here we come back to the question of artistic integrity versus financial success. In marketing the dance company in a way to gain financial stability (by

performing in *The Follies*), accusations of being a sell-out arose. This is not a new dilemma in the dance world. The Denishawn Company and School had a transformative affect on the way Americans saw dance. If the performances of their work for The Ziegfield Follies was of slightly lesser artistic quality than when it was presented on its own, doesn't it hold some value in the number of new audience members who were able to experience this style of dance? In reference to the Divine Dance and the spirituality of her art, St. Denis wrote,

> If our dance is motivated by exhibitionism, personal pride, vanity, morbidity, envy, fear, or is used for erroneous propaganda we shall obviously see reflected in movement an overstrain, distortion and lack of dignity and balance. We shall know by the overtones of ugliness futility and distress of mind that such dancing should be classed as secular. (St. Denis 34)

Though she may have had some personal qualms about the vaudeville productions the company sometimes performed in, she still approached her art with dignity and commitment.

When the Denishawn Company split up in 1931 Ted Shawn began to tour on his own. He created lecture demonstrations for university audiences which advocated a role for men in the modern dance world. In the winter of 1932-33 he offered a dance class (mandatory for all students) in the physical education program at the all-male Springfield College. Out of the enthusiasm generated from this course he was able to create his company, Shawn and His Men Dancers (Foulkes 82-83). With a troupe of eight or nine male students he began to create group work which demonstrated masculine vivacity and

athleticism in dance. It was during this time that Shawn established Jacob's Pillow as the home base of his touring company.

This was pre-World War II, during the Great Depression, and feeding and housing such a large group of athletic young men came with a lot of monetary costs. The troupe of men began hosting “teas” for the local women who wanted to learn more about art and culture. Each attendee would pay for admittance and Shawn would give a talk on some aspect of the art of dance. “Shawn invited the dowagers of western Massachusetts to the Pillow in the late afternoon. The “boys” would serve tea, then retreat to the woods and emerge, stripped to tan trunks, and perform” (Foulkes 84-85). This is an excellent example of smart marketing. Through the guise of educating the public, the company is able to raise money which will allow them to continue touring and performing their art. Unlike the earlier ballets that were criticized for the shortening tutu, this show of male skin was the means by which Shawn funded his true artistic calling of serious modern choreography. The afternoon teas were not the performance itself, but the way in which the company could afford to tour their work. At the same time, Shawn was also creating a broader audience base by inviting these ladies to feel apart of the inner circle of the art world. They were more likely to attend a dance performance in the future (and would likely drag along their husbands too), and continue to monetarily support Shawn and his dance company (and probably other touring companies) through the purchase of tickets.

In Doris Hulmphrey's book *The Art of Making Dances*, she discusses how to choose a subject for the choreography. She uses *The Dying Swan* and *Sceherazade* as examples of different thematic material used by choreographers in the past which has

created a lasting image on the mind of the public.

> The blunt fact is that subject matter is mostly of concern to the choreographer, and whether it takes the form of narrative, symbolism or a conviction about style, is of no importance; the enthusiasm for it and the innate talent is what keeps it alive, and puts it palpitating on the stage. (27)

According to Humphrey, it is all in the execution of the production. She says choreographers should expect the audience to be indifferent to the chosen subject, but that what they will actually see is the movement created. It is up to the choreographer to catch the attention of the audience by the choices she makes in her creation. She tells her reader to be ready for disappointment. “The subject which has suffused the choreographer with high enthusiasm may not, either at its roots of meaning or in its style of movement, please an audience or be comprehensible to it at all” (28). If a choreographer's work is not appreciated at the moment of performance, that is it. The game is over. She does not have the option to hang the dance on the wall (as artists can do with a painting that isn't appreciated) and wait for the next generation to understand it. Humphrey ponders the thousands of dances which are completely lost to the “ephemerality” of the choreographer's predicament when the public does not recognize it for the art that it is (28).

Before Humphrey left the Denishawn Company, she worked closely with St. Denis in creating music visualizations. This was her first taste of the choreographic form and abstraction that became the “hallmarks of her choreography” (Foulkes 32). On her own, and in collaboration with her partner Charles Weidman, Humphrey forged her way

into a new style of movement. She created works “in silence, dances with a vocal chorus and alternative sound accompaniment, and dances with speech, with music and with song” (Hausler 40). Clearly she had a wide range of choreographic ideas that appealed to her, which may be a part of why her work is still researched and reconstructed today. Nona Schurman, former pupil and dancer of the Humphrey Weidman Company, wrote of Humphrey's choreography:

> . . .choreographically and philosophically Doris emphasized the “recovery,” [of fall and recovery technique] and that emphasis (in her dances) speaks about the affirmation of the life force, which was her great message. That is: no matter what the failure or defeat, the human spirit will recover. . . To reveal this philosophical concept, Doris used choreographic devices in a theatrical setting: In other words, she made dances. (Hausler 42)

Humphrey boldly created works that interested her and which communicated her message of strength, and the unyielding life force which was important to her, with little thought to what her audience would make of it. In *The Art of Making Dances* she states quite clearly that some creations will succeed and others will fail (28). This is part of the choreographer's world and she makes no excuses and no concessions to the public.

Martha Graham was another prominent American choreographer to come out of the Denishawn School. During the 1920s she left the company and began pursuing her own choreographic interests. Her first solo work was a part of the vaudeville show, *The Greenwich Village Follies*, but she soon left for a teaching opportunity in Rochester, New York (Foulkes 31). To say that Graham's choreographic career has been prolific would be

an understatement. She choreographed over 150 works, many of which are still performed by the Martha Graham Company and other companies throughout the world (McDonagh 303-335). Her range of works spreads across a vast array of subject matter and themes, but always the human condition is at the heart of her artistic vision. In addition to this great body of works, Graham also created a codified modern technique. Based on the example of breathing and centered within the torso of the dancer, "a contraction hollowed out the stomach and rounded the back; the release freed the body again, straightening the spine" (Foulkes 17). She believed in the strength of the human form and the human body's ability to move and to communicate through that movement. And in the very strength she placed on stage, she also showed humanity's ability to be vulnerable. When writing about the condition of artistic dance in 1930 Graham states quite bluntly that dance up to that point had been a dance of superficial appearance, rather than a dance of content. ". . .instead of an art which was the fruit of a people's soul, we had entertainment" (Foulks 20). In a short interview with Elinor Rogosin, Graham expressed her views on varying disciplines of the arts influencing each other. She mentioned a poem by St. John Perse which she was working with in her dance *Mendicants of Evening.* "We hope the result will be divine. . . because whatever one is, or whatever one dances, one is" (Rogosin 32). She delved deeply into the human psyche when creating her work and her dancers displayed great commitment to both the movement and Graham's intention behind it.

Graham left much of the managing of her company to those around her, leaving her to focus solely on her work as an artist. Louis Horst was a long time mentor, lover,

musical composer, and rehearsal director to Graham and her company. When Erick Hawkins was a part of Graham's company and was fulfilling many of the management roles, he approached the Coolidge Foundation to commission musical composers for Graham's work. The 1942 proposal for the sponsorship of the first performance of this work resulted in the dance *Hérordiade*, considered a transition piece at the beginning of Graham's Greek works (Bannerman 6). In the autobiography *Blood Memory*, Graham says:

> I feel that the essence of dance is the expression of man – the landscape of his soul. I hope that every dance I do reveals something of myself or some wonderful thing a human being can be. (6)

In creating her work, she hoped to show the audience something of themselves that might not have become conscious thought before. She was concerned with making works which touched the heart of the human experience, and by doing so created choreography that has lasted for decades.

Both Graham and Humphrey brought a clear image of the American woman to the modern dance stage. Graham states that when modern dance began, it was a catalytic agent for the arts world. “It charged everything, it set fire to certain things” (Rogosin 33). Not the least of which was the female's role in society. Two great examples of these strong female characters created by Graham and Humphrey are found in *With My Red Fires* (choreographed by Humphrey in 1936) and *Cave of the Heart* (choreographed by Graham in 1946). In addition to her choreographic pursuits, Humphrey encouraged her dancers to to find their individual dance expression (Siegel 142). Her dancer's sense of

individuality and self identity allowed them to contribute to Humphrey's choreographic process, but it also led many of them to leave her company and pursue their own movement interests. From a pedagogical standpoint, this was a wonderful addition to the dance community.

All of these modern dance pioneers created new works, in a new medium of dance, for a nation without an identity in the dance world. They crafted a means to communicate big ideas and abstract thought without the use of words, with only the human form and all it's ability to express and emote. They had a firm belief that what they were doing was important and not one of them let public opinion, political strife, or a slow economy get in the way of creating their art. Though each of these artists created their work from drawing upon their own personal identities, I believe that they each had an innate need to engage with the audience. Perhaps not to the extent of desiring the audience's approval, but by placing their work on the stage for all to see, they hoped to shape and impact the conscious mind of the viewing audience.

The modern dance pioneers all did a great deal of writing, to help educate the public about what it was they were trying to do in their art. The next generation of dance artists and choreographers, generally grouped together under the title of post modern dance artists, integrated themselves into the educational system itself by helping to found dance programs within universities and colleges. This could be seen as a smart marketing tactic of their artistic abilities. As teachers of art they have a source of income which is more steady than the income generated by ticket sales for performance tours and the added bonus of teaching dance in such a way is that they are creating a more educated

audience for the dance performances of the future. Either by taking a second job as a dance teacher, or by finding someone else to manage the business side of their art, these artists found ways to stay free from the constraints of public opinion while experimenting to find their individual artistic voice in movement.

Chapter Three: Choreographing *Heritage Journey*

I had a plan for graduate school. I knew choreographing an evening length work was the culmination of this three year program and I had the perfect topic: the connection between mental illness and substance abuse. It was the perfect coupling of my own personal experience with something that could be measurably researched in the academic world. But then I changed. During my first two years of work and research in the University of New Mexico Department of Theatre and Dance I came to realize that I wasn't just a dance teacher. I wasn't just coming back to school to get the final degree required to allow me to pursue a career in higher education. Beneath the "Dance Educator" mask I had placed on myself for so many years there lives a person who loves dance and enjoys reaching out to others through choreography. If I pursued the concert work of mental illness and drug addiction, I would only be hiding behind a different mask and not working on something that fully interested me personally, and as an artist. With only the summer standing between me and my final year of graduate school, I had to decide what type of choreographic project actually interested me as a choreographer. The authors of *Art and Fear* really succinctly stated my dilemma:

> As an artist you're expected to make each successive piece uniquely new and different – yet reassuringly familiar when set alongside your earlier work. You're expected to make art that's intimately (perhaps even painfully) personal – yet alluring and easily grasped by an audience that has likely never known you personally. (Bayles and Orland 37-38)

I knew that I wanted to create something that was personal, and yet contained the

capacity to be universal. Communicating to the audience is very important to me. I am not content with allowing the audience to passively take in the choreography on stage. I want them to be drawn in, to react to what they see and hear. Not for the sake of shocking them, or simply moving them, but to allow them to take away a part of me when they leave, and maybe to have discovered a new piece of themselves in the process.

This can only happen if my art is authentic for me. The work created must come from within me and be satisfying for myself and no one else. Even though I am aware of the audience who will eventually view the work, and I do want them to be engaged by it, the work itself has to first hold meaning for me. Thinking back to what Bayles and Orland said about making art as a form of engagement with the world, I must decide in what world I want to create it. "In making art you declare what is important" (Bayles and Orland 108). For the first time I am presented with an opportunity to create movement without first thinking of how it showcases the skills of my students. I get to hand select the dancers I work with for this project and can be sure that no matter how challenging the movement vocabulary I may create, they can perform it with technical skill and artistry. I am not limited in how I create this authentic movement. But it has to come from within myself, or my experiences with others. The creation has to breathe as truth.

As I analyzed my own experience in graduate school and really began to discern the changes I have gone through as a choreographer, dance professional, and as an individual, I realized the most logical place to find inspiration for my final dance concert was from my own heritage. Traveling through the stories of my ancestors reminds me why I have the need to reach out to perfect strangers through my work. It is from these

people that I learned a determination to succeed, to better ones-self, and a compassion to help those who need it.

Where to begin this new choreographic journey? It all started in the inspiration of the music. For as long as I can remember, music has been ever-present in my life. Even before I began dancing, music was important. When I was growing up, the radio was always on, or my sister and I would take turns choosing which records to play on the stereo. My mother would be playing the piano, or the flute, at varying times during the week. Or when I worked outside with Dad I would hear him humming (off-tune) snippets of something. My grandfather would come to visit and sit in the reclining chair conducting the orchestra playing on the television. Or even Grandma's ability to make any statement into a part of a song (this is the only reason I know the song *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition*). Music has been ever present in my life and as a choreographer I have always felt it important to carefully select the musical scores with which I work. For this project, I began by making lists of musical genres and individual songs that had meaning from my past. I also had each of my parents make a short list of the most influential music from their lives. I did not want to confine my choices by what is “usually done” in concert dance. I tried to stay open to which musical selections were speaking to me. I began to hear particular songs speaking to each other and could see them fitting together as part of a larger story.

I found myself drawn to the country and folk music I associate with my father's side of the family. It felt right and I decided it spoke to my desire for authenticity. My family is full of great story tellers, and country music has a long tradition of telling

stories in a way that is clear and meaningful. This style of music portrays real people, experiencing the happenings of real life and that appeals to me as an artist. As Martha Graham wrote,

> In a dancer's body, we as audience must see ourselves, not the imitated behavior of everyday actions, not the phenomena of nature, not exotic creatures from another planet, but something of the miracle that is a human being, motivated, disciplined, concentrated. (136)

In order to reach my audience (which I hope is diverse) I need to show them people they know. Whether themselves, a family member, or a stranger they see each week at the grocery store, I want them to relate to the characters I bring to the stage. For this project I did not want to delve too deeply into the abstract.

I have always heard music speaking to me, creating images in my head, telling me what to create. But not until *Heritage Journey* did I fully listen and let it guide me. Before I have always tried to structure the creation to the music, or to predict the creation's final destination. I wasn't very far into this project when I realized *Heritage Journey* would not be corralled, or lead to a conclusion. It took it's own winding path and I could only trust and hope the conclusion would arrive before the concert date did. As Hyde suggested, I tried to trust in my own guiding *daemon* and allow the inspiration to guide the work, rather than trying to strong arm it where I thought it should go. The choreography itself got off to a rough start. In my mind I saw three distinctly different works of choreography. The first section dealing directly with heritage, the second section began with ocean sounds and I really wasn't sure where it was going. The third

section was re-working a dance I created in the spring 2012 semester for the student dance concert, titled *Pour Apportour Un Petit Peu de Joie* (roughly, "The Bringer of a Little Joy"). It wasn't until working with these three sections for more than two months (and a long conversation with visiting professor Zoe Knights) that I began to see how the sections spoke to each other and could instead be three chapters of the same story. I shuffled the parts of each section around several times, looking for connections and transitions.

In *Chapter One: That Was The Life Back Then*, it was difficult to not be overly influenced by the style of music I chose. It was too easy to get sucked into the banjo and fiddle and accidentally begin to parody what I was actually trying to create. I began this creative process with the section I titled, *Barn Dance*. With four couples I wanted to combine the patterns and partnering of square dance with a hint of modern dance movement. I referenced sections of choreography from the movie musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* as partial inspiration for this section, as well as personal experience with square dance. I simultaneously worked on the trio to the song *Til There Was You* and the solo to Patsy Cline's *Three Cigarettes in an Ashtray* but had no idea how they all fit together. These short movement phrases were part of a larger story I was trying to tell, without knowing what the story was yet. From watching choreographer Sophie Maslow's *Folksay* I knew it was possible to string related ideas together without each section needing to be directly related to the next. Maslow created a suite of dances that incorporated folk music (composed and performed by Woody Guthrie), movement that seem caricatures of Americana culture, spoken text, modern dance vocabulary, and humor

into a work which depicts small glimpses at moments in real people's lives. There isn't an over-arching story, just these small vignettes that engage the audience with an era and mood that is fully American. In a way, this is what I was trying to accomplish with my work, but it wasn't quite coming together.

It wasn't until I found the musical accompaniment for the dancer's lunging entrances at the beginning of the show that I realized I needed a narrative to tie things together. During Christmas break I took the opportunity to drive to Roswell, New Mexico and interview my grandmother, great-uncle, and great-aunt. I spent a short 24 hours with them, asking questions, recording our conversations, looking through photo albums, and trying to let them reminisce without interruption. I came home with more than three hours of audio text and three weeks to incorporate it into my choreography. From these interviews came the solo *Walt's Accident*, the trio *The Bar Room Transition*, and many short sections which I was able to insert into already existing musical scores. My hope was the dances would find cohesion by including these narratives and also by hearing these voices telling their own stories, that the audience would be more engaged with my creation.

Chapter Two: Fragments of Memory was inspired by a quick four-hour trip to the Oregon coast at the end of September. While walking the very foggy coastline I realized how much the beach makes me think of my family and close friends. So much of my childhood was spent at the coast with family and friends, and the smells and sounds all brought back snippets of memory. I was so inspired by the vision of the waves reaching forward and tumbling over one another, like the experiences and memories of life, that I

knew this needed to be incorporated into my concert. The choreography began by simply creating the ocean through the movement of four dancers. While working on this section, I was also inspired by the ways in which water can manipulate the body of a submerged person. The Creative Investigations I class I was taking was spending time investigating movement in a 3-foot-deep therapy pool. I focused my movement experimentation on the initiation of breath and how the surrounding water might support or hinder the dancer's movement. This grew into an exploration of individual and group movement and this also became a part of the choreography for *Chapter Two*. I had my dancers work with the choreography in the therapy pool in order to help them recreate my ideas of the space supporting and manipulating the movement on the stage. There was also a third element that informed this section and that was the idea that the events and people we experience in our lives leave a residue on our souls. It is a residue that is on the peripheral and can never be quite wholly comprehended.

I know this chapter of the concert was the most abstract of the three and I tried to bridge the gap with the use of poetry, as well as coaching the dancers on their connections to each other. Even if the audience didn't understand my intent with this change in mood, I wanted the sense of bitter-sweet emotion to be present. Of the three chapters I choreographed, this was the most closely linked to me personally. Through the use of form and abstraction, I was exploring ways to communicate loss and separation. I worked closely with Luz Guillen, the dancer I chose to showcase in this chapter, on her emotional intent within the quartet and the final duet. Together we developed a structured improvisation to represent her recognition of being alone, her struggle to return to the

ancestors, and her acceptance of not being able to fully recall her fragmented memories.

The final duet in this chapter was a peak in the show for me. The musical score of a Bach cello concerto sang to me while I was creating the movement and the two dancers developed the relationship in a way that revealed the meaning behind the choreography as it was created. I did not start it with a goal in mind, other than knowing I hadn't finished saying what needed saying. Through the process of working with the dancers it became clear that the duet represented the choice of accepting the help of others, or continuing to hide behind the mask of self-dependance and isolation.

Creating *Chapter Two* of *Heritage Journey* was a risk for me. Even as I was making it, I wasn't sure how it connected to the larger idea of the concert. But it interested me and I was enjoying the work of creating it. So once again I chose to trust in my guiding *daemon* and follow Doris Humphrey's advice in *The Art of Making Dances,* to not worry what the audience may think. I tried to utilize suggestions from the faculty and my peers to help guide my viewer in the direction I was going. But in the end, I created it in the way I felt it should be and if it didn't work, it can join the many thousands of other dances that haven't been understood by an audience. In ways I believe the creation of this section was influenced by the way I view Bill T. Jones' solo *Untitled*. This work was created in tribute to his life-partner and fellow dancer/choreographer Arnie Zane after he died of AIDS. Jones crafted this work for the film camera and projected photos (which represented the memories created together with his partner) and moving images of Zane. The viewer can see Jones step into Zane's place and perform his movement in a three-dimensional memory of the lost person. These ideas played in my

mind as I created a liquid world of moving memories for my dancers.

In *Chapter Three: Joy,* I wanted to present the ideas of community, joy, and acceptance of the brevity of life. This work was originally choreographed in memory of a former student who died of cancer at the age of 17. She was the happiest person I ever knew, and even accepted her illness with a smile and compassion for those she was leaving behind. In creating the movement for this Baroque oboe concerto I wanted to play with my own version of a "music visualization" and worked hard to map out what I heard as the themes and variations in the three sections of music. Even though the middle section of this chapter (the adagio) was a solo that focused on the length, or shortness, of a person's life, or time-line, the choreography did not struggle with the idea, but accepted it as natural and right. In re-staging it from the earlier performance, I had the opportunity to address some of the issues of form that the work had. I used all eight of my dancers, as I had originally conceived the piece with many dancers, and simplified a lot of the parts that had become overly tangled in the original staging.

My choreographic goal for this work was the blending of ballet and modern techniques into a movement vocabulary that was somewhat unique to me. I watched Paul Taylor's *Esplanade* for the inspiration of joyful movement and crafting of space he created and Doris Humphrey's *Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor* to inspire the kind of space-shaping patterns I wished to utilize. Above all, I wanted to see the music in action in the same way that I heard it. This meant there was very little stillness and a lot of intertwining of gestures, bodies and running patterns. I incorporated American Sign Language as a part of the choreography because I felt these beautiful gestures of language

fit so well with my over-arching theme of building a community through joyous expression.

These three distinctly different, but linked chapters created the evening length work *Heritage Journey*. My goal of presenting a section of what the elements, people, and experiences that created me, as an individual, were represented through the selection of musical choices, movement vocabulary, and spoken text. The research I undertook for this project informed my work by giving examples of historic choreographers, all of whom I admire for their ingenuity and tenacity. Each of them had specific goals and strong ideas for the purpose of their art. They each drew strength from within themselves as an inspiration for what they created. By looking within myself for inspiration, I believe I created a work which was honest and open and laid bare my values as a choreographer. I believe in beauty and aesthetically pleasing movement, in communicating my ideas to the audience. I believe in creating a community on stage, and in creating work which can be engaging to the average audience member.

Conclusion

As a choreographer, I am concerned with my work remaining true to my vision, while also attempting to engage the audience with my concepts and ideas. It is important to be aware of the audience's existence, but not beholden to create exactly what they think they want. I believe that if dance as an art form is going to be taken seriously and continue to be successful in the larger world of art, choreographers and dancers must carefully consider all aspects of the free-market economy in which our society is based. There must be a way to follow the true ideals of your own art, while still valuing oneself monetarily. There should be no loss of face in being able to successfully market oneself as an artistic choreographer and performer.

I know that my choreography will ever be a work in progress. I will be forever searching for a balance between my own choreographic endeavor and the ability to engage a wide range of audience members. I am not interested in my work only speaking to those specialty art "connoisseurs" that Arnheim mentions in his essay (127). I want my work to be seen by, and invoke a kinesthetic response in, an average audience member. To do this I must be clear in my personal beliefs and intentions and create my work before turning to see what marketability it might have in our culture. I believe I will continue to experiment with the idea of storytelling as a means to engage my audience with my art. Just as Bayles and Orland said,

> . . .for most art there is no client, and in making it you lay bare a truth you perhaps never anticipated: that by your very contact with what you love, you have exposed yourself to the world. (38)

I have stripped away the many masks I've hidden behind and intend to expose myself to the world through the creation of my art.

No longer will I only wear the mask of "Dance Educator" who occasionally dallies in making choreography for her students. Instead I will have interchangeable masks which will enhance who I actually am and the things in which I am interested, instead of the masks hiding my inner-self from the public. I have a "Choreographer" mask which allows me to study and experiment in the styles of movement I enjoy, and which helps me choose the subjects I am passionate about. Unlike the other masks I have hidden behind before, the mask of "Choreographer" helps to expose my true self, rather than diminishing it. I will always retain my identity as a dance teacher and I will always be passionate about educating dancers, but now I feel more free to also pursue things which may only be of interest to me. And as with *Chapter Two: Fragments of Memory*, I may be the only one to enjoy or understand what I intended to create. By looking to the examples of the great modern dance pioneers, who bravely created dance as art at a time when America only knew of dance's existence in the ballet or burlesque worlds, I know it is possible to fulfill oneself as an artist, find a way to be financially viable, and not be considered a sell-out. I have remembered the joy of dance and the happiness which comes in exploration of the boundaries and landscapes of creating dance as Art.

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