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Generating Catharsis through Dance

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Leslie Bitong

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Lisa Naugle, Chair
Professor Loretta Livingston
Professor Mary Corey

2017

DEDICATION

To

my parents and friends

my teachers who have taught me well

those who have contributed to my life experiences, shaping my artistry

“No art suffers more misunderstanding, sentimental judgment, and mystical interpretation than the art of dancing. Its critical literature, or worse yet its uncritical literature, pseudo-ethnological and pseudo aesthetic, makes weary reading. Yet this very confusion as to what dancing is- what it expresses, what it creates, and how it is related to the other arts, to the artist, and to the actual world- has a philosophical significance of its own.”

Feeling and Form - Susanne Langer 1953

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT OF THESIS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
<i>A Brief Summary of the Choreography</i>	3
CHAPTER 1: Review of Literature	5
CHAPTER 2: Methods	19
<i>Beginning the Choreographic Process</i>	19
<i>Fear</i>	22
<i>Infatuation, Overdependence, and then Obsession</i>	24
<i>Loss</i>	30
<i>Catharsis</i>	34
CHAPTER 3: Findings	39
CHAPTER 4: Concluding Thoughts	46
BIBLIOGRAPHY	50

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Generating Catharsis through Dance

By

Leslie Bitong

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

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Dr. Lisa Naugle, Chair

My research was an investigation of what creates catharsis in dance. I wanted to know: how and why does dance move people? What are the qualities in contemporary dance that lead to a cathartic experience for the viewer? This required an analysis of philosophies related to: dance and its purpose, choreographic aesthetic involving emotion as a driving force, and the nature of catharsis in art. With an ensemble of undergraduate dance majors from UC Irvine, I implemented various methods and ideologies I had gathered, in an effort to choreograph work that would move an audience. I chose choreographic themes based on emotions that could be universally relatable, and in order to convey these emotions, I coached, directed, and taught movement to dancers who would perform my choreography. This process culminated in a thirty-minute work, entitled, *What Remains*. I kept a record of my choreographic process, comparing and contrasting my methods and their effectiveness in extracting a certain level of expressiveness from the twelve young adult dancers performing my work. After the work was performed, I reflected on what had transpired on stage, as well as feedback from audience members.

INTRODUCTION

Catharsis is often discussed by scholars in the performing arts in the context of tragedy in the theatre. However, there is little discussion about the concept of catharsis in reference to dance. Many scholars and philosophers have shared their insights and opinions about dance aesthetics in relation to emotion. While not directly referencing catharsis, there are connections between their philosophies and the idea of catharsis as described by Lev Vygotsky, Robert Sharpe, and others. Contemporary choreographers, Crystal Pite and Hofesh Sechter, use emotion to generate movement, and movement to communicate emotion. Through their work and how they describe it, they illustrate how catharsis might be generated in choreography.

As a choreographer, I want the dancers performing my work to reflect themes of human experience and emotion. I am inspired by these themes and use them to generate movement. I feel that in order to be fully engaged in the creation of my work, I have to connect with it on an emotional level, and bring the dancers to the same level of engagement. I strive to do this by creating choreography that is driven by strong intention, and in which the emotion can be seen and felt, resulting in a therapeutic release known as catharsis (Sharpe 20). The focus of this research is the connection between illustrating emotion through choreography, and how the performance of such choreography might lead to a cathartic experience.

At the end of a dance, after a viewer has been able to internalize all the information, one might say there is an opportunity for change in the viewers' mind. Such a change in the audience might prompt a deep exhale, and perhaps a release of built-up tension as the observer thinks to oneself "that was beautiful". To me, this is an example of what it means to be "moved by a dance". This is the response that I sought to investigate. I found that the closest word that encapsulated the entire process was catharsis.

I worked with contemporary dance vocabulary as a lens to investigate what might create catharsis in my choreography, with an ensemble of selected dancers. I researched well-known choreographers who have spoken openly about their use of emotion during the creative process. Since emotional states are related to immediate experience, I sought the work of phenomenologists such as Sondra Fraleigh and Suzanne Langer, who have written extensively about emotion in relation to art and dance aesthetics. Using what I found to inform my choreographic choices, I generated choreography for twelve dancers in the span of ten weeks, to be performed in front of an audience. I sought to achieve emotional variation, tension, and conflict within the dance vocabulary, in hopes that it would lead the viewer to a cathartic experience.

Lev Vygotsky, a 20th century developmental psychologist and author of *Art as a Catharsis*, describes catharsis as a moment when “we experience a complex discharge of feelings, their mutual transformation, and instead of the painful experiences forming the content of the short story, we experience the delicate, transparent feeling of a breath of fresh air” (3). With Vygotsky’s definition in mind, I searched for answers to the question: “what creates catharsis in a dance?” What follows is an examination of how to develop a story through dance—one that facilitates a transformation of feelings, especially from negative to positive, and leads to a cathartic experience that may also be an aesthetic experience.

The purpose of my choreography was to explore the complexities of emotion and the transformation of feelings, through narrative, meaningful gestures, postures, imagery, and expressiveness from the dancers. My hope was that the work would manifest in a transformative experience.

My work, entitled, *What Remains*, was an illustration of the journey of a relationship through the stages of fear, infatuation, all-consuming obsession, loss, heartbreak, and the release of these built-up emotions. The choreographic themes were meant to be relatable to the dancers and the audience, as one can assume that all have experienced a close relationship. This relationship might be with a romantic partner, a friend, or perhaps a substance. My choreography took the form of a loose narrative of five movements, each representing a strong feeling. The aim was that when linked together, these five movements would illustrate the development of emotions and the gradual transformation from one feeling to the next.

Within the choreography, I created characters in the form of protagonists and antagonists to help form the narrative and establish relationships. My hope was that this would facilitate the full engagement of the dancers as well as the audience, so that they might truly experience the build-up of emotion and tension that would hopefully result in catharsis.

A Brief Summary of the Choreography

The work starts with a portrayal of fear. Often when entering a relationship, there is fear of the unknown. There might be hesitation and trepidation, a reluctance to be vulnerable and a tendency to protect oneself, and a lack of trust that leads to the anxious feeling of being chased, and the necessity to look over one's shoulder.

Following this is the act of overcoming the hurdle of fear, and venturing into the unknown. This next section illustrates infatuation that eventually leads to obsession. This feeling of obsession might manipulate one's perspective, influencing actions and decisions. This blinding intoxication can be overwhelming, and take control of the protagonist.

The next section illustrates the inevitable sense of loss. This movement explores heartbreak, shock, and the empty feeling of loneliness and/or abandon. Loss can incur a complex array of emotion, including anger, frustration, and sadness, followed by the eventual consolation which allows for transformation.

The next and final section of the work illustrates the act of letting go- releasing the emotions that may have built up along the journey of the relationship. This section of the work is a response to the culmination of emotion, as well as conflict, tension, shock, and ironies that build in the first three sections. The movement is meant to illustrate the beauty that comes from the complexities and disparaging themes within the work. The aftermath of a relationship is the experience that results, and the ability to gain something positive from the negative aspects of it. This idea is similar to that of catharsis- the transformation from negative to positive, and the relief that is felt in the purgation of complex feelings.

Through the culmination of my research, I hoped to gain a better understanding of what creates catharsis in a dance, and contribute to the existing literature on this subject. Perhaps my investigation will provide a heightened understanding of dance aesthetic, leading to a wider audience appreciation of the work and a larger support for the art.

CHAPTER 1: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Robert Sharpe, author of *Irony in the Drama*, explains that the word catharsis is a Greek term coined by Aristotle in the year 335 BCE. According to Sharpe, Aristotle defined catharsis as an “ultimate psychological reaction” in which pity, fear, and sadness caused by tragedy effect a purging of these and similar emotions (84). Sharpe describes the emotions that result in the cathartic state when he explains that shock, irony, and empathy lead to an ironic fusion called purgation, which is “not disturbed, but serene” (87). If dance can evoke empathy, shock, and a “harmonizing perception of incongruities” known as irony (87), then perhaps a performance of dance can evoke a cathartic experience in the viewer.

Lev Vygotsky speaks frequently about the nature of catharsis in relation to art. According to Vygotsky, there are many different theories regarding catharsis and its true meaning, however there is no other term in psychology that gets to the root of the aesthetic reaction so completely. Vygotsky describes catharsis as a transformation of painful and unpleasant experiences into “the delicate, transparent feeling of a breath of fresh air” (3). Similarly, performance theory scholar Darren R. Gobert posits that the word catharsis translates to purification. He denotes the transformation process of the spectators’ experience from negative to positive emotions, when observing a performance (109). These two points of view identify the complex nature of feelings and how art has the capacity to restore or contribute to one’s sense of pleasure and balance.

Contemporary choreographers, Crystal Pite and Hofesh Shechter, both express a desire to connect with the audience on a visceral level. They use emotionally imbued movement to relate to the viewer, allowing him or her to engage in the work. By connecting with the audience emotionally and drawing them into the complex narrative of the choreography, Pite and Shechter may lead the audience to a cathartic experience through the journey that they create.

When addressing a room full of people at a conference in August 2013, Crystal Pite spoke about what drives her choreography, saying:

Humans move. Our arms reach out, our knees collapse, our heads nod, our chests cave in, our backs arch, we clench our fists, we jump, we shrug, we pick each other up, we push each other away. And for me, this is language as much as it is action. This is what the body says about need, defeat, courage, despair, desire, joy, ambivalence, frustration, love. I think that these images resonate meaningfully in our minds because we have all felt these things so purely in our bodies. We have been moved. I'm a choreographer and I work with the body because I am convinced about this. ("Conflict is Vital- Crystal Pite")

Crystal Pite speaks about the gestures, postures, and movement of dancers acting as a language to communicate emotions and connect with people. She assumes that all people can understand this movement language because all people have experienced the trials, tribulations, and joys that come with life. She describes the ways in which the audience is moved by seeing images of meaningful movement, and being reminded of the emotions that the movement represents.

Hofesh Shechter also speaks about emotion in his choreographic process saying:

I try to use things I know and go from there. I think the only original thing can be in emotion. The structures and steps are things we take from the past. I think there was a moment for me when I decided to use a structure to express an emotion I feel...Emotion is really connected to the now, something that is happening to you. Even though people can identify emotions, it always feels like something unique. ("Wow talks + dance-Hofesh Shechter")

Shechter's description of emotion as an effective tool to create unique work supports the idea that when emotion is expressed through choreography, it can generate movement that is authentic because it is created using internal feeling, which is unique to the individual. This can lead to the use of narrative, gesture, imagery, and spatial relationships between dancers that are

real and “connected to the now”. The choreography is therefore more fully engaging to an audience since they are able to be present in the work.

Many authors, including Sondra Horton Fraleigh share their philosophical views on dance as a symbol, as a language, and as a means of communication and expression. In *Dance and the Lived Body* Fraleigh expresses her belief that:

Dance stems from an impulse to express and sustain a vital life and to project and share its aesthetic dimensions. Certainly we may dance somber and despairing themes; but underneath thematic intentionality is a basic impulse that is positive and life engendering. In dance we celebrate our living, concrete reality- our embodiment- and within the complexity that embodiment proffers. It is thus that dance may be called *a sign for life*. (Fraleigh xvii)

This quote encapsulates Fraleigh’s views on choreographic intent and expression, aligning with Lev Vygotsky’s definition of catharsis as “painful experiences forming the content of a short story” (3). Fraleigh describes dance as a representation for life, which aligns with many of the views expressed by Pite and Schechter, who express their beliefs about dance and its ability to reflect emotion and communicate with people by creating a common language.

While each choreographer, philosopher, and dance scholar have different ideas about the subject of dance, its purpose, and its effect on audiences, many reference empathy. In the December 2010 edition of *Dance Research Journal*, Mathew Reason and Dee Reynolds refer to empathy as a “form of fellow-feeling” or “imagining stepping into an actor/character's shoes” (3). They also refer to empathy as “a mode of engaging with dance that can give pleasure to spectators and can be a strong motivating factor in why people choose to watch dance” (2).

According to Robert Sharpe, empathy is an element that comprises catharsis in performance art. Along with empathy, he identifies the other elements of catharsis as irony, described as conflicting/counterintuitive ideas or images occurring at the same time, and shock,

described as unexpected happenings occurring on stage that might surprise and/or startle the audience (17).

Crystal Pite evokes empathy in her work, *Betroffenheit*. Pite describes her choreography as indicating “a kind of suspended state where verbal language cannot be used to describe or to explain what’s being felt.” This work charts the journey of a protagonist through the trauma, loss, and grief that is the result of addiction. Pite expresses that her aim in creating the work was to pose a “universal question of suffering and survival” and to illustrate the sense of pleasure and relief that comes with addiction and substance abuse. She expresses that she wants the spectator to go through the journey of addiction with the protagonist when seeing the work on stage (“*Betroffenheit: A Story of Trauma, With Choreographer Crystal Pite*”).

Pite presents a situation that is relatable, and causes strong feelings that most people have felt in their bodies. When the audience sees these feelings being illustrated on stage, they can empathize with it and be moved by it. Pite’s desire for the viewer to see images and events through the eyes of the protagonist aligns with Susan Foster’s description of empathy as the viewer living in the art. Foster defines the idea of empathy in relation to art as, “a physical connection between viewer and art in which the viewer’s own body would move into and inhabit the various features of the artwork” (10).

As well as empathy, Pite’s *Betroffenheit* depicts shock, which is described by Sharpe as an emotion that leads to the cathartic state. Sharpe explains, “the shocking is artistically used for the psychological purpose of purging emotions, through pity and terror, of these and similar emotions” (120). Artistic director Jonathon Young describes *Betroffenheit* as a German term denoting a state of shock; in English, this state would be described as a time when there are no words to describe what is happening, because the feelings it creates are so jarring that they are

indefinable (“Betroffenheit, The Story Behind the Performance”). Pite’s choreography in *Betroffenheit* illustrates shock through her use of horrified facial expressions, frantic and dramatic waving of the arms, trembling and pulsating movements of the whole body, and the dancers grasping at each other in desperation.

Pite’s choreography illustrates irony, which Sharpe describes as another element of catharsis and “the result of a perception of two or more contrasting levels of truth simultaneously, at a viewpoint detached from both” (42). In *Betroffenheit*, the protagonist is disheveled in a state of confusion, looking out of place against a backdrop of colorful costumes and happy faces. His posture is hunched over, and his facial expression appears fearful, disturbed, and forlorn. Simultaneously, there are tap dancers dressed in elaborate and colorful costumes, accessorized with top hats and bright feathers. This scene might evoke a sense of confusion in the audience, as they witness the irony and disturbing nature of the composition (Sharpe 42). Pite invites the audience to witness the sense of incongruity through the pleasure and relief of substance abuse, which simultaneously cause grief and suffering. Through Pite’s depiction of empathy, irony, and shock, the audience may be so engaged in the performance, that they internalize these sensations, and release them during the course of the work, in a “purgation”, which is defined by Sharpe as catharsis (87).

Another way in which Crystal Pite’s work might lead to catharsis is her use of gesture.

Pite describes her process when choreographing her work, *The Tempest Replica*:

Everything is reduced to a series of gestures and postures that tell the story...so that the tilt of a head, the retreat of the chest, the reach of an arm, not only tells the audience a story, but becomes a way of seeing for them...As a choreographer, I can pretty much rely on the fact that you know the trajectory of sadness and suffering in your own belly. That you know what it feels like to reach for somebody or someone. These dancers (those playing Prospero and Miranda) represent you. They take your gestures and postures, and they exaggerate them, they concentrate them, they isolate them, and they elevate them, so

that what remains, what is here on stage, is something that is beyond words. (“Crystal Pite speaks at Sam Sullivan’s February 2014 Public Salon”)

In this description, Pite introduces the concept of kinesthesia as she describes the movement of the dancers as representing sadness, suffering, and other sensations that are universally felt. She invites the audience to locate themselves in the performer on stage. Kinesthesia, a phenomenon related to empathy, is described by Foster as “the muscular connection to our deepest feelings” and as “the orientor of our senses and sense of identity.” She describes kinesthesia as a connection that humans share, causing us to be equally moved by the same depictions of human predicament or struggle (118). Foster further describes kinesthesia as a “reservoir of experience” built up from an accumulation of physical acts and interactions. This reservoir of experience is stored in kinesthetic memory, which informs how a viewer sees a dance (113). In Crystal Pite’s *The Tempest Replica*, she uses dance to symbolize the plight of the human condition by using movements that represent certain feelings such as suffering and sadness. This might trigger memories from the individuals in the audience. When the dancers “reach for somebody or someone” it reminds spectators of the feeling of desperation, allowing the viewer to relate to the performance through kinesthesia.

Sondra Fraleigh speaks of kinesthesia as well, positing that the kinesthetic element is necessary in learning dance movements. She explains that it does not necessarily express (or represent) literal emotions or feelings; however, kinesthesia is rooted in human feeling and founded in kinesthetic sensitivity and intelligence (47). Susan Foster agrees, and further explains that the meaning and inherent substance of dance cannot be reasoned; only experienced. She describes dance as preceding words, and perceived through the body on an experiential and kinesthetic level (53). She goes deeper by presenting this theory by modern dance critic, John Martin:

When we see the human body moving, we see movement which is potentially produced by any human body, and therefore by our own...through kinesthetic sympathy we actually reproduce it vicariously in our present muscular experience and awaken such associational connotations as might have been ours if the original movement had been of our own making. (7)

Since kinesthesia is related to empathy, it is also a condition that leads to catharsis. If kinesthesia allows us to experience a feeling represented by movement, vicariously through the dancer, then kinesthesia can allow people to feel certain emotions through dance. Thus, a viewer who is fully engaged in a dance performance may experience the feeling the performance represents, and can be lead to a catharsis by following the progression of the dance to its completion.

Crystal Pite's description of gesture in *The Tempest Replica* aligns with Sondra Fraleigh's explanation of gesture as a tool to communicate emotion to the viewer. Fraleigh explains that there are certain types of gesture, which set off emotions in the audience (243). She describes the arms and hands as "very associative" and able to speak, having the most articulate and varied expressiveness of any other bodily movement because they are so free in their capacity to create shapes and dynamics in movement (243). Philosopher Suzanne Langer speaks about the use of gesture as a mode of communication saying, "In actual life gestures function as signals or symptoms of our desires, intentions, expectations, demands, and feelings" (174). She explains the idea of communication in art as a concept that is "not personal, nor anxious to be understood", implying that it does not need to be a literal translation (410).

Crystal Pite states that she exaggerates and elevates the gestures in her work, so that they transcend words and movement. Similarly, Fraleigh states that gestures procure images and associations beyond movement, implying that gestures have an ability to incite the imagination and represent ideas and/or deeper meaning. (244). Fraleigh's views on gesture align with those of Suzanne Langer, as Langer quotes modern dance choreographer Mary Wigman who has said, "a

meaningless gesture is abhorrent to me” (174). Gestures that possess meaning might contribute to the cathartic experience, because they make the emotion or narrative of the work clear so that the audience is able to follow what is happening. The viewer is therefore more engaged in the work and is able to experience a build-up of tension, anticipation, and expectation, which may lead to catharsis.

Hofesh Shechter’s description of his choreographic process emphasizes his desire to generate emotions within his dancers, so that they will perform the work with certain qualities that deliver specific messages including those of frustration, anger, and hope. He does this by directing his dancers to channel certain emotions and translate them into movement. When speaking about creating his work, *Uprising*, Hofesh Shechter explains:

I’m trying to create work from things that I feel in my body, and when you come to try to describe to a dancer how to do a movement that comes from emotion, you have to find images that are not about the shape of the movement, but actually about how it feels. I want the dancer to feel these things. That’s what will give it a strong energy...the kind of dance that I’m interested in is about being able to connect your emotions and your sensations and translating that into physicality. (“Rehearsal- Programme IV- Introduction Hofesh Shechter NDT 1”)

Shechter uses actual feeling to generate movement. He implies that this method is not about being inspired by an image or an idea, but about how a movement physically feels on the body. If the dancer runs with a sense of urgency, he or she will feel a sense of urgency. This is different from Suzanne Langer’s idea of virtual gesture, which is used to create a semblance of an emotion rather a physical feeling (180).

Shechter describes movement originating from emotion and providing opportunity for the dancer to feel a certain way. Drama scholar Darren R. Gobert echoes this idea. Gobert explains how emotion can be both a feeling and a physical response that could be causally related. He posits that the act of crying magnifies the feeling of sadness, the act of striking something

intensifies the feeling of anger, and the act of trembling perpetuates the feeling of fear (109). Shechter prompts the dancers to channel their emotions in the dance, so that they might generate and magnify the feeling for themselves, and deliver that message to the audience. Perhaps the process of working through emotions within a focused context allows one to easily release them, therefore experiencing the transformation of catharsis.

The dancers who perform *Uprising*, not only dance, but perform the virtual acts of physical fighting. These movements appear to be actual acts of fighting because of the tensions in the body and the obvious force that the dancers use on one another. When the dancers feel the emotions they are illustrating, embracing them fully and then releasing them at the end of the performance, they may be able to have a cathartic experience themselves. For the audience who sees the dancers' realistic fighting and convincing facial expressions, the performance is relatable on some level, because it is assumed that they have all felt feelings of anger and frustration. Because the audience may locate themselves in the dancer, they are stepping into the artwork, previously described by Susan Foster as empathy. This empathy aids in the elicitation of a cathartic experience for the audience.

Shechter's choreographic process could be described with Sondra Fraleigh's explanation that, "The choreographer is the first to give image to the dance, which originates in his imagination and through his ability to shape (create) movement according to his intentions" (47). Hofesh Shechter creates movement from things that he feels in his own body, then prompts his dancers to use that feeling when performing the movement. He asks the dancers to make the emotion real for them by channeling their personal experience to achieve the desired energy and aesthetic of the choreography. Suzanne Langer speaks about the idea of using inner experience to produce "the unique, magnetic power of transmissions which makes it possible to draw other

persons, the participating spectators, into the magic circle of creation” (207). In *Uprising*, the audience may be drawn to the performance on stage from the moment it begins because of the way the dancers charge forward toward the audience and stop abruptly, creating a sense of aggression. What follows is a series of physical confrontations between dancers, which invites the audience to lean in and stay engaged with the experience of the dancers on stage (“Uprising Act I. Hofesh Shechter”).

Sondra Fraleigh explains her position that the dancer does not dance what he/she feels, but the emotions that the choreography prompts. She posits that the dancer expresses the emotions of the dance, rather than expressing his or her own emotions (68). Fraleigh believes that contrary to what Shechter suggests, the dancer represents the choreographer’s lived experience, not his or her own. Suzanne Langer provides further clarity by saying that what art expresses is more the ideas of the feeling rather than the actual feeling; that language expresses ideas of things and events rather than the actual forms (59). Langer goes on to say that a performer “does not express his emotions; he conceives them, to the smallest detail, and enacts them” (323). While these are differing points of view, these philosophers all refer to dance as a type of language used to express emotion. What ultimately results is a performance that is danced with emotional intent, and therefore successful in communicating that emotion to the audience, leading them to a cathartic experience.

Hofesh Shechter also emphasizes the importance of using images to generate emotionally imbued movement. Shechter’s method aligns with Susan Foster’s perspective that imagery links emotions. She says that empathy consists of reproducing kinesthetic images portraying emotional experience (128). Suzanne Langer also speaks about the power of images, describing them as “an abstraction, a symbol, the bearer of an idea” (47). Fraleigh goes further by connecting imagery to

our lived experience, saying, “Dancing always expresses something of livingness. Conceiving and perceiving dance imagery involves us in transfers of meaning as we relate dance and its imagery to our lived experience in general...Dance reflects life” (172). In Shechter’s work, he illustrates conflict, tension, and confrontation, which are all inherently part of life. He prompts the dancers to feel these sensations, so that they can demonstrate them with their bodies. Because dance reflects images, experiences, and the complexities of life, the audience is able to witness life performed on stage, in a manner that is fleeting, resulting in a cathartic release.

Hofesh Shechter references shock and irony, described by Sharpe as two elements of catharsis, when he describes his piece, “Political Mother”:

It’s a wave of images that takes you, that hopefully works faster than the mind and works more on your emotional state, and creates tension. It kind of throws you into a chain of emotions and thoughts that is maybe revealing some of the frustration, some of the buried hope. A lot of different emotions that relate to humans under pressure. (“I Think Therefore I Bam: Hofesh Shechter”)

Shechter talks about the audience being thrown into simultaneous feelings of frustration and hope, which can be seen in the movement. There is contrast in the choreography, as the arm movements are flowing and the feet shuffling, telling a story of opposing feelings or ideas. The dancers are on a large, bare stage, yet they remain in close proximity to one another, seeming enclosed in a tight space. Perhaps the vastness of the stage represents hope, but the restricted nature of the dancers signals the frustration. The shock elements in this work are seen when the piece begins with two dancers remaining still for a prolonged amount of time with their arms outstretched. There is minimal movement here, when suddenly a large group of dancers appears on stage, performing flailing gestures and frantic movement. The choreography is free and energized, resembling the act of crying out in a ritualistic manner (“Hofesh Shechter-Political Mother”). The idea of shock in this context is explained by Robert Sharpe as unexpected

happenings that occur on stage, and are surprising to witness (120). Shechter's description of the opposing emotions- frustration and hope seem to align with Sharpe's description of shock and irony as unrestrained, unbalanced emotions (120). These depictions help the viewer to internalize the complexities and magnitude of the work, allowing them to experience the intense emotion in it.

Shechter speaks about the relation of *Political Mother* to his own experience when he describes his upbringing, surrounded by conflict in Israel: "I did feel that I was growing up in a conflict. Israel is very westernized and free. Everyone can say and do what they want, but when you're 18, you have to go to the army, which is a non-democratic system" ("Skins 'Maxxie dance' choreographer"). Langer corroborates the method of personal experience used as a choreographic tool by saying that all dance construction arises from the experience of the choreographer, which forms the movement and structure of the dance. This gives the creation its uniqueness and authenticity. Langer believes that "The experience shapes the kernel, the basic accord of his dance existence around which all else crystallizes", and that creative person carries his or her own characteristics which create his or her aesthetic (206). Shechter's use of his own personal experience as inspiration in his choreography shapes his aesthetic, and the emotionally imbued movement that tells a story. Because the movement originates from authentic experience and emotion, there is a level of authenticity seen in the work. This makes the performance more relatable to the audience.

Crystal Pite and Hofesh Shechter create work that is inspired by the plight of the human condition. Their choreography evokes empathy by telling stories about the struggles and conflicts of people. Their choreography demonstrates how narrative, images, and gesture, along with ideas that demonstrate irony, shock, and empathy, might generate catharsis. However, while

the audience may understand the intention of their work, there is still a sense of mystery and inconclusiveness in their choreography. Their work can be interpreted in many different ways, and might be successful in moving some audiences, while unsuccessful with others. This aligns with Langer's assertion that, "No art suffers more misunderstanding, sentimental judgment, and mystical interpretation than the art of dancing" (169). Crystal Pite echoes this sentiment by describing dance as "a very inefficient way to tell a complex story" ("Telling stories through dance part 1"). This enigmatic nature of dance is a vital part of what generates the feeling of catharsis. If dance did not challenge the viewer with its ambiguity, the viewer might not be as emotionally invested in the work. When speaking about catharsis, Lev Vygotsky asserts:

Clarity is not one of the properties of emotion. Pleasure and displeasure may be intense and prolonged, but they are never clear...the more attention we pay to the sensation, the clearer it becomes and the better we remember it. But we cannot concentrate our attention on an emotion. As soon as we try, pleasure or displeasure immediately dissipates, and we find ourselves observing some irrelevant sensation or image which we had not intended to observe in the first place." (10)

Vygotsky's assertion can be directly applied to a viewer's experience when watching dance. He describes the elusive nature of catharsis, and the fact that it is not meant to be acknowledged and/or defined. It is a fleeting moment that one must allow to wash over them, so that they can experience catharsis.

The concept of catharsis is interpreted and defined in many different ways. Dance shares this quality, as it is indefinable and may attempt to illustrate certain feelings that are unclear to the audience. In this way, there are certain commonalities between the concept of catharsis and the art of dance. Perhaps this is why the audience might experience catharsis when watching dance. While they might have a visceral, emotional response to the work, there is always a level of elusiveness and uncertainty that remains.

Robert Sharpe's assertion that catharsis is comprised mainly of shock, irony, and empathy, helps us to see clearly how dance might generate catharsis. Shock can be witnessed in the unexpected and unusual choreographic choices seen in Crystal Pite's *Betroffenheit* and Hofesh Shechter's *Political Mother*. Pite's counterintuitive subject of harmful pleasure, and Shechter's conflicting ideas of frustration and hope show irony in the thematic content. Empathy can be seen through Crystal Pite's gestures of reaching for someone in desperation, hunching over in fear, and tilting the head in confusion. Hofesh Shechter evokes empathy by asking his dancers to channel emotions and turn them into visible movement, able to be read by the audience. The viewer may experience catharsis by embracing these moments, feeling the effects of them, and then releasing them, with what Vygotsky called, a "delicate, transparent feeling of a breath of fresh air"(3).

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

Beginning the Choreographic Process

I chose five choreographic themes based on emotions and experiences that were relatable to most people: fear, infatuation, obsession, loss, and the memory and lasting effect of these. Ultimately, my aim was to extract a heightened sense of expressiveness from young adult dancers. I challenged them to embody certain emotions through the variation of movement qualities, the tactile manipulation of bodies, and the expressiveness of their facial expressions. Doing this would translate emotions into physicality, so that they may communicate to the audience through the movement of their bodies, and without words. The hope was that in this communication of emotion through dance, the work would illustrate the build-up and release of emotion, known as catharsis.

I began my choreographic process by selecting undergraduate dance majors to rehearse once a week for ten weeks, toward the development of choreography that would be performed three months later. I decided on a large ensemble of twelve dancers in order to produce a dramatic effect. With a large group, I believed I would more likely be able to utilize the space, create intricate tableaux, choreograph complex gestural phrases, and construct elaborate lifts and partner sections. I wanted this complexity to mirror the world of chaos and confusion that is life. My hope was that by executing exciting movement, I would successfully create unexpected moments that would lead to shock, conflicting/opposing ideas that would illustrate irony, and emotionally imbued movements that told a story, and eventually evoke empathy.

When selecting dancers, I aimed for a balanced ratio of males to females. The purpose of representing both genders equally, was to create opportunities for aesthetically different movement sequences, and to illustrate the respective emotions from the perspective of males as

well as females. This might give the audience multiple opportunities to relate to the dancers on stage, allowing them to locate themselves in the dance. This cast of equal males and females would also create opportunities for dynamic lifts and partner sections of different gender combinations, which would facilitate engaging and thought-provoking movement.

I sought movers who showed maturity in their dancing. I wanted to work with dancers who were able to embody movement on a deeper level, beyond simply placing arms and executing steps. I looked for dancers who were able to illustrate the difference between tension and release in their bodies, able to demonstrate dynamic movement through space by travelling swiftly and changing levels drastically, and able to intelligently dance with other bodies using spatial awareness and weight sharing. Because of the gestural and pedestrian, yet technical and athletic vocabulary I planned to choreograph, I sought dancers who were proficient in modern and jazz dance. This would ensure that they had the technique to execute fast and athletic movement, but also the control to perform slow, sustained choreography, and the maturity to release their technique and move as pedestrians. This was important because of the wide range of emotion I wanted the dancers to embody. With these foundational skills in place, I would more likely be able to work with the dancers on specific performance qualities that depended upon expressivity, story telling, and the illustration of emotion through movement quality.

The next step in my method was to choose a venue in which the performance would take place. I chose the Claire Trevor Theatre as my performance venue. In this setting, the audience would be required to focus on what was happening on stage, free from outside distractions. The elevated platform of the stage would allow the viewer to witness the whole picture, with its intricacies in spacing, timing, unison movement, and movement done in canon. The lighting opportunities that the Claire Trevor Theatre presents would facilitate the story telling of the work

by providing atmosphere, mood, isolation, and opening and closing-in of the space. The creation of different atmosphere within my work was important to the emotions that I aimed to represent. The lighting which would accompany fear, obsession, etc. would draw the audience more closely into the narrative, by adding a level of clarity to the intention, and pulling focus to the dancers. With the help of a lighting designer, I would be able to create both subtle and dynamic change, and a world that provided a place and time, creating context in my choreography.

The next step of my choreographic process was selecting the music. I spoke to different composers who were interested in collaborating; however, due to conflicting schedules and time restraints on both ends, composing an original score was not a possibility. Because of this, I did my own music research and searched for compositions that evoked the emotions I aimed to portray. I found a variety of interesting records, which included electronic, experimental, strings, and percussion. I began to build a library of possible songs and sounds, which I would use in rehearsal, with the understanding that they might change depending on how the work evolved. This music would inspire choreographic creativity for myself, and inspire performance quality and expressivity from the dancers.

As I began working with the dancers, the first obstacle was in navigating their busy schedules. For this reason, I first worked with two separate groups. My plan in moving forward was to hold one full ensemble rehearsal lasting two hours per week, as well as several smaller group rehearsals throughout the week, contingent on dancers' availability. I created phrases of movement on my own body, with the intention of teaching the movement to the dancers. In this way, a vocabulary of movement that included gestural motifs, group configurations, and choreographed sequences was generated. I would be able to arrange and manipulate these to create structure. By conceptualizing a base of work before entering the studio, I utilized the

dancers' time efficiently and was able to conceive of ways to develop narrative within a limited amount of time.

Once I applied my ideas to the dancers, I adjusted and re-invented movement according to their responses. This process of trial and error generated a rough version of the choreography. From there, I could begin to coach the dancers to move with specific intention. I aimed to extract certain movement qualities from the dancers, which would help deliver a clear narrative and represent certain emotions. This might later help create catharsis.

The first rehearsal was with three female dancers, a less daunting task than starting with the whole cast. I asked them to join me in a circle on the floor as I explained my thesis project, and what their role would be. I spoke about my plans and the importance of their commitment to the exploration of embodying emotion; using their own emotion as impetus in their movement, and using imagery and gesture to convey emotion to the audience.

Fear

The first choreographic concept was the idea of fear. While this seemed very vague and vast, more specific prompts related to fear would follow. Initially, I simply instructed the dancers to approach every movement of the set choreography with fearful intent, thus leaving them room to explore and interpret within the confines of the movement phrases. I taught three phrases, each with a different motivation. For the first phrase, I prompted the dancers to approach the movement as if they were trying to hide themselves in fear. The nature of the choreography was gestural, with motifs of hiding the face and protecting their physical bodies from being exposed and vulnerable. For the second phrase, I directed the dancers to execute the movement with hesitation and trepidation. Since the movement phrases were oriented toward a corner in the

room, I instructed the dancers to think about what they are most afraid of, and imagine that it existed in that corner. I then told them to confront it. How would they react in that situation? How did this reaction manifest in their bodies, through the choreography? The third phrase was driven by the idea of being chased; constantly looking over one's shoulder in fear of being caught. The motivation for this phrase was for the dancer to run/flee from what they were fearful of. I gave the dancers a movement phrase consisting of fast and manic movement, representing the feeling of panic and anxiety that comes with fear. I then directed the dancers to imagine something that they were most fearful directly behind their backs, and they would have to run from it.

Prompting the dancers to pull from internal emotion and real memories of fearful things/happenings was risky. I did not know how the dancers would react, and if this method would be effective. While I knew that there was more work to be done to achieve full commitment from the dancers, I could see a change in their approach to the movement. Although subtle, I saw fearful expressions on their faces and a change of quality in their movement. The movement phrases I had taught them were changing, morphing, and coming to life with emotional intent. The idea of hiding/protecting oneself was accompanied by contractions of the spine, hollowing of the chest, and turning the head away from the front of the room. The motivation of hesitation and trepidation was expressed with a furrowing of the brow and a resistance in the body paired with a sharp, startled quality. The movement phrase inspired by a chase was imbued with a frantic sense of urgency and fleeing from danger. As they conveyed each motivation, I saw individual story telling begin to emerge.

The following rehearsal consisted of a larger group of dancers, male and female. This was a group of eight rather than three. While I had hoped to build on what we had accomplished

during the previous rehearsal, working intimately with a larger group of people posed different challenges. This group, while enthusiastic and energized, was more difficult to focus. I gave the same prompts, but did not see the same results. They seemed to feel more self-conscious and less willing to show emotion. Perhaps this was because they were hesitant to be vulnerable in front of their peers. I adjusted my approach so that rather than prompting the dancers to channel internal fear, I challenged them to react to external elements. I gave them the same movement phrases that I taught to the group of three, but rather than asking them to recall their own memories, I paired them into duets, and instructed them to react to each other as they learned the choreography. I gave them the task of hiding/protecting themselves from one another, being hesitant to approach or touch one another, and actually chasing and being chased by one another. While there were different results, I saw the same level of expressiveness I had seen from the smaller group of dancers. Each movement phrase became bigger; taking up more space and taking the focus of the eyes outward. The movement became more athletic, and while some of the subtleties and nuances were missed, different qualities emerged. The movement phrases that previously appeared internal and intricate became more dramatic and theatrical. I saw more dynamics in travelling through space and when transitioning from one movement to the next. The reactions seemed more authentic than when we had started, as the dancers were being prompted by physical beings rather than imagery.

Infatuation, Over-Dependence, and then Obsession

The next emotion that I introduced to the dancers was infatuation. I began with a male/female duet that could potentially turn into a group section of six dancers. My approach was to work with one female protagonist, who would journey through a relationship with another

person, and spiral downward into addiction and obsession. This basic narrative would allow for a gradual transition from one feeling to another, manifested in the dancers' bodies.

In selecting the dancers who would perform the duet for the second section inspired by infatuation and then obsession, I chose dancers whom I had a high level of trust in, because they would be responsible for telling a specific story that had depth and complexity. I chose dancers who were in their fourth year of collegiate dance training, had advanced technical skills, had experience working together, and were reliable, seasoned, and mature movers. I had had at least one previous opportunity to work with these dancers, so I knew how best to communicate with them. Being committed to the task at hand, remaining present and engaged during the rehearsal process, taking directions well, and asking questions, were all essential for this choreographic process. For this section, we rehearsed for one hour per week, for four weeks.

In the first session I began by explaining the objective of the choreography, which was to illustrate the evolution of a relationship. The movement would illustrate the beginning stages of infatuation, then the more dangerous stages of over-dependency, and finally the harmful stages of obsession. The dancers' first task was to recall a passed relationship that may have been unhealthy, all consuming, and potentially harmful. This relationship could have been with a romantic partner, a friend, or perhaps a substance. I gave them movement phrases that would later be sections of choreography. Within that structure, I gave them the freedom to interpret the movement and advance the general narrative in their own way. I asked them to call upon their passed experiences to influence their movement quality and expressivity. I wanted to discover if this would be sufficient in achieving the general sense of infatuation, or if I would need to give them more specific direction. I explained that their performance would tell the story of a relationship that begins with diving headfirst into the unknown, investing in each other with

carefree abandon. I then told them to approach the choreography that followed with a light and playful quality as they explored their new experience. The portrayal of this relationship would slowly develop into dependency, over-dependency, addiction, and eventually obsession. This development would be seen through the lens of the female protagonist.

After explaining the choreographic concept to the dancers, I instructed them to enter the space and imagine that they were slowly overcoming the feeling of fear, and becoming vulnerable and invested in one another. Focused on each other, I told them to navigate the space, starting with a tense and guarded posture, representing fear, caution, and a resistance to being vulnerable. As they continued to walk, advancing closer towards each other, I directed them to slowly slacken their posture, representing a release of fear. I wanted them to show increasing interest and intrigue in one another, using only subtle changes of posture. I then directed them to fall into each other, displaying trust by sharing weight. Although we were working with imagery, real trust was necessary for them to relinquish control of their bodies. They had to trust that their partner would be there to support them. This seemingly simple movement took the dancers longer than I expected to execute, because a level of trust and comfort had to be built through repetition. As we repeatedly explored the sensation of falling, the dancers became less fearful and more willing to sometimes dive headfirst, and other times fall backwards, knowing that their partner would be there to catch them.

The next concept I introduced to the dancers was the idea of becoming intertwined through a series of sharp, incremental gestures bringing them closer, their limbs weaving through each other until they were in a tight embrace. At first, the dancers seemed reluctant to be in such close proximity to each other. However, as the rehearsal progressed and they developed their characters further, they seemed more committed to the narrative, acting out their roles in a more

believable, committed way. I began to see more expressivity in their faces. These expressions were of wonder and intrigue, followed by calmness and security.

For the next movement phrase, I instructed the dancers to approach the choreography with a sense of joy and playfulness. I probed questions such as, if this were the beginning of a new relationship, what would you feel? Excitement? Nervousness? I asked them to think back on their last new relationship and to use that feeling when approaching the movement sequence. After asking them to harness their own experiences and imbue them into the movement, I saw more nuances emerge within the choreography. There was a different energy that included more spring in the jumps, more closeness in proximity, and more eye contact and subtle tilts of the head.

In the next part of the duet, I instructed the female dancer to constantly lean on the male dancer, and act as though she is not able to stand on her own two feet without losing her balance. I told her to imagine that she needed her partner in order to navigate the space, showing a reliance on him and an inability for her legs to function without him. She successfully executed this movement immediately, showing the emotional intention of desperation and over-dependency by completing the physical task.

For the next part of the duet, I instructed the male dancer to manipulate the female dancer, almost as if she were a puppet on a string. Again, this was a more physical task. In completing this physical task, the male dancer looked as though he were controlling the female dancer, and this propelled the narrative forward. This was a difficult concept for the female dancer to grasp, because being manipulated in this way required her to be placed in positions that were seemingly foreign and uncomfortable. She needed a higher level of trust in her partner, because of her lack of agency.

For the final sequence of the duet, I instructed the female dancer to follow the male dancer intently, and then cling to him in desperation. I gave them specific directions on timing and movement quality, as the male dancer walked away and the female dancer slowly sank to the floor. To express the idea of addiction, I utilized repetition of movement, and gradually increased the intensity of muscle effort, force, and energy.

A week later, we held our second rehearsal for this duet. When revisiting the movement, it was difficult to proceed from where we left it. While the dancers remembered the choreography, they needed to get reacquainted with their characters and motivation to get back to the level of emotional expressivity that we had reached during our previous rehearsal. After reminding them of their performance intention and allowing them to move through the material a few times, they had gotten back to their place of commitment and vulnerability.

In order to keep the material fresh and continue to investigate the feelings within playfulness and infatuation, I disrupted the flow of the movement by inserting prompts within the choreography, to see how the dancers would respond. I instructed them to increase the speed of the movement in certain parts, then inserted moments of stillness periodically. This added an interesting dynamic and a level of unexpectedness within the duet, mirroring the unpredictability of human relationships.

The next phase of this movement section would include the addition of four male dancers into the choreography. After bringing these dancers into rehearsal, I explained their roles to them. I told them that their characters would be antagonistic, controlling, and persistent. Their objective was to magnify the emotion of obsession, by acting as extensions of the lead male dancer's character. The female dancer/protagonist, trying to escape the lead male dancer, would be hindered by other representations of him, seeing the same face wherever she turned. I then

instructed and directed the male dancers to navigate the space in various spatial relationships such as circling, to signal the increasing feeling of panic, as the circle got smaller.

Next, I taught the dancers a phrase that consisted of sharp, robotic movement that all six dancers would perform in unison. I instructed them to make contact with the female dancer at certain times, making it appear as though they were controlling her. I then instructed the male dancers to soften their movement, and encircle the female dancer in an improvisational manner. I prompted them to imagine that they were vines in a jungle, consuming the female protagonist as she became lost amidst their limbs.

For the last part of this section, I assigned each male dancer to a part of the female dancers' body; one to each arm, one to each leg, and one to the head and torso. I instructed the female dancer to move with passive weight, and respond only to the initiation by the other dancers. I instructed the male dancers to advance the female protagonist forward, manipulating each part of her body and controlling her like a puppet.

For this section, my choreographic methods consisted of task-based movement, and prompting through imagery and questioning. I also used variation of timing, sharpness of movement quality, and spacing, to facilitate the illustration of a narrative. In giving the dancers distinct roles/characters through which they could develop and interpret freely, the intention and story behind the movement developed and went in different directions from what I had originally planned. I knew that with more rehearsal, new discoveries would be made, and the narrative would continue to evolve. The transition from one emotion to the next would become clearer. This transformation, seen through character development and development of emotion through choreography, would mirror the idea of transformation, that is catharsis.

Loss

In the third movement section, I explored the feeling of loss. I illustrated its gradual and inevitable nature, the emptiness that is felt as a result of it, and the anger and sadness that are associated with it. I explored these choreographic themes through the use of imagery, specific movement quality, and virtual gestures.

I chose six dancers, (two male and four female) because of their dynamic range in movement quality. Since I had been working with them for a few weeks, I knew that I could draw out explosive energy from the male dancers- and weighted, continuously flowing qualities from the female dancers. I was interested to see how these two different dynamics would work together, and whether or not they would complement each other and support the theme of loss.

To express the emotional transition out of obsession and into the feeling of loss, I designed a situation where all dancers were present on stage, each in a tight embrace with their partner. I prompted them to slowly rotated around each other, and as they continued, I noticed the potential of one dancer slipping through the arms of the embrace and gradually sinking to the floor. I wanted to emphasize this, so I organized all dancers to do the same. What emerged was a remaining dancer from each couple. A simple directive such as staring down into their empty arms seemed to tell a story of loss. From there, two male dancers were left on stage. This gradual reduction in the number of dancers on stage presented an intimate scene, and gave way to the dancers' potential for expressing grief.

When rehearsing with the two male dancers, I instructed them to channel the ideas of anger and frustration into the choreography of this section. I explained that the choreography would be combative and aggressive, and I wanted them to approach it with that frame of mind. I prompted them to think about something or someone that they love or place in high importance

being taken from them. I told them to focus this resentment towards the movement, and execute it in a strong and forceful manner.

The choreographic phrase began with simple gestures to be performed with tension in the arms, the hands in tight fists, and pulsing movements of the upper body which brought their focus up to the ceiling, then down at their hands, signaling confusion and frustration. After this phrase signaling tension, I instructed them to show release of that tension by opening the palms of the hands, allowing their knees to collapse, then allowing their bodies to slacken as they fell to the floor. I then instructed them to pick up the fragmented pieces of what they had lost, scoop them into their arms, and drop them once again. They repeated this phrase to show the cyclical nature of experiencing loss and unsuccessfully trying to put the pieces back together.

In the next phrase of movement, the dancers would show their aggression by channeling it towards one another. They performed what Suzanne Langer refers to as “virtual gestures” which are “actual movement but virtual self-expression” (Langer 120). These virtual gestures consisted of combative movements, inspired by the ideas of trying to tackle one another, throwing one another to the floor, and pushing each other down. Their movement phrase ended as they stood still in a secluded corner of the stage, looking out into the distance.

In a separate rehearsal, I worked with four female dancers, looking for ways they might represent the feeling of sadness. I told them that their movements would represent tears. I explained that while tears are the result of sadness, they could also have a soothing nature and provide consolation and support.

I asked the dancers to gather in a clump, and explained that their role was that of tears flowing uncontrollably. I then gave them rolling movement to be executed in a continuous canon, rippling from one sequence to the next as smoothly as possible. From there, I gave them

specific tasks and gestures that would become magnified as they were repeated by each dancer. For the first gesture, I told them to cover each other's eyes and pull their hand across each other's faces, as if wiping away tears. As they did this, I observed that they were not yet attaching an emotional meaning to it. Although they were doing the movement I asked them to do, they appeared to be uncomfortable and uncertain. Rather than asking them how they were feeling and verifying whether or not they were truly uncomfortable, I chose to give them more important, more detailed instruction such as specific timing of the movement and positioning of the head. With this added information, they were able to do the gesture phrase in a way that looked closer to the image I had envisioned and the feeling I wanted to convey in the choreography. The next gesture to be performed in repetition was the act of lifting each other's heads from a dropped position to an uplifted position. This needed little instruction, as the dancers seemed comfortable taking each other by the top of the head and pulling them back to an arched position. Perhaps the dancers seemed more comfortable with this task because it allowed them to use more of their physicality in a way they are used to as dancers. This flowed into the next task, which was to lie on top of one another to create a pile. I explained to the dancers that their bodies were to illustrate the accumulation of tears. This allowed them to come into close contact with one another, minimizing the negative space, so that they no longer looked like individual bodies, but a collective unit.

Next, I gave the dancers the image of "catching teardrops in their palms", as they navigated the space, dispersing in different directions. This image prompted them to move with a certain desperation and urgency, which was interesting and inspired me to take this idea further. I then gave them a phrase of movement in which the intention was to transfer the teardrops to

different parts of their bodies. I observed this development of the dancers as they took a new level of responsibility.

Following this, I explained that this next phrase of movement represented support, comfort, and consolation. They took turns catching each other, and holding each other up. It took some time for the dancers to perform this movement with the same flowing and continuous quality as in the previous phrase. To facilitate the achievement of the desired quality, I told them to imagine that they were in a pool of tears, using the idea of weightlessness with simultaneous resistance that occurs in water. This imagery helped them to accomplish the feeling of flow and consistency through their movement and interaction with one another.

In the next movement phrase, the four female dancers interacted with the two male dancers for the first time. The female dancers weaved in and out of the male dancer's space, initiating contact in different ways. Here, I described the image of the female dancers as tears rolling down the male dancers' faces. I explained that the motivation of this interaction was to illustrate the release of tears, and therefore the release of built up tension and anger.

These movements represented comfort and solace, which influenced and seemed to soften the harshness and anger of the male dancers. The female dancers enveloped the male dancers as they maneuvered through their arms, wrapped their bodies around their legs, and slid down their figures in close contact. The rigid, upright posture of the male dancers slowly slackened as they sank down to the floor.

The female dancers dragged them to the center of the space, and showing support, held them upright and caught them as they would repeatedly fall and recover. The next movement phrase illustrated the embrace of the two male dancers as they stood still looking out into the audience. The female dancers wrapped their arms around them, as the male dancers eventually

sank through their limbs and to the floor, slipping from the comforting grasp. The two male dancers travelled through the space, grasping at the air, trying to retrieve what was lost. At the end of this frantic search, they were once again enveloped by the female dancers and again, sank to the floor, as they were swept away and off stage. Throughout this scene, I explained the motivation, which was the need for support in times of grief. While the male dancers tried desperately to stand on their own, they needed comfort and consolation to be released from their anger and frustration. This release allowed for the male dancers' characters to give in, and their anger to be swept away.

Catharsis

The final section of my choreography was an illustration of catharsis. It started with an accumulation of bodies, piled on top of one another, creating a sense of weight that had developed throughout the choreography until this point. The heavy pile was dismantled, lightened, and made loftier, illustrating the release of tensions and built up emotions. What followed was a waltz through memories and experiences. Glimpses of prior tasks and movement motifs were displayed, embraced, and released.

I began this rehearsal with four dancers. I chose these four because throughout the process so far, they had demonstrated an ability to share weight seamlessly, and work with improvisational structure, which would become important. I explained that the purpose of this section would be to illustrate the sense of transformation from heavy to light, and tension to release. I expressed to the dancers that this idea echoed that of catharsis- "the transformation from negative to positive and the painful and complex experiences resulting in a breath of fresh air" (Vygotsky 3).

I directed the dancers to roll into the space, and then settle on top of one another, creating a heavy pile. The physical weight of each body was apparent, and the dancers expressed that the heaviness was oddly comforting. I instructed them to remain in this pile for a prolonged amount of time, before the dancer at the top of the pile began to move and rearrange the bodies. Following this, I tasked the dancers with lifting one another to higher levels- from lying down, to sitting up, to standing. As the dancers executed this task, they did so in a mechanical way, moving each other's bodies as if they were arranging objects rather than people. After seeing this, I prompted them to insert a sense of empathy and compassion into the task. They seemed confused at this prompt, so I explained that the idea of empathy meant identifying oneself in another, and that this was known to be an element in generating catharsis through dance. Giving more detailed instruction, I told the dancers to increase their point of contact with one another, and follow each movement until its completion. My explanation along with these specific instructions made a difference to the movement quality, illustrating the sense of empathy I sought.

From there, I prompted the dancers to imagine that there was a ball of built up tension and complex emotion in their chest. This ball would slowly emanate from their chest into a cloud in front of them. Using their improvisational skills, I prompted them to react to this image. The dancers responded very well to this prompt and demonstrated the lightness and released quality I had hoped for. However, the more we rehearsed this idea, the more the dancers reverted back to their habits of using technique and physical ability, rather than using the subtle imagery we had developed. Because of this, constant prompting in rehearsal was necessary.

Following this sequence, I gave the dancers a series of jumps and lifts that would emphasize the idea of shedding layers and growing lighter and more relieved. The dancers

executed the movement with strength and technical proficiency, however the meaning behind the movement was not yet clear. I prompted them to imagine that they were riding a collective wave, and they needed the help of one another to remain on the same wave. After implementing this imagery, the movement illustrated a greater feeling of breath and loftiness, as one movement would lead to the next more seamlessly, emphasizing the concept of releasing tension.

At the end of this sequence, I instructed the dancers to culminate, forming a pile once again. This time, rather than manipulating each other's bodies with care and compassion, they would perform this task as quickly as they could, showing the entire sequence in fast-forward, representing the idea of accumulated memories. This fast-pace sequence would morph into a slow, waltz-like movement, displaying prior motifs and gestures from tasks seen earlier in the piece. I directed the ensemble to join the quartet on stage with the same waltz movement, each displaying different gestures done earlier in the work. I prompted the dancers to choose which gesture they would demonstrate, but that it should be a gesture that resonated powerfully with them. As they performed these gestures I continually prompted them to "say something" with each gesture, making the message of it clear.

Eventually, this waltz transitioned into familiar tableaux. I directed the featured duets representing fear, obsession, and loss, to repeat their prior movement phrases simultaneously. While this directive appeared to produce complex work, the dancers executed it quickly and easily. What resulted was glimpses from each emotion illustrated, accumulated into one image that had depth and complexity. I instructed these duets to stop their movement suddenly at a certain point, creating a snapshot of the emotion they were portraying. I then instructed the other dancers to enter the space, and observe each snapshot. At first confused at this task, the dancers entered the space and quickly and unceremoniously glanced at each duet. In order to get the

imagery I sought, I once again explained the idea of empathy and compassion within the dance. I prompted them to see each duet, and identify themselves within the themes that each tableau represented. I told them to recall their experiences of fear, obsession, and loss within the piece, and perhaps in their lives as well, calling upon kinesthesia. This made a difference with the intention of this simple task. Developing this idea, I directed the mobile dancers to initiate contact with the “frozen” dancers, and with the same display of empathy, guide them to the corner of the room. They would progress to the opposite corner, referencing the prior gestures in a fast movement sequence, as if recalling memories of fear, infatuation, obsession, and loss.

The next sequence would illustrate transformation. I instructed each dancer to freeze during a certain point in their movement sequence. They took this directive well, but I needed to prompt them to insert more tension into their position. I then instructed one of the dancers to gently push each body to the side, and as he did this, their tense positions relaxed. With little prompting, they had illustrated an image that clearly showed the transformation from tension to release. To continue this idea of transformation, I wanted to create a lift that would travel across the stage and illustrate time passing and change happening. I directed the ensemble to lift one dancer over their heads and pass her along to one another. This needed much collaboration from the dancers, and they willingly communicated with each other and devised a way to successfully accomplish the intended image.

For the last sequence of this section, I instructed the dancers to fall back and against one another in a canon, resulting in a “domino effect” of each person falling on the next. The dancers were hesitant to fall onto one another, perhaps fearful that they would hurt someone or get hurt themselves. In this instance I felt compelled to re-introduce the idea of trust when falling. This

theme had transpired earlier in the work, and had resurfaced again. I told the dancers to use each other for support, rather than avoiding contact.

After this, I directed the dancers to remain seemingly lifeless on the floor, and to feel the weight of their bodies as they lay heavily. I then created a small phrase of movement that would transition from the floor and grow lighter as it progressed. Finally, I directed the dancers to repeat their gestural phrase incorporating movement from the previous sections illustrating fear, infatuation, obsession, and loss, and eventually culminate in a tight clump. This clump would be an embrace of one another's bodies, referencing the idea of embracing emotion. This would eventually dismantle and radiate outward, showing the release of all of the accumulated conflicts, tensions, and emotions displayed and experienced throughout the choreography.

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

Through my review of literature and video, I had gathered information and inspiration to create an original work. I used insights from scholars, philosophers, and choreographers, and applied them to my choreographic process. Through this process, I learned what approaches and strategies were most effective in extracting certain movement qualities from the dancers, so that they could successfully tell a story through the dance. With the use of narrative, gestures, imagery, and coaching of the dancers, I had created work with the aim of illustrating the progression of emotions and their transformation into catharsis.

While my choreographic process previously consisted of pure movement, followed by imbued intent, my aim for this project was to attach meaning to the movement immediately. This way, the dancers would be able to develop the emotional intent at the very beginning of the process, resulting in a more effective performance. I found that by constantly reminding the dancers of their motivation and the meaning behind their choreographed movements, I was able to see the effect later on in the process. Once the dancers were performing on a stage, free from the confines of the dance studio and the mirror in front of them, I saw them truly embody the meaning and the intention behind the work. This showed me that my methods had worked. The dancers had embodied the emotions and had performed with the heightened sense of expressivity I sought.

When rehearsing with the dancers, I found that working with smaller groups was more productive and successful, as the dancers were more focused in an intimate setting, with less distraction from their peers. Larger group rehearsals were more energized and provided a less serious atmosphere, which contributed a fresh dynamic and necessary relief from the heavy and intense material. For this project, both the small group and large group dynamics were necessary

to provide focus within the choreography, and complexity in the interaction of dancers. This would facilitate the illustration of the narrative, conveyance of emotion, and the build-up of conflict and tensions that would lead to catharsis.

During this process, I found that working with a duet as the focal point of each movement section was an effective way to establish a relationship, and to convey an emotion clearly. Each duet was used to set up a narrative and a dynamic that would be magnified and intensified by the rest of the ensemble. Starting with duets gave the work a foundation that could be made more intricate and complex through the use of the other dancers.

In each movement section, the development happened at a fast pace. This fast pace illustrated a sense of urgency and a certain need to engage in what was happening. As I continued to choreograph, I discovered the importance of transitions between movement sections, and how the use of silence during these transitions was effective in illustrating transformation from one emotion to the next. Noticing the power of these transitions in silence, I lengthened them and expanded upon them. Developing these transitions also served to emphasize the progression of the narrative and the forward trajectory of the journey taken by the dancers on stage. The slow-moving transitions provided an opportunity for the audience to digest the material, and for the dancers to re-set and transition into the mindset of the next emotion they would portray. Most importantly, the transitions symbolized the transformative nature of catharsis.

Working with young adult dancers and extracting expressivity from them was a challenge. They seemed embarrassed and hesitant when I asked them to emote and show vulnerability. They were most successful in conveying emotion when I gave them specific, technical instruction. They responded better to this than prompts to interpret the emotion of the

work on their own. I found that I had to speak very technically at first, and give very specific instruction on body placement and movement qualities such as tension vs. passive weight. Once these movement specifications were in place, I was able to coach them more successfully, and extract the intended emotional qualities from them.

During my choreographic process, there were certain methods that were more successful than others when aiming to extract specific emotions and performance qualities. I found that including gestures in the choreography was a very successful method. A gesture, compared to a technical movement such as a battement or a pirouette, can be attached to a specific emotion or meaning. Gestures are often pedestrian in nature, so there is an element of humanity and uniqueness within them. The gestures that I incorporated into my choreography were magnified, manipulated, and repeated to represent multiple meanings and add to the conveyance of emotion. For example, within fear, I instructed the dancers to perform expressive gestures such as trembling of the hands, shielding of the body, and covering of the eyes. These gestures acted as motifs in the choreography, and became a language to communicate and express the emotion. The dancers were able to latch on to these gestures and be expressive and communicative through them, because they knew the exact meaning and could focus on conveying it through the small, concentrated movements.

When rehearsing the duet illustrating infatuation, I found that task based movement was most effective in extracting expressivity from the dancers. I began by asking them to play certain roles, and imagine that they were in the beginning stages of an exciting new relationship. While this was somewhat helpful, I could sense that they were holding back, perhaps because they were self-conscious when expressing these sensitive and vulnerable themes. Once I gave them specific tasks such as “help your partner attain a star from the sky, look at it together, then drop it, and try

to gather it back up”, I saw the choreography come to life. While both effective, I found that specific tasks were more useful to this process than prompting the dancers to channel internal feelings/experiences.

Presenting a clear narrative was another important aspect of my choreographic process. In the “infatuation” duet, the feeling of infatuation would transition into addiction, and then obsession. I found that giving the dancers a clear story line as opposed to abstract ideas, gave them more of an impetus to act out their roles. An effective way to direct this story telling was by designating a protagonist and antagonist. The story developed when I introduced more dancers into the scene, creating different manifestations of the antagonist.

Along with the task based movement and designation of characters within the choreography, spacing played a vital role in illustrating the story. The varied proximity of the antagonists to the protagonist and the antagonists to each other, relayed different messages. When the antagonists encircled the protagonist, it evoked a feeling of suffocation and entrapment. When the antagonists formed a clump that the protagonist would navigate through, it evoked confusion from the protagonist, and a sense of being consumed and overwhelmed.

When creating the movement section that illustrated loss, I found that it was effective to create juxtaposition, to highlight the complexity of this heavy emotion. In choosing to use the polarized themes of harsh and aggressive anger, next to the soft, weighted nature of sadness and tears, I found that each emotion became clearer. I also found that presenting a cause-and-effect within the movement made the intention more identifiable. The visual of two people clinging onto each other, then slowly slipping through each other’s grasp in a gradual way, was successful in illustrating the passing of time and the impermanence of all things. After this, came the reaction to the loss- the feelings of anger and sadness. Presenting an action and reaction in my

choreography helped the dancers to grasp the meaning of the work and be able to understand it more clearly. This allowed them to perform it with more expressivity and to embody the emotion more fully.

The use of imagery was a vital part of this process. When giving instruction to the dancers, I found that vivid descriptions to describe certain movement qualities were successful in achieving the desired effect. In the movement section illustrating loss, I told the quartet of female dancers to embody tears, and they were able to demonstrate the dripping, soothing, cleansing quality of consolation. I explained their relationship to the duet of male dancers as tears of frustration being built up inside, then released from their eyes to flow freely, washing over the duet. After giving the quartet the movement and specifying certain details within the choreography, they were able to do simply what I had asked. However, after giving them imagery to latch onto, they had infused the movement with life and artistry, giving it vitality and expressiveness that I would not be able to teach through simple instruction of body placement and movement quality.

The last section of the work was meant to portray the actual feeling of catharsis. This provided an opportunity to emphasize, magnify, and re-iterate the emotional content throughout the work, so that it culminated in a complex bundle of prior tasks, meaningful gestures, and images that were familiar to the audience. The purpose of this section was to illustrate empathy, memories, and the beauty that might come from the complexity, chaos, and confusion of life.

I found that taking individual gestures from prior choreographed sequences in the work and asking the dancers to magnify them and “say something” with them, prompted the dancers to find meaning in each gesture. Once it was meaningful to them, they were able to transmit that in their performance, making the gesture seem bigger and more important. Within this visual of

concentrated gestures sweeping across the stage, I found the potential of contrast in placing dancers amidst the scene, performing a culmination of movement phrases in a fast and frantic manner. This contrast displayed irony and emphasized the plight of the individual, adding to the complexity of the scene.

I found that placing each featured duet representing fear, infatuation, and loss, next to each other, to be performed simultaneously, gave a clear depiction of the journey that the audience could easily identify. This added to the sense of memories and emotions starting to accumulate, as the audience could see flashbacks from earlier in the narrative. This scene also evoked a sense of empathy, as the rest of the ensemble simply observed the three duets representing fear, infatuation, and loss. Illustrating this sense of empathy required a lot of coaching and verbal prompts, as I repeatedly told the dancers to acknowledge themselves in the images represented by the duets. When I prompted the dancers to help and comfort one another, the idea of empathy became clearer. I found that in accomplishing the idea of illustrating empathy, the audience could feel comforted by the dancers on stage, seeing the images of help, assistance, and compassion, experiencing kinesthesia.

When witnessing the final sequence of the choreography on stage- the full ensemble performing the accumulated gestures compiled into one movement phrase, done sporadically and oriented in different directions with varied timing, I saw the journey of the work fully revealed in front of me. The high level of energy and sense of urgency provided a heightened sense of emotion that could be felt from the dancers on stage. This sequence was the result of the build-up of complex emotion, conflict, and tension, creating a high point of the narrative. This climax consisted of a recalling of memories, a full revelation of the emotional content of the work, and an embrace of the represented emotions. The gradual gathering of dancers in a physical, tight

embrace, advancing across the stage, gave a sense of closure and unification through the commonalities in humanity and the compassion that results. As the clump dispersed, emanating outward during the final notes of the music, I could feel the relief of the dancers, as they exhaled and settled to the floor. Witnessing this, I too felt the sense of relief and the sensation of catharsis.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

My research began with an investigation of emotion in dance. I was interested in emotion as choreographic inspiration, and the ways in which this translated to the audience. After further development of my research question, my interest had evolved into an exploration of catharsis as a reaction to dance, and how this could be achieved. After seeking the work of philosophers, scholars, and phenomenologists, as well as contemporary choreographers who have all studied and created well-known work referencing emotion in dance, I was able to discern what might generate catharses in contemporary choreography. With these ideologies as tools to incorporate into my own choreographic process, I was able to choreograph my own work to be viewed by an audience. The feedback I received was enlightening and provided more clarity to the question: “what generates catharsis in dance?”

Without realizing it at the time, my choreographic process echoed Vgotsky’s assertion that “we cannot concentrate our attention on an emotion. As soon as we do, pleasure or displeasure immediately dissipates, and we find ourselves observing some irrelevant sensation or image we had not intended to observe in the first place” (10). While choreographing, I had focused my attention more on illustrating the narrative, and illustrating the emotion through the dancers, rather than constantly thinking about what the emotional response of the audience might be. When developing each phase of the narrative, I did not focus on whether or not the audience would have a cathartic experience. I focused solely on exploring the transformations, clarifying the messages of the gestures, and reflecting certain aspects of conflict, tension, empathy, shock, and irony. It was only after the work was completed, that I was able to reflectively analyze the effect my choreographic choices would have on the viewer. In placing my focus on the dancers and the story they were telling, the audience subsequently was moved by the choreography.

The feedback from the audience after watching the performance of my work, *What Remains* was interesting, insightful, and varied. Certain moments resonated with certain viewers, as different people related to different aspects of the choreography. One individual commented on the transition from fear to infatuation. She described the act of the two characters walking slowly around each other as “taking the perfect amount of time for me to realize that they were transforming”. She commented that the time taken to explore this transformation made the duet more believable and rewarding to witness. Another viewer commented that her “favorite part was the pile of the four dancers that stayed for awhile”. This individual appreciated the stillness of the pile of dancers, because it allowed her to absorb the information and derive meaning from the accumulated bodies. Another viewer commented that the transition in which the entire ensemble was coupled up into duets, slowly rotating around as one would gradually slip through the others’ grasp, was “something that she wanted to capture”. She expressed that she had a visceral response to this image, as she was saddened by it and wondered, “Who will crumble next?” Interestingly, more of the specific feedback I received was in reference to the transitions that were performed in silence and with minimal movement, rather than the bigger “dance” sections that involved a high level of technical skill from the performers.

While some audience members commented on specific moments, many viewers made general statements about the work, saying things like “it was immersive, I felt like I was in it”, and “you really told a story- I don’t know exactly what it was about, but I felt it”. Some audience members expressed that they were moved so deeply by the work, that they cried. One viewer in particular had further questions about the work, asking more details regarding what it was about and what it was inspired by. She told me that it resonated deeply with her, because she was experiencing a difficult relationship at the time, and could relate to the characters on stage.

Others expressed that they appreciated the use of narrative, and asked themselves questions such as, “is that dancer who seems to be in trouble, running around in a circle, supposed to be me?” Another viewer commented, “I could tell it was about different relationships and how they change and morph and disintegrate”. This audience member had interpreted the work in a slightly different way than how I originally intended. She was able to come to her own conclusions about the narrative, but still feel the same lasting effect that compelled her to respond to it.

Although the feedback to my work was varied, the most common reaction I received was the response, “that was beautiful”. This indicated to me, that my objective was achieved. Whether the viewer experienced catharsis or another sensation, the general audience had been moved by the work.

I had also received reflective feedback from the dancers who performed the choreography. Many of them expressed that the performance was a rewarding experience because they “felt it on stage”. Some shared the fact that they related to the source material of the choreography, because they were going through similar situations involving addiction and/or loss. As I congratulated the dancers after their performance, I could sense lightness and a pleasant energy surrounding them. Perhaps they were relieved that the pressure of the performance was over, or perhaps they felt catharsis as a result of embodying emotions, tensions, and disparaging themes, then releasing them by the end of the work.

The process of trying to generate a cathartic experience through a dance mirrored the sensation of catharsis itself. The journey was difficult and complex, as I navigated the challenges that come with choreographing material, developing narrative, and working with a large ensemble of dancers, while allowing information I had gathered to inform my choreographic

choices. The complexity of the process was reflected in the final product seen on stage. As I witnessed the performance, I simultaneously let go of it, feeling the pleasure and relief of a deep exhale.

My choreography had evolved, and the final product was a work reflecting themes of humanity and compassion. As humans, we have all felt fear, infatuation, obsession, and loss. Since we have this in common, we can relate to each other through art, and find beauty in locating that commonality on stage. As a choreographer, this is my goal- to display work that is meaningful, relatable, and beautiful, so that we can be moved.

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