

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Defining Humor, Theories, and Where is it in Dance?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1pv2c5km>

Author

Harper, Jessica Lynn

Publication Date

2016

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Defining Humor, Theories, and Where is it in Dance?

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Jessica Lynn Harper

Thesis Committee:
Professor Chad Michael Hall, Chair
Professor Sheron Wray
Professor Shaun Boyle

2016

DEDICATION

To

My family. The funniest people I know.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | iv |
| ABSTRACT OF THESIS | v |
| CHAPTER 1: Review of Literature | 1 |
| <i>A Little Insight</i> | |
| <i>Why do we laugh?</i> | 4 |
| <i>Theories, Culture, and Elements of Humor</i> | 5 |
| <i>Vaudeville</i> | 10 |
| <i>Burlesque</i> | 12 |
| <i>Josephine Baker</i> | 13 |
| <i>Charlie Chaplin</i> | 15 |
| <i>Donald O'Connor</i> | 16 |
| <i>Bob Fosse</i> | 17 |
| <i>Mark Twain</i> | 19 |
| CHAPTER 2: Methodology & Interviews | 21 |
| <i>Why So Serious?</i> | |
| <i>Common Themes</i> | 23 |
| CHAPTER 3: My Process: My Findings: Conclusion | 31 |
| <i>Don't Expect Much</i> | |
| REFERNCE LIST | 40 |
| APPENDIX A | 43 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is my great honor to acknowledge the many people who have supported me throughout this process. Without them, I would not be here and I am forever grateful. Words cannot express the endless gratitude that fills my heart. First, thank you to my family, other half, and friends for loving me unconditionally. You are my rock. Many thanks to my awesome chair 'extraordinaire' Chad Michael Hall, who always has my back and keeps me motivated to strive beyond limits. I am inspired by you and am so blessed we have been able to work together. I look forward to many more fun adventures. Thank you to the goddesses of women on my committee, Professor Sheron 'Wray is the Way', and Professor Shaun Boyle. Your strength and presence fueled my drive to research and keep creating. Thank you to my lovely cohort. We have been through it and I treasure the many memories of laughter, suffering, tiredness, delusion, tears, and joy. These past two years are a couple of my most favorite thus far. Thank you for accepting all of me. I look forward to creating more memories. My deepest gratitude to all the faculty. You have all taught me so much and I feel I have grown into more of the person I am meant to be. Thank you for your continuous support and acceptance. Thank you to the first year cohort. It has been a pleasure working with you. I wish you the best in all that you do. Lastly, I would like to thank my dancers for their unwavering loyalty and commitment. Your collaboration and fierce rigor has and will always keep me motivated. You inspire me and I am so thankful for our time together. Rehearsals are some of my most fond memories. I look forward to hopefully working with you again. If you cannot laugh with me, please feel free to laugh at, or near me. Don't expect much and you'll enjoy more. Thank you so much.

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Defining Humor, Theories, and Where is it in Dance?

By

Jessica Lynn Harper

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2016

Professor Chad Michael Hall, Chair

People of all cultures find humor in things, even though certain aspects of humor differ (*The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Martin 5). The sound of laughter is universal and seems to be innate, which is often associated with humor. Our perception of what is funny may differ, but humor is recognized when it arises. This research investigates the many definitions of humor, the philosophy and production of humor, why laughter occurs, humor theories, elements of what makes something funny, and where humor lives in dance. The foundation of humor theory is identifiable in three groups: *incongruity*, *superiority*, and *relief* theory. I give examples of legends that use humor, and categorize which theory group their humor exudes. I give history on vaudeville and burlesque, and the legends that have employed humor in their works such as: Josephine Baker, Charlie Chaplin, Donald O'Connor, Bob Fosse, and Mark Twain. Successful comedians, writers, choreographers, and professors interviewed, give their perceptions of humor, factors of what makes something humorous, and insight on how humor is essential to life. I take an in-depth look at professionals' understandings of humor from: Craig Hawksley, Joe Keane, Liz Tenuto, Patrick Damon Rago, and

Patricia Sandback. I also shed light on successful artists who utilize humor in dance today, and share my creative process in developing my choreographic thesis concert *Don't Expect Much*. My thesis concert is much like a vaudeville-burlesque show, moving from one varying act to the next, creating an avenue for audiences to laugh and be entertained. Satire is a major theme throughout *Don't Expect Much*.

CHAPTER 1

Review of Literature

A Little Insight

Humor has always been a key component to how I live my life. I think it is safe to say that most people enjoy humor. I am interested in finding the ‘funny’ in life. Naturally, I look and find humor everywhere. So what is humor? What are the elements that make something humorous, and where is humor in dance? This review addresses the psychology of humor, humor theory, the production of humor, and how humor relates to movement. I reveal not only some attempted definitions, but also theories and factors of humor. Additionally, I look at the ways dance has successfully incorporated comedic elements, convincing audiences that dance can be used humorously. For this review, I chose to take a cross disciplinary look at humor, specifically looking at Freud’s psychological theories, and the artists Josephine Baker, Charlie Chaplin, Donald O’Connor, Bob Fosse, and Mark Twain. I chose these greats because I respect them, relate to their senses of humor, and have been majorly influenced by them throughout my life. I chose Freud’s categorization of types of humor: *incongruity*, *superiority*, and *relief* theories. Each humorous ‘joke’ can neatly fit into one of these identifiable theoretical definitions.

Well, what is humor?

Although humor can be found in all cultures, it can be difficult to define because there is much diversity within its contexts and forms. J. E. Roedelein, professor of psychology for over thirty years, uses multiple capacities of what humor is in *The Psychology of Humor*. It is “ironic that we are daily exposed to humor, and the world’s

literature abounds with examples, yet humor eludes precise definition” (Roeckelein 9). Attempting to define it is a challenge. As humor is multifaceted, it is “often used with the greatest degree of looseness” (Roeckelein 9). I look for the funny in everything and find it everywhere, yet it is quite hard to pin down a specific definition. I begin by looking at what some well-known sources have to say about it.

Freud offers the following examples of humor: “puns, displacements, nonsense, false logic, automatic errors of thought, unification, contrast, outdoing-wit, indirect allusion, omission, comparison, peculiar attributes, reproduction of old liberties, and smutty (dirty) jokes” (Machovec 46). *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary* defines humor as “a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement; the faculty of perceiving and expressing or appreciating what is amusing or comical; a capricious or freakish inclination; odd trait” (643). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines humor as “that quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement” (DiCioccio 5). All three sources suggest that humor is a form of communication; by comparison, expression, or speech used to excite amusement.

Scholars define humor as a form of social interaction, which can occur everywhere. In *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Rod A. Martin proposes humor is:

A broad term that refers to anything people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it. (5)

Humor is a form of communication. How we produce and formulate these verbal and nonverbal messages plays a role in how others perceive these messages. Agreeing with Martin, humor refers to the mental processes that go into “creating and perceiving” (5) such amusing stimuli.

Humor is an important function in life. It is looked at in many fields and on many levels. R. A. Martin, Professor of Psychology, focuses his research in humor and laughter. Martin suggests that psychologists divide humor into four components: *social*, *cognitive-perceptual*, *emotional response*, and *vocalization-behavioral*, which is the *sound of laughter*. Willibard Ruch, another Professor of Psychology, specializing in positive psychology, concurs that humor is divided into multiple contexts:

Humor can be studied in relation to cognition, motivation, and emotion. Humor contributes to emotional health, and is important in learning and social relationships. Thus, humor is an important domain of human functioning and gets attention from both basic research as well as the applied fields. (Ruch 19)

Agreeing with both Professors, humor is divided into multiple components: *social*, *cognitive*, *emotional*, and *behavioral-laughter*. “The social context of humor is one of play” (Martin 5). When people engage in social play, they may take on a non-serious attitude “toward the things they are saying or doing, and they carry these activities out for their own sake-for the fun of it” (6), rather than having a serious goal in mind. The *social* aspect of humor occurs even when alone; reflecting on a funny memory, reading a book, or watching a television show, because people are usually involved, which is considered ‘pseudo-social’ because there is a response to some sort of character or person.

As mentioned earlier, the *cognitive-perceptual* processes of humor also refers to the mental processes that go into creating and perceiving something that is funny. As humans continue to grow, so does our intellect, which impacts how humor is created and perceived (7). An example of this would be a pun.

The *emotional* aspect of humor may be pleasant, giving a sense of wellbeing, which is suggested by Martin, but “there is no common name elicited by humor” (7). It is closely related to joy, but researchers cannot agree on a specific name for the positive emotional response humor may provoke, much like a definition for humor.

Defining humor is elusive, but we each have our interpretations and appreciations of it. Researchers such as Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller, and Hampes, “claim that humor is associated with personal warmth and cheerfulness, optimism, assertiveness, and self-esteem” (DiCioccio 6-7). Although it can have both positive and negative affects, which may unify or divide people, I prefer to use humor for the positive. It seems like a survival skill; humor can give us longevity, and it certainly helps me get through tough times. I find the benefits of laughter to be quite essential in my every day way of being; if not laughing, at least smiling.

Why do we laugh?

Laughter is often synonymous with humor, but do we have to laugh to find things funny? People laugh because it makes them feel good. People may laugh out of embarrassment, when they are nervous, when they feel superior to someone else; the list goes on. Usually a smile will form if something is funny and from there, perhaps a laugh. “A man smiles-and smiling, as we shall see, graduates to laughter” (Darwin). There are many forms of smiles as there are types of laughs. Already in 1872, Charles Darwin gave

many ways to describe the types of laughter by respiration, vocalization, facial expressions, gestural, and postural positions (Ruch 24). Ruch discusses the relevance of studying smiling and laughter and how it directly relates to the psychology of humor in his chapter “The Psychology of humor” in *The Primer of Humor Research*. There are a myriad of reasons to study smiling and laughter. Research considers not only emotional responses to humor, but also the effects on health (Ruch 23). Although I am not a scientist, I am interested in the smiles and laughter that are direct results of humor. How am I to successfully utilize humor in my dances if we cannot agree on one definition? I used different approaches to creating humor in my own work, but I did not work with one definition. For the sake of this paper, I will use the following definition for what makes something funny or humorous: “something that makes one laugh; that causes the involuntary eruption of laughter. With that description in mind, what makes things funny is surprise...HUMOR, noun: a surprise that delights” (Hawksley, 28 July 2015). I want to look at the language and insight of what artists say, but first we must take a look at theories and elements that make things funny.

Theory, Culture, and Elements of Humor

There are many theories about humor. I use Freud’s classifications mentioned earlier: *incongruity*, *superiority*, and *relief* theories. The *incongruity* theory is a surprise, when one gets something that is unexpected, which can be applied to all types of humor. The *superiority* theory is when there is a pleasure and delight in someone else’s misfortunes. The *relief* theory is “at work when we look at erotic art, satire, caricatures, experience disgust humor, amusement from watching others engage in social or moral taboos, or actions involving bodily functions” (Klein 10). It is important to recognize that

our personal and cultural backgrounds and social factors influence how humor is produced and perceived. Scholar, Avner Ziv, writes:

The function of humor may vary from culture to culture and that humor has four basic functions: first to achieve group solidarity; second to reduce conflict and conceal malice; third to control, perpetuate or challenge norms and stereotypes; and forth, to induce pleasurable experiences. (Klein 11)

With Ziv's function of humor, as well as the three identifiable theories, humor is a form of communication. How one produces and how another perceives it determine how funny, or not funny, it is.

In his book *Humor, Theory, History, Applications*, Frank J. Machovec declares how humor "has existed in every culture, ancient and modern. It transcends language, geography and time" (6). From Machovec's description, I conclude that humor has universality, even though aspects of humor do differ from culture to culture. Everyone laughs or experiences funny, though someone's idea of funny may seem superficial or peculiar to others. Humor depends on what kind of mood the person perceiving or experiencing it is in. Machovec explains seven elements that cause people to laugh, which may determine or influence how one perceives humor. These seven elements include: *a playful mood, experiencing pleasure or joy, transformational power, short-lived, fragility, universality, and timelessness* (9).

7 Elements of Humor

Let's take an in-depth look at these elements. They are imperative to my research, not only for my interview process, but for my choreographic process as well. Later, my

findings reveal how other professional choreographers employ these elements in their humor.

The first element is creating a *playful mood*. M. Eastman states that play is “the condition in which joyful laughter most continually occurs” (Machovec 7). Through a *playful mood*, like when children are playing, humor is simple, pure, more attainable and easy to see. As we grow up, our intelligence impacts our perception of humor.

With intellect, we utilize our imaginations to create joy, which is the second element: *experiencing pleasure* and *joy*. Now, my idea of joy may be on the opposite end of the spectrum from someone else’s idea of joy. This impacts whether or not people may perceive the same situation as comical. Therefore, the public may have a completely different opinion on what is funny. For example, I may find a fart joke funny, which exercises Freud’s *relief* theory, but another person may find it disgusting. If someone trips unexpectedly, but gets up and is not injured, which exercises the *incongruity* theory and possibly the *superiority* theory, I may laugh at them, only after I have established they are okay. Someone else may be very concerned for the person who tripped. Some may laugh regardless of recovery. Either way, it is our perception. Maybe I was in a playful mood when this other person tripped, so it was impeccable timing for me to find joy and laugh.

The third basic element of what’s funny is *transformational power*. Machovec says this occurs, because positive humor is finding the balance between pleasure and pain, success and failure, and the inspired and insulted (7). What does this mean? Machovec offers the idea that many people would rather live in a state of pleasure than pain. People may want to choose joy. People may want to find balance. People may

experience this switch of feeling doom and gloom to seeing rainbows, sunlight, and unicorns, in a second. It is like having an epiphany or ‘ah-ha’ moment that shifts you from depression toward happiness. A perfect example of this when one is distraught and then in another moment, one can be laughing out loud. I perceive that access to this new way of seeing is offered at any moment. Individuals choose, I believe, whether or not to be in a state of success, joy, or inspiration. *Transformational power* softens harsh situations, warms the cold, and gives people a new perception. In my work, my aim is to utilize this element, to develop it as a skill.

The fourth element is “humor’s ephemeral, transitory quality” (7), otherwise known as *short-lived*. What does this mean? Machovec cites Max Eastman, describing it as a “fairy-shadow life” (7). Some jokes have an expiration date. What a perfect name for a fleeting factor. Humor is merely an accessory. It eventually runs out of style. This brevity, becomes so common, it loses its strength. An example of this may be a joke: ‘Why did the chicken cross the road?’ ‘To get to the other side.’ This joke may be told to a child and once this child has the intellect to understand it, the joke loses its brevity and becomes *short-lived*.

A fifth factor of humor is a having a *fragile* quality. This aspect depends on delivery. Timing is everything. If a punch line is not said at the right time, or in the appropriate environment, it loses its validity of whether or not it is funny. People who are habitually funny are considered to have awareness of this timing. It is a skill. This sense of timing seems to be an acute alertness that comes into fruition with practice. People with this particular skill apply accents of timing to their behavior, which emphasizes or exaggerates ‘timing,’ making something seem more funny or humorous. Only the best

comedians and most talented can utilize such a delicate excellence. Machovec explains further:

This fragile quality requires that it be presented with a significant level of skill. Potentially hilarious material can die prematurely, bomb or backfire if not presented well. This is true for visual humor such as cartoons, silent movies or slapstick humor without dialogue or any sound at all as well as verbalized or written humor. (8)

Later, my thesis will reveal my application and struggle with this *fragility* in my own dance making process.

Machovec suggests the sixth basic element of humor is *universality*. “It is a common trait and therefore of potentially universal appeal or appeals to a broad cross-section of people, across language and culture” (9). Could people laugh at the same joke? People from within the same culture do share similar humor and sometimes this occurs even across cultures. A pun is a good example. In Martin’s book, he offers this example: “Two cannibals are eating a clown. One says to the other, does this taste funny to you?” (7). People in different cultures may know the meaning of ‘cannibal’ and ‘clown,’ and therefore find this humorous, which is Machovec’s idea of *universality*.

The last basic element of humor as suggested by Machovec is *timelessness*. Due to humor being potentially universally communicable, this timeless factor makes complete sense to me. “What’s really funny is funny for all time” (9). From my experience there are those memories or situations where it does not matter when I reminisce, I still laugh. Timeless humor is everlastingly funny. Some jokes or people will always be funny; perhaps it is only timeless because it is this innate quality or being that

does not try too hard to be funny. They just are funny or the situation will always be funny. Or perhaps a joke will continue to be funny no matter how old it is. Okay, so now what? All of these factors of humor are important. People may utilize multiple elements at a time.

Analyzing humor so closely can lessen its impact and charm. Humor is multicolored, multilayered, multicultural, and complex. Next, I turn my attention to comedians, writers, and dance makers of humor. I look closely at dancer, Josephine Baker, joke-tellers like Charlie Chaplin and Donald O'Connor, the multi-talented Bob Fosse, and author, Mark Twain. People mostly recognize these stars as pioneers of funny, and they all have inspired and influenced me. Before I introduce each legend, it is important to first discuss the birth and history of vaudeville and burlesque. Later I will also give insight into my process creating a choreographic thesis concert, which is similar to that of a vaudeville-burlesque show. It is intended to be an evening of absurd, off-the-wall entertainment.

Vaudeville

The word Vaudeville was used as early as the fifteenth-century, and was known as the voice of the city, or the sound of the town, “voix de ville” (*The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, Slide xiv). When the word was fused as Vaudeville, it was known all over France meaning “a ballad or light form of comedy” (xiv). It was used to satirize events of the day or the talk of the town.

American Vaudeville’s roots are in the minstrel shows, which developed in the 1800s (xiv). In nineteenth-century America, Vaudeville entertainment was rising, but a little different from French theatre. There were a variety of shows that included comedy,

dance, song, circus bits, jugglers, and more. Each circuit or act was short and sweet, and at first, probably no more than seven minutes. American Vaudeville may have attracted many different tastes, but was geared toward middleclass whites. “The opening of Tony Pastor’s Fourteenth Street Theatre in 1881 signaled the use of ‘vaudeville’ to imply a higher grade of entertainment, one that was clean and refined” (*The International Encyclopedia of Dance*, Cohen). Theatre attendees could enjoy Shakespeare, acrobats, singers, dance, and comedy all in the same night, but the theatres were capitalizing on middle class emotions, featuring more polite variety in their shows. Benjamin Franklin Keith was known as ‘the father’ of American Vaudeville. Like Pastor, Keith demanded neat, orderly, clean acts, with strict policy. Keith incorporated twelve-hour vaudeville shows, attracting workers, middleclass, shoppers, and urban audiences. Although these shows were becoming more focused on orderly, and polite conduct lacking vulgarity, there were significant racial prejudices and stereotypes in Vaudeville humor at that time. African American dance was “never presented in the early days of white vaudeville because at first such dances were interpreted by white performers in blackface” (Cohen).

Its antecedents were the Minstrel shows. White men would paint their faces black and pretend to be ‘happy’ slaves. These acts were extremely racist and crude, but accepted at the times as legitimate entertainment. Not only were there stereotypes for African Americans, there were racist jokes on stage about other national groups such as: Italians, Irish, and Jewish. Usually, presented as this ‘bumpkin’ type character, an unintelligent ‘clown’ or peasant would be mocked. As a way to enter the growing, lucrative entertainment industry, minorities themselves used racial humor, which they used ironically to resist the negative uses of humor predominant in these particular

circuits at that time. In the article “American Shuffle,” located in *The New York Times Magazine*, John Jeremiah Sullivan writes how African Americans would paint their faces black so they were not ‘themselves’ on stage. “They could not, that is, appear as themselves. The sight wasn’t tolerated by white audiences” (Sullivan 34). Being on stage gave a sense of power, and Caucasians did not want African Americans to be on stage, unless they looked or portrayed that of another character (34). While I recognize there are positive effects of humor, there are indeed negative effects as well. “Minstrelsy was the most popular form of American entertainment from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century” (*The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*, Lewis). Its popularity was part due to the unifying function, “bringing whites of different ethnic, socio-economic, and historical backgrounds together in differentiation from racial outsiders” (Lewis). After the Civil War, African Americans began to enter minstrel show entertainment, although they were forced to wear blackface (Lewis). Although there was a decline to minstrelsy on stage in the early twentieth century, “their appeal continued in the recorded media” (Lewis). People still wanted more. This is where burlesque comes in.

Burlesque

Burlesque provided an outlet for people to indulge in a more playful and provocative side. It brought a new and different vibe to the stage. *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* defines Burlesque as a “theatrical entertainment of a broadly humorous often earthy character consisting of short turns, comic skits, and sometimes striptease acts” (www.merriam-webster.com). *Random House Kernerman Webster’s College Dictionary* gives many examples including: “a comic literary or dramatic piece that vulgarizes lofty material or elevates the ordinary; to make ridiculous by mocking representation”

(thefreedictionary.com/burlesque). Burlesque, in a sense is similar to a vaudeville show. The only difference is the striptease acts, as well as incorporating women as the entertainers and comics. Think fans, boas, feathers, skirts, and sass. Burlesque essentially brought sexy into comedy. It was a gateway for women to express their humor through their sensuality:

In America burlesque was a non-literary mixture of skimpily dressed women (even strippers) and male low comedians, with dancing, songs, comic patter, and an increasing raunchiness frowned upon by the civil authorities, which began closing burlesque houses by edict, as in New York in 1942. As a living form, it had virtually expired by the 1950s. (*The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*, Booth)

So how does this relate to humor in dance? Let's look at the influential and inspirational stars that employed humor in dance regularly. First, I'll introduce Josephine Baker.

Josephine Baker

Josephine Baker was known for her provocative comic skits. She was also the first African American to be cast in a major motion picture. Freda Josephine McDonald, Josephine Baker, also known as the Black Pearl, was born June 3, 1906, St. Louis, Missouri. In 1916, when she was ten, "something happened that would influence her whole life" (*The Josephine Baker Story*, Wood 27). She won a crisp dollar bill in a dance contest, which was performed in an informal vaudeville show (27). "This struck her with a force of revelation. For the first time in her young life she had earned money for something that was not drudgery" (27). By the age of fifteen she danced in a vaudeville chorus *Shuffle Along*, and eventually moved to New York. She was known for her acts

being instinctive and improvisational, which upset her coach Sissle because she would change the dance routines every time she went out on stage. “Sissle was not pleased, but he ruefully admitted that her improvisations were usually wilder and funnier than anything they’d done in rehearsal” (Wood 59). Only the best and most skilled dancer could perform such an ending. In 1925, Baker traveled to Paris and performed with partner Joe Alex in *Danse Sauvage*, where she only wore a feather skirt. This got her a lot of attention by the French, who were at that time, obsessed with anything ‘exotic’ (83). “She knew she had conquered Paris, and would find that a new world was hers” (83). What really made Baker’s career flourish was her performance in *La Folie du Jour*, where she wore only sixteen bananas. Later she revised her costume to appear more opulent. It “was restricted to a golden version of her banana skirt, this time studded with rhinestones and with the bananas curved cheekily upward at the ends instead of hanging like a bunch” (108). People adored her new glamorous look. “By mid 1926, Josephine’s celebrity in Paris was astounding. Photographs of her were selling everywhere. Indeed she was believed at the time to be the most photographed woman of the world” (109). She was famous for her comedic and sexy skits that were well received by the French. Admired by many, she was also one of the highest paid performers in France.

When she came back to America, in 1936, at first she did not have the same recognition. “Once again she was criticized for being Frenchified” (197), although that would change. On February 25, 1936, Josephine greeted her guests before performing in her club as Chez Josephine. “*The New York Herald-Tribune*, for instance, wrote: to miss hearing her and seeing her in her club is to miss one of the most exciting and entertaining cabaret performers of our day” (100). America could not help but fall in love with

Josephine. Her rolling eyes and clumsy slapstick dancing attracted people. Although there was much more to this diva's life, I will continue investigating other legends that have employed humor in dance.

Charlie Chaplin

One of the most 'in-demand' men in Hollywood, Charlie Chaplin, born in 1889, was the greatest silent movie star in history. "Like all true artists, Charlie had a highly developed sense of observation" (*Charlie Chaplin: His Life and Art*, Bowman 28). Every gesture, movement or expression he saw, he tried to imitate (28). "Charlie began to pantomime everything he could" (30). Chaplin too is from a vaudeville background, using comedic slapstick routines. In 1910, Chaplin played a comedian for Fred Karno Comedy Company in a tour of the United States and Canada (41). By 1913, his subtle way of acting in film made him that much more likeable. He was cavalier in his comedy and extremely successful. Although audiences could almost predict what was going to happen, he was still funny. He was very demanding with others in rehearsals and was very serious off camera. In the book *The Funny Parts: A History of Film Comedy Routines and Gags*, author Anthony Balducci offers that Charlie Chaplin had complete control, and walked every actor through each scene, despite the improvisational tools he used for himself (87). His comedy is timeless. He wrote, directed, composed, and starred in his own films. For example, in his 1925 movie, *The Gold Rush*, Charlie performed with two forks and two bread rolls to impress a table where a group of ladies are seated. His "Dance of the Rolls" had a burlesque tone, while his rolls represented his feet and the forks his legs. Chaplin's timing of high kicks was impeccable. He worked the music in a way where it was almost as if he was going to be late, but he never was. His commitment

to his character, derived originally from his 1915 film *The Tramp*, was very entertaining. His whole attitude is what set him apart from others. “Chaplin’s routine was intricately designed, carefully timed, and gracefully executed” (Balducci 87). Chaplin was also known for his comedy and pathos. From 1918 and on, Chaplin’s longer pictures gave “his clients amusing but penetrating studies of life in various aspects. Humour predominated; the humour that meets hardship and suffering with a smile” (Bowman 106).

With tragedy there can also be humor, depending on perspective. There are a couple acts in my choreographic thesis, where I directly make fun of challenging times in my past. Chaplin went through difficult times. Maybe that is why he was so funny. It took tragedy for him to be successful in humor.

Donald O’Connor

Another dancing legend of great influence to me, and my research, is Donald O’Connor. He is a singing, dancing, miming fool of a clown, and I will forever laugh with, and at him when viewing his ever so famous “Make ‘Em Laugh” from the 1952 film *Singin’ in the Rain*. The online *International Encyclopedia of Dance* states O’Connor’s dance “may yet be the most hilarious dance routine recorded on film” (Cohen). He performs a slapstick comedy number, using physical comedy, flipping off the walls, fighting with a dummy doll, crashing into brick walls, and then landing in a pool to produce laughter in audience members. O’Connor used many of his vaudeville acts in his choreography. “Make ‘Em Laugh” has the surprise factor, as well as takes pleasure in someone else’s misfortune. These approaches directly relate to the many humor definitions and Freud’s *relief* theory on humor. It also seems that his work is structured in a dramaturgical way. O’Connor even used dramatic satirical presentation in

another performance in *Singin' In the Rain*, making fun of modern dance and its widely accepted seriousness. These ideas I carry forward as influences in my choreographic thesis, making fun of how serious we can be as modern dance artists.

Bob Fosse

Another legend of musical theatre with vaudeville roots is Bob Fosse. Born June 23, 1927, Robert Louis Fosse was a dancer, choreographer, director, composer, actor, and comedian. His career started in the early fifties and continued until the eighties. He first started taking dance lessons at the age of eight, while accompanying his older sister Patsy to the Chicago Academy of Theatre Arts (*All His Jazz*, Gottfried 9). He won a number of Tony Awards and put on many Broadway Productions such as: *Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, *Sweet Charity*, *Pippin*, *Cabaret*, and *Chicago*. A lot of his productions were comedies. He is mostly recognized for his genius choreographic style, utilizing sexual undertones, small gestures, humor, and cynicism; all the while choreographing on some of the most skilled dancers of his time:

Helen Gallagher, the dancer who had worked with Bob in *Pal Joey* and would later replace Carol Haney in *The Pajama Game*, thought he had achieved an original look with “Steam Heat,” but she also thought that “the slides and shoulder movements are Jack Cole while the hats and props are Fred Astaire.”

(81)

Bob learned Jack Cole and Fred Astaire’s aesthetic, and fused them to become ‘his.’ He danced in the chorus in a couple productions, but he got his first big break after gaining the attention of director George Abbot and Jerome Robbins in his short appearance in

Kiss Me Kate, and was hired to choreograph for the Broadway production *Pajama Game* in 1954 (72-81):

Ethel Martin, who had danced in the Cole troupe with both Carol Haney and Buzz Miller of “Steam Heat,” felt that “Jack had given us a stylistic sense, a way of tucking under, a way of moving, a way of stance, which Bob had admired and learned. When you had Cole people dancing, like Carol and Buzz, they gave something an unmistakable look. Maybe Bob gave it another point of view, maybe even for the better, but they were using Jack’s tools. Because they *were* tools. To have taken those people and put them in ‘Steam Heat,’ well, with all credit to Bobby, it had to have something from Jack.” And Agnes de Mille agreed; in fact “they all stole from Jack Cole,” she said. “Jerry Robbins and of course Fosse.” (*All His Jazz*, Gottfried 81)

Fosse would have agreed. He appropriated the work from less well-known dancers, and was influenced by established artists (81). Fosse won a Tony Award for Best Choreography in *The Pajama Game* (85). From then on, he continued to create, direct, choreograph and win more Tony Awards, Academy Awards, and even an Emmy. His signature style included: wearing hats, gloves, using a cane, and emphasizing the turned in toes, pelvic thrust, and small gestural movements. He has now and in the past, influenced my choreographic aesthetic. I admire his tenaciousness as an artist.

Now, I am going to shift to another pioneer who employed humor in his work. He did not necessarily utilize humor in dance, but as an author and human, he exuded humor, and has greatly inspired my work as a choreographer.

Mark Twain

Mark Twain was born November 30, 1835, and died April 21, 1910 (*Twain in His Own Time* xxii-xxxii). He was known for his witty one-liners, aphorisms, and maxims. “Much of Twain’s humor is ‘funny’ today simply because it is so serious in what it says about the human condition, or what Twain supposedly called the ‘Damned Human Race’ [this exact phrase never having been found in his collected writings or letters]” (*Mark Twain: The Adventures of Samuel L Clemens*, Loving 4). Another author, Robert Middlekauff says “not surprisingly, Mark Twain’s maxims are characteristically extravagant, even exuberant, and sometimes sheer burlesque” (*Mark Twain’s Humor: With Examples* 450-451). I relate to his satirical humor. Twain’s humor is from southwestern heritage, telling ‘tall-tales’ and myths (Loving 4-5). He was a playful man. One technique or theory that he used often was the *superiority* theory. He took delight in making fun of others and their stupidity. Humor was essential to his livelihood. He took “great satisfaction in it and in a great variety of other devices that led to laughter” (Middlekauff 454). “Politicians and diapers must be changed often, and for the same reason” (Twain). “Never argue with stupid people. They will drag you down to their level and beat you with experience” (Twain).

“[Twain’s] humor is simply whimsical exuberance, bizarre extravagance, and joy in laughter” (Middlekauff 450). His quirkiness was evident and seems often to have no social purpose. “Humor is mankind’s greatest blessing” (Twain).

Mark Twain seems to have made humor a way of life. In this aspect, I relate to Mark Twain. I find humor in everything. I feel that humor and comedy provide unique

insight to difficult issues or situations. Mark Twain was successful in using humor as a tool to address perhaps sensitive issues or situations of his time.

Drawing from the many definitions of humor, theories of humor, factors of funny, and the diverse artists that inspire me, I am intrigued and continue to search for humor everywhere, especially in dance. In the next chapter, I reveal my findings from artists I was able to interview. I look forward to discussing more examples of humor in the work and creative process of performing artists working today.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology & Interviews

Why So Serious?

After researching definitions of humor, the psychology of humor, the production of humor, Freud's theories on humor, and the legends that have influenced me, I seek out professionals who regularly employ humor in their works today. I also looked for professionals who had strong opinions on humor. I was able to connect with professional comedian Craig Hawksely, director of Dance&aHalf company Liz Tenuto, director of *Madonna Monroe, The Musical* Joe Keane, Professor Patricia Sanback at San Diego State University, and Professor Patrick Damon Rago, Department Chair of Loyola Marymount of University's dance program. This particular topic of my thesis will focus on the interviewees' responses to questions and obtaining research on humor in dance history. I will also give some insight in how I utilize humor in my choreographic process. I begin by describing my methodology.

While I researched humor in the literature, I also viewed many clips on YouTube. I was reminded of how much I am influenced and inspired by the great artists from the past and present. I searched *funny dances, humor in dance, modern dance humor, essentials in humor*, etc. With this drive to interview people who employ humor today, a few contemporary choreographers immediately came to mind, so I began to search how to contact these artists. In addition to dance I considered other influences. I grew up watching *Saturday Night Live* sketches, and had experience and joy, in acting and directing 'mock' documentaries, also known as mockumentaries, so connecting with a

professional comedian was important. I created a list of questions to ask these potential interviewees. See *Appendix A* for the list of questions.

I contacted people via email for the purpose of time efficiency. Potential interviewees could take their time answering one, some, or all of the questions and then email me their answers when they were ready. I emailed the people I knew who employed humor on a regular basis in their work. After obtaining an IRB, I felt confident and began emailing potential participants.

To my surprise, comedian Craig Hawksley agreed to have an interview, but he suggested it was easier to perhaps answer questions via email so he could take his time. In addition I reached out to choreographers like Monica Bill Barnes, Liz Tenuto, and Joe Keane. In my opinion, Tenuto's company Dance&aHalf, based in San Francisco, has a similar choreographic aesthetic to my own, and surprisingly Tenuto responded immediately. I consider her to be innovative, and therefore I anticipated her answers would be insightful.

Keane's 2014 *Madonna Monroe, The Musical* is so clever. Keane tells the story of Marilyn Monroe's life through Madonna's material, utilizing different lyrics and theories on how Monroe died. I thought Keane and his cast were successful at creating a work that was entertaining, hilarious, and funny. They even had to extend their shows an extra weekend. Keane too, was very receptive in taking the time to answer my questions about humor. These individuals were aligned with my research on humor and dance.

Although I reached out to other choreographers who employ humor, my attention returned often back to Patrick Damon Rago. We danced together in *TONGUE*, a modern dance company under direction by Stephanie Gilliland, in 2002, while I was an

apprentice. Previously I have always enjoyed Rago's sense of humor. He constantly wrote jokes, poems, creating pieces with satire and wit. As a result of this, he was a perfect match for my research. I also connected with Professor Patricia Sandback, a choreographer who's been creating humorous works for quite a while. Next, I reveal the common themes that arose from the interviewees who participated in my research.

Common Themes

Common themes emerged from my interviewees' responses. These themes included: *defining humor*, the *importance of timing*, *pathos verses comedy* and the *feeding of the soul* to reach people. As mentioned before, I was able to interview comedian, Craig Hawksley, 'triple threat' Joe Keane (dancer, actor, singer), company choreographer of Dance&aHalf Liz Tenuto, Professor Patricia Sanback from San Diego State University, and Professor Patrick Damon Rago, Department Chair of Loyola Marymount University's dance program. I also include insight from some contemporary choreographers who employ humor such as Monica Bill Barnes and Maria La Ribot.

What makes something funny?

Comedian Craig Hawksley responded:

Throughout my answers and comments, I'm going to interpret the word 'funny' as something that makes one laugh; that causes the involuntary eruption of laughter. With that description in mind, what makes things funny is surprise...HUMOR, noun: a surprise that delights. (Hawksley 2015)

All interviewees attempted to define what they thought made something funny, but not all attempted to define humor. I bring this up because it is truly difficult to find a precise definition for humor. I ponder if the interviewees who left the answer blank or simply

said “I can’t define it” (Rago, 12 January 2016), found it difficult to define as our perceptions of humor differs. I suggest that this only proves how difficult it is to give a precise definition of humor.

Originally from St. Louis, Missouri Craig Hawksley, a very successful stand-up comedian and actor, knows how to create humor. Getting insight from a professional, who clearly knows comedy has been imperative to my research. Craig, being the first interviewee to respond, set a precedent on what is considered ‘funny.’ I value Hawksley’s response. Surprise is indeed something that fuels laughter. People and situations surprise me constantly, especially when they are genuine and not necessarily forced. Depending on the context, in those in between moments I find humor. Almost anything can be funny. I wanted to know what others thought.

Joe Keane, actor, choreographer, comedian, director, dancer, singer and writer says that “honesty” is what makes something funny. Being “uncomfortable, angry, in love...anything can be funny, if you play the moment honestly” (Keane, 4 February 2016).

“If you could define humor, what would the definition be?” was one of my questions. Liz Tenuto answers “Uff, what a tough question! Humor to me is medicine. A good laugh is the best vacation I have ever had” Agreeing with Keane, Tenuto says, “the truth is a huge key into being funny, whether it is brutal honesty or innocent honesty” (17 December 2015).

These answers directly relate to how humor and laughter are survival skills. People, often with something in common enjoy it. Laughter is universal. This leads me to the importance of timing. It is timing that makes brutal or innocent honesty effective.

The Importance of Timing

Timing is what separates those of us who are funny, are those who are not funny. Even if a choreographer is not deliberately trying to be funny, his or her message may only be understood with the appropriate timing. “Timing is all about manipulation of your audience. So, timing is the pace, and the rhythm as well as the pauses” (Hawksley, 28 July 2015). The moments of suspension are just as important as the moments of movement or delivery, and how we perceive messages influences whether or not we find something funny. Timing plays a huge part in how produce and perceive these messages.

In my research on the psychology of humor and the production of humor, I found that social influences and the performer’s cultural backgrounds impact how we receive and produce humor. The elements that make something funny are also imperative to whether or not someone finds humor in what they see, hear, observe, feel, or experience. How a joke is delivered is the most essential key to whether or not something is received well; in this case, if it is considered humorous.

Sanback agrees, “it [timing] is everything.” Professor Rago had the exact response, but Joe Keane goes further with “it is what separates Joan Rivers and David Letterman from everyone else...it is a must have” (4 February 2016). Comedian Hawksley states “...timing is something that comes naturally. You can actually feel when to pause and when to continue.” This is most definitely true for me. When creating work for my choreographic thesis, I tend to utilize absurd or ridiculous movements that seem suggestive, and because they are so extreme, the whole situation becomes hysterical to me. Even my dancers laugh together uncontrollably while collaborating with me.

Finding the pauses and rhythm in rehearsal is just as rewarding, if not more than the actual performance. This is probably because we did not know how our audience would perceive the work. Successful deliveries are “when the audiences as a whole ‘gets’ it and there is a sense of unity and community in the audience response” (Sandback, 21 January 2016). I agree with this statement. Playing back and forth with the audience is what can make or break humor in dance. Key elements to humor and timing include: “Unapologetic commitment to being who you are, embracing imperfections, fearless honesty, generosity towards the creative team and towards the audience, boldness, keen listening, humility” (Tenuto, 17 December 2015).

I find that most slapstick or satirical humor is structured in a dramaturgical way, taking advantage of pauses, in an almost outlandish approach. Choreographer, Maria La Ribot employs humor in this kind of way. La Ribot performs nude with outlandish costumes and props like a folding chair draped over her body. In Luc Peter’s film “La Ribot Distinguida,” La Ribot’s many works are displayed where she moves from one subject to another without any development. Her work is provocative and humorous. She creates scenes that seem to be quite ridiculous, but they actually raise questions for audiences on a more serious level. La Ribot integrated actual laughing in *Laughing Hole*, while her performers held up cardboard words like: *raw death*, *brutal killing*, *lost mum*, and *abstract hole*, which raised questions for her audiences. In this case, La Ribot used laughter, language, and time to draw attention to misfortunes. This is not easy to do. A. Fourtouni argues that La Ribot choreographed her humorous works in a dramaturgical way as well. Fourtouni wrote her thesis on *Humor and Contemporary Dance Performance: The case of La Ribot*. Fourtouni analyzes La Ribot’s dance *Laughing Hole*.

“This performance uses techniques that have a humorous effect and that [her] choreography is similar to that of a joke” (Fourtouni 4). Her thesis explains how La Ribot’s *Laughing Hole* used Freud’s characteristics of a joke: timing, the body, and use of language. It is indefinitely more of a dark humor, which leads me to the next common theme.

Pathos and Comedy

Behind every sense of humor, there is tragedy. Most choreographers create works derived from those tragedies. I am interested in creating work with a sense of humor. Although there may be a sad or disturbing dance, in the past I have found a way to make it funny even if it is after the fact. Perhaps it is my own defense mechanism, but regardless, I look for what is funny or how things could be funny. Ironic or satirical elements can be present to create humor.

Satire is a huge aspect of humor, and is definitely found in dance history. Satire, by definition, combines both comedy and tragedy. It is essential to humor. As one theorist argues, a satirist “is a master of irony, caricature, disabling imagery, the unexpected thrust of wit, anticlimax, burlesque, and invective” (Kernan 166). Humor without satire is like a knife without an edge. *Random House Kernerman Webster’s College Dictionary* reveals, “Satire is the use of irony, ridicule, and sarcasm in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice or folly” (www.thefreedictionary.com). “Irony is a primary factor in humor” (Rago, 12 January 2016). Monica Bill Barnes says, “what I find tragic can make people burst into laughter” (“HUMOR & WIT: Their Dances Make Us Laugh”). It is important to bring this up because our perception and mood alters how we accept or determine if something is humorous. A lot of modern choreographers tend to

create works that are quite serious, but that does not mean I cannot view them as funny, and it does not mean they cannot have a humorous undertone, as others have done before. Even though I create work that can be more serious, I mock how serious modern dancers and choreographers are in my thesis concert.

Even modern dance pioneer, Martha Graham used satire in her work. Henrietta Bannerman argues that “the development of Graham’s comic and satiric dances started early in her career, at a time when she was creating and constantly changing her vocabulary” (“Dancing for laughs: Martha Graham and comedy”). Six years before her death, Graham created *Maple Leaf Rag*, which revealed her humor, a trait not often linked with her work. In 1960 she created *Acrobats of God*, “which jokingly portrays the trials and tribulations of the dancer’s way of life” (Bannerman). In an article in *The New York Times*, Martha Graham writes:

I think comedy is the most difficult thing in the world; one can always lament, you know-but to laugh in the face of life, that’s very hard. And for me the great tragedian should also be a great comedian. I think it was true in the case of the little man with the big feet, Charlie Chaplin. (1985)

Tenuto seems to agree with Graham stating, “There is a razor thin line between sadness and humor. I think the best comedians are able to infuse levity into what they find painful or difficult” (17 December 2015). This leads me into my final theme of my findings, the *feeding of the soul*.

The Feeding of the Soul

Dance is the ultimate expression of the human condition. Laughter is the best remedy so why not feed the soul through humor in dance? Tenuto reveals:

There is something amazingly therapeutic about being in a room together with people at a show and the whole room is laughing. Humor connects people. It also allows people to take things less personally and zoom out to a broader, more nuanced understanding.

I concur. La Ribot talks about how the environment and makeup of the audience can really enhance a piece in Peter's 1994 documentary, "La Ribot Distinguida." Someone else's laughter or presence can assist another's understanding of a joke.

Laughter is universally communicable. We understand it. Hawksley believes by "increasing your understanding of life increases your ability to laugh because you recognize more of the absurd activity around you. Laughter gives knowledge. Knowledge is power." Everyone values knowledge in some way. Humor uncovers vulnerability. Understanding someone else's vulnerabilities allows people to feel connected. "Humor reveals things to us that we never considered" (Rago, 12 January 2016). Humor helps people because it is a "physical release, endorphin rush, laughter, like tears, is soul cleansing" (Rago). In the article *HUMOR & WIT: Their Dances Make Us Laugh*, Patricia Sandback says, "I've done serious dances, but you can communicate more with humor" (Eitland, sandiegostory.com). In the same article, Monica Bill Barnes later reveals that "humor is big for me. I'm sincere in my efforts but I don't try to be funny. It just happens. That's how clowns work. We find humor in their tragedy" (Eitland, sandiegostory.com). People look for these connections. I intuitively want to feel like I am part of a cohesive group. For one of my questions, I asked: "How can humor help people?" Answering the question, Keane so heartwarmingly states:

I think humor cleanses our soul and makes us feel connected. I literally think that comedy and music are the keys to solving the world's problems. When we all dance to the same song and laugh at the same person slipping on a banana peel, we realize we are all from the same human family. And no one wants to do anything other than help people in their family.

Humor, like dance, feeds my soul. I use humor to make people smile, to make myself happier, to defuse a situation, and to connect to my students. "Humor is the key to communication. And communicating is the key to peaceful relationships. It means you're on the same page, even if it is about watching a dog go poop" (Keane). As Sanback simply states "[humor] is the balance to the daily frustrations that are a part of all our lives" (21 January 2016).

In conclusion, humor in dance is something our world needs. Although my choreographic concert may bring future audience members expecting more, I am still willing to take the risk to shed light on humor. Even if only one person laughs, I will be satisfied. I am joyous when choreographing and humor evolves. Laughter is essential to my life so I intend to research more on the subject. It is been such an honor to connect with Craig Hawksley, Joe Keane, Liz Tenuto, Professor Patricia Sandback, and Professor Patrick Damon Rago. It has inspired me to research humor and its many definitions, the psychology and the production of humor, humor theory, and the people who employ humor on a regular basis. I only hope to find how humor can benefit the art of the dance and the people who make, create, and view it. I strive to spread the love and laughter through my choreography and the collaborations with the dancers I work with.

CHAPTER 3

My Process: Findings: Conclusion

My Process

My choreographic process is similar to that of my research. I know what I like, but I am not quite sure how to get there, or know exactly where ‘there’ is. I make decisions and collaborate with my dancers, but it is all play. I feel like choreography imitates life, or at least the fantasies we create in our heads. I may have an idea or plan, but that plan may not turn out exactly how I imagined, and in some cases, much without orchestration, it brings more joy than I could imagine. I thank God for that. I am playing in life. My perspective on how we choose to approach life is our individual choice. I choose to look at things with a light heart and find humor in almost everything. This is definitely in alignment with my research. Now, I am not saying I do not have any idea of what I want to create or how to navigate my time in research. I am not just floating around on this cloud letting the wind take me. I have goals. I have dreams and ideas, but I accept what comes my way. The acceptance part may take a moment to soak in, but eventually, I surrender and accept. I am open to the shifts and changes because we must be. Sometimes I feel most joy in what comes to me unannounced. The one thing constant in life is change, much like the movement in dance.

During my investigation of humor in literature along with researching collaboration in choreography, I have had an open mind and heart. It has actually become a sacred process for me. The feeling of ‘ah ha’ came over me, exercising the *transformational* element of humor. The dancers delivered beyond what I imagined and they performed exactly as I had hoped, and yet there is always room for growth. I am

interested in the journey, not just the end result. In this section, I reveal findings on my choreographic research, as well as share how my work was influenced by the legends mentioned in Chapter 1. I conclude with reflections on my concert, what I might change, and what I plan to do with my research in the future.

In the Beginning

For my thesis concert, I created a show called *Don't Expect Much*, reflecting a Vaudeville show compiled of many acts. Firstly, I share my thoughts on how I began choreographing my first few acts. I knew I wanted to create an act or two mocking modern choreographers and dancers; breath cues, ridiculous long stares, the perceived seriousness of modern dancers, vocalized sound cues, warm-up activities, and use of socks all had to be present in my concert. Of course, in making fun of modern dancers and choreographers, I am also making fun of myself. I am a modern dance maker who has been, and sometimes still is, very 'serious.' In my thesis project, the satirical work is all a form of flattery to the dancers, choreographers, professors, and directors. Some of what I mock or at least hope to portray that I'm mocking, I truly do not understand. Some things just strike me as funny and are beyond words. I would much rather perform an improvisational dance as a response. There is certainly no malicious intent behind the mockery. Rather, I am hoping that we can all find some humor in things we tend to take very seriously. After all, if we cannot laugh at ourselves, how can we live and laugh with each other?

Modern Yourself

One of the first sections of *Don't Expect Much* is called "It's About Time." The dancers and I started out by creating breath cues with no music or added audio to the

piece. I wrestled with the idea of adding additional audio tracks, but ultimately my first instinct of having the dancers produce the only sound prevailed. We laughed at ourselves in the rehearsal process. This in itself was a reward. “It’s About Time” is a satire of the habitual sound cues and intense gazes often present in modern dance works. Three dancers use facial expressions and vocalizations to the extreme, eventually becoming absolutely ridiculous; the dancers are definitely ‘in’ on the joke.

While I enjoy discussing the intention behind the work with the dancers, I am resistant to describing my work to audiences. I would rather audiences not have any preconceived notion as to what the act is about. If I give the audience an outline of what each act means, the audience may expect more, possibly leading to a harsher judgment of the work. Audiences also may be convinced that a work be a certain way without using their own intelligence and mental faculties to have an autonomous opinion. With that said, I continue, but invite audiences to be authentic in their viewing of my work, regardless if they find humor in it or not.

Another act in my show that pokes fun of modern dancers and teachers is “Merde.” Originally, this duet with undergraduate dancers Sara Schroerlucke and Simon Harrison was going to be about time, space, and energy, incorporating an improvisational call and response score, where the dancers would discuss the important elements of dance, mocking what we dance majors and graduate students learn and discuss in school. Although I liked this idea, I suddenly had the impulse to utilize Freud’s *relief* theory in some way.

In collaboration, Sara, Simon and I came up with a new premise of two dancers addressing the pre show ‘nervous poo.’ While warming up, they begin by discussing how

Sara tends to get a ‘nervous poo’ right before performing. They utilize the *incongruity* theory by surprising audiences with their ‘unique’ warm-up exercises, offering audience members a unique and humorous ‘backstage’ look into their experience.

Trying to be funny can be challenging, especially on the stage. Some of us are naturally funny, and being comical comes with ease. For those of us who exude humor with ease, I believe there is a vulnerability present. When creating a work, I do have some sort of inclination where the movement derives from or feeling it portrays. I know when I am trying to be funny, but regardless there is a sense of vulnerability. Maybe I think I am funny or my work is funny, but others disagree. My research is on humor and where it lives in dance, so I created acts that are funny, but it is my perception and the dancers’ perceptions of we believe to be funny.

Another duet that I have inserted into my evening length work is called “Modern Yourself,” with dancers Julienne Mackey and Julianna Cressman. Two young dancers enter the stage, playing their chakra bowl and xylophone carefully and purposefully, exercising the important element of *timing*. The melodramatic sound from the instruments creates a ritual feeling, gaining the attention of the audience. Next, the dancers recite quotes from dance pioneers like Martha Graham and Pina Bausch. “Dance. Dance. Otherwise we are lost” (Pina Bausch). “Dance begins where words end” (Pina Bausch). Their recitation quickly becomes competitive, with the intention to ‘out-do’ each other. There is a feeling of surprise, exercising Freud’s *incongruity* theory as well as his *superiority* theory, as each dancer tries to ‘out quote’ the other.

Findings

A lot of my work in *Don't Expect Much* exercises the absurd as identified by *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* in Chapter 1. I find the absurd to be funny. To define humor is elusive, but the absurd is most definitely a way to describe it. My show does not tell one specific story, but rather unfolds as a series of vignettes or shorter stories. There are motifs that are woven throughout the show that serve to connect various acts to each other. Hopefully some of the humor is palpable to the audiences.

Such a Character

Donald O'Connor and Charlie Chaplin influence the slapstick nature, mockery, and satire in my choreography. Certain acts have a burlesque tone influenced by Josephine Baker and Bob Fosse. For example, "I'll Pointe Ya in the Right Direction" features four dancers on pointe, flipping feather fans, chewing gum, and interacting as tired and jaded prostitutes trying to make a living. However they also embraced and exercised their power to control the male gaze through their sexuality. They performed as if they did not have time to impress. They moved in and out of flirty and annoyed attitudes. I loved working on this act because it reminded me of Fosse's "Big Spender" from the film *Sweet Charity*. Trying to be sexy is funny to me. This is the motivation for "I'll Pointe Ya in the Right Direction."

As mentioned before, characterization is a big part of telling this story. Joe Keane's work in *Madonna Monroe, The Musical*, as well as Josephine Baker's "Banana Dance," Bob Fosse's pelvic thrust motifs, and Chaplin's "Dinner Roll Dance," has inspired my work. Mark Twain's ingenious ability for aphorisms also provided inspiration for the concert. For example, *Modern Yourself* has the clichés of modern

dancers being too 'serious' by the dancers trying to 'out quote' each other. The dancers' commitment to their characters is essential in delivering these aphorisms. It is just as important if not more than the actual choreography. It separates a performer from a dancer.

All acts of my thesis concert relied heavily on character and attitude. It was imperative for the dancers to have a clear idea of their character and embody that character through their dancing. I choreographed "Strut" for UCI's *New Slate* dance concert, which premiered December 3, 2015 with intention of using it in my thesis, *Don't Expect Much*. This contemporary modern piece was majorly influenced by Bob Fosse's pelvic thrust and suggestive sexual undertones. The five women utilize large trench coats, and four chairs, which they fight over, much like musical chairs. They are competing for the spotlight, much like at an audition. "Life is like one long audition" (Fosse). Sometimes life does feel like a long audition, which is hysterical because we tend to be focused too much on an end result, or where we will end up, and forget about living in the present and enjoying the ride.

"Strut" ended on a high note where the ladies surrender, give up the fight, and join together to strut on. This section was a risk for me because I usually do not use props, or have a clear story to tell. Sometimes it is just more about the movement or character, allowing the audiences to make up their own story. *Don't Expect Much* is compiled of many stories. It is funny how that worked out.

This is The End...for now

This whole process has inspired me to investigate humor in literature and in my choreographic works more. Reflecting on my creative process and choreography, I find

patterns or themes that emerged such as emphasis on characterization, making fun of how serious dancers can be, competition, sexuality, and the humanness of any art. Perhaps my own experiences have led me down this path. There are more acts to my evening length work, but I chose to not share details. I firmly believe in the audience having an authentic reaction and I would like share *Don't Expect Much* in the future.

“Humor is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place” (Mark Twain).

Conclusion

Don't Expect Much went extremely well in terms of performers reaching their goals, and was well received by the audience; they demonstrably laughed, stomped, smiled and gestured at the performers. It was even more rewarding when the audience ‘got’ the jokes, connecting us all in responsive laughter. Humor indeed connects people.

I feel that humor and comedy can provide unique insight to issues, making them potentially more palpable to audiences. This is something I continue to strive for in my work. In the future I plan to use humor to address or raise awareness to specific issues or situations. In this work I demonstrably empowered my dancers to address hierarchical issues, as well as embracing a public celebration of their sexuality in *Don't Expect Much*.

Reflecting what I have choreographed as a result from my research on humor, I see that I tend toward creating works that use mockery, even farcical humor. Like Professor Sandback’s creations, “the humor is built into the subject/content of the work. I tend to see life as funny in general.” Similar to Professor Rago who says “I see humor in everything. Sometimes I see too many opportunities for humor.” For me, anything absurd, ridiculous or dramatic leads me on a path to laughter and humor.

Looking back at my work, I realize that I cast dancers for specific roles where they might feel empowered. I wanted to give dancers and actors the freedom to be authentic in their own artistry; this is something I intend to continue to fuel as a director and choreographer. I was filled with contentment while watching the show unfold, witnessing the choices each dancer or actor made in response to the particular audience of that night. Personally, I enjoyed seeing the show multiple times to observe any subtle detail or nuance that I might have missed previously. It was rewarding to see people come to the show both nights because it affirmed that they appreciated the work. I even received emails to reserve seats for the second night, after attending the premiere on May 4, 2016. People wanted to see the show again. People even had to stand and sit on the floor as the performance seating was overfilled. There was this indescribable ‘buzz’ the show created. It was surreal. I was pleased, relieved, and happy. I was thrilled it was so well received by audience members. I owe it all to my cast and the many people who’ve supported me along the way. My goal is to present *Don’t Expect Much* again.

After viewing the show in its entirety, I would like to tighten it up; possibly shorten some acts, and change the order. Showing my short film *Dance It Out* was very successful as the opener for *Don’t Expect Much*. It set the tone and gave audience members permission to laugh. Having a cast over thirty was challenging to find the flow of the show and time for dancers to change costumes. This kind of maneuvering occurred often, as I had multiple dancers in several acts. There was success in the order in which I placed the different pieces. And, much like the importance of *timing* I am pleased and grateful for how it turned out, and yet there is always room for growth. I look forward to

continuing my research as well as producing more dance that employs humor. Live.
Laugh. Love. Dance.

References

- Balducci, A. *The Funny Parts: A History of Film Comedy Routines & Gags*.
North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2011. 87. Print.
- Bannerman, H. "Dancing for laughs: Martha Graham and comedy." *Dance Theatre Journal*. 2000. *Criticaldance.com*. Web. 1 December 2014.
- Booth, M. *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*. Oxford University Press.
Online Publication. 2010.
- Bowman, W. M. *Charlie Chaplin: His Life and Art*. New York, NY: Haskell House
Publishers Ltd. 1974. 28, 30, 41, 106.
- Cohen, S. J. *International Encyclopedia of Dance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Online publication. 2005.
- DiCioccio, R. L. *Humor Communication: Theory, Impact, and Outcomes*. Iowa: Kendall
Hunt Publishing Company. 2012. 5-7. Print.
- Eitland, K. "HUMOR & WIT: Their Dances Make Us Laugh." *Sandiegostory.com*. San
Diego Story. 30 January 2014. Web. 28 February 2016.
- Fourtouni, A. *Humor and Contemporary Dance Performance: The Case of La Ribot*.
Utrecht University. *MA Contemporary Theatre and Dance Studies*. Fourtouni
MA Thesis. p 4. Web. 1 December 2014.
- Gottfried, M. *All His Jazz*. New York, NY: Bantam Books. 1990. 9, 72-81. Print.
- Hawksley, C. Personal Interview. 28 July 2015.
- Keane, J. Personal Interview. 4 February 2016.

- Kernan, A. "A Theory of Satire". *The Cankered Muse*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1959. Rpt. in *Modern Satire*. Ed. Alvin B. Kernan. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962. 166.
- Klein, S. *The Art of Laughter*. New York: St Martin's Press. 2007. 9-11.
- Lewis, B. *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*. Oxford University Press. Online Publication. 2010.
- Loving, J. *Mark Twain: The Adventures of Samuel L Clemens*. University of California Press. 2010. 4-5. Print.
- MacHovec, F. J. *Humor, Theory, History, Applications*. Indiana: iUniverse, Inc. 2012. 6-46. Print.
- "Martha Graham Reflects on Her Art and Life." Interview. *New York Times*. *Partners.nytimes.com*. New York Times. 31 March 1985. Web. 12 March 2016.
- Martin, R. A. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. 2007. 5. Print.
- Middlekauff, R. L. *Mark Twain's Humor: With Examples*. Berkeley: American Philosophical Society. Vol. 150, No 3. 2006. 449-454. Print.
- Peter, L. *La Ribot Distinguida*. 2011. *YouTube*. Web. 18 April 2016.
- Rago, P. D. Personal Interview. 12 January 2016.
- Roeckelein, J. E. *The Psychology of Humor*. Wesport: Greenwood Press. 2002. 9. Print.
- Ruch, W. *The Psychology of Humor*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. 2008. 17-68. Print.
- Sandback, P. Personal Interview. 21 January 2016.

“satire.” *Random House online*. Random House Kernerman Webster’s Dictionary.

2010. 2010 K Dictionaries Ltd. Copyright 2005, 1997, 1991 by Random House Inc. Web. 13 March 2016.

Slide, A. *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*. University Press of Mississippi. 2012.

xiv. Print.

Sullivan, J. J. “American Shuffle.” *The New York Times Magazine*. 26 March 2016.

34-55. Print.

Tenuto, L. Personal Interview. 17 December 2015.

Twain: In His Own Time. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2010. xxii-xxxii. Print.

Wood, E. *The Josephine Baker Story*. London, United Kingdom: Sanctuary Publishing

Ltd. 2000. 27, 59, 83, 100, 108-109, 197. Print.

Appendix A

Defining Humor, Theories, and Where is it in Dance?

Interview Questions by Jessica Harper MFA graduate Candidate

1. What makes something funny?
2. Do you use a particular type of method in creating something that is humorous?
3. Is satirical, slapstick, or wit most commonly used in your humor?
4. How important is timing in humor?
5. What are important elements of your humor?
6. If you could define humor, what would the definition be?
7. Do you utilize physical comedy in your approach at delivering comedy?
8. Have you been surprised at how audiences respond to your humor?
9. What have been some of your most successful deliveries or memories as a comedian, actor, dancer, professor, critic, or choreographer using humor?
10. Have you ever used improvisation on stage and was it a success?
11. Do you tend to stick to particular types of topics to ensure positive feedback from audiences?
12. Who are some of your idols or people you look up to or who do you think is funny?
13. Were you always interested in doing humor in art?
14. Why do you think humor is important?
15. How has your career influenced your writing?
16. What do you find funny?
17. When did you realize you wanted to be a comedian, actor, dancer, choreographer, professor, or critic?
18. How do you think humor helps people?