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I gave the dancers the freedom to improvise...and they choreographed

*Chaos onstage can be scary, especially when the choices seem almost limitless.
Are ballet dancers trained to crave certainty and structure? Is all repetition bad?*

by daniel waters

According to the international Gem Society via their website, a crystal is a solid whose atoms are arranged in a "highly ordered" repeating pattern. This will become important later.



From February 2023 to April 2023, I worked on *yellow*, a dance I choreographed for a concert of graduate student work at my university. I had 12 dancers, all of them with over a decade of ballet training each. My goal was to create a dance that was structured enough to interest a theatre audience but ever-changing, so as to avoid any sense of boredom, which I get from watching the same dance over and over and over again.

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I didn't want the dance to be pure improvisation, because it had a time limit and I wanted the dancers to be in specific places sometimes because of lighting. Still, I wanted some chaos, and for it to be short and somewhat different each night. I wanted something that felt NEW to me even after watching it every night, multiple times a night, 7 days straight during tech week.

"I failed" is what crossed my mind during the first few nights of tech. The dance looked exactly the same every time, and despite my best efforts to keep it under 3 minutes, it was consistently over four minutes. It was not the result I expected, but it was interesting. The dancers created a structure that was so complex and fun to look at that I can only compare it to a crystal. I think ballet practitioners are like crystals.

I gave the dancers the opportunity to be like water. Water takes the shape of the surface where it is contained (the stage) but it remains fluid. It allows for other substances to pass and cut through, water responds to touch, to sounds, to weight. Water is life.

On the other hand, my dancers wanted structure and beauty; they wanted repetitiveness similar to looking at a diamond under a magnifying glass. I think chaos is scary, and that is why we try to take it out of our daily lives by creating structures like jobs or schools and roads, to make sure we always get to those jobs or schools the same way at about the same time. We want to live in a house or apartment so that we can sleep at the same place each night. I wanted chaos, but life is not chaos for ballet dancers, life is beauty, structure, and repetition.

Inspired by the article “Toward a Feminist Ballet Pedagogy: Teaching Strategies for ballet Technique Classes in the Twenty-First Century,” by Gretchen Alterowitz, I had decided to give agency to the dancers who agreed to work with me after the audition process. I started by dividing the cast into groups, rehearsing solos, trios, and duets at different times. I began each rehearsal by asking the dancers, “How's it going?” Sometimes they answered with just a smile, sometimes we spent 15 minutes just talking. I then asked what music they liked, and we'd choose a song together. I would give them one eight-count and then ask them to improvise another eight-count; then I would do another eight-count. and we repeated the process until we achieved a minute of choreography.

At the end of the rehearsal, I would give them a homework assignment. Some of them had to come up with short solos, some of them had to learn another choreography from a video, some of them had to read poems. I tried to cater to what they had told me they enjoyed and were used to working with. I repeated this process until I arrived with 12 different solos.

The first time my dancers came together as a group was for the audition to get into the concert, under some pressure. Each of them knew there would be other dancers next to them and not just the two or three people they got used to dancing with. It looked like pure chaos, and I loved it. It was everything I ever wanted, and best of all, the piece won a spot in the concert.

The following part process was the hardest. I was now tasked with teaching the dancers to embrace the chaos, to replicate all the accidental stumbles and the falls I saw during piece audition. I also wanted them to know that it was OK if they forgot the choreography and ended up facing a different way than everyone else. At that time, I was taking a class with composer Alan Terricciano, and he talked about how fugues tend to use repetition and accumulation to create very complex patterns. So, I added some structure into the mess to make sure that my lighting designer Jimmy Balistreri had an opportunity to highlight some moments. Overall, it

was a simple 1 then 2 then 3 accumulation sequence, combined with a short phrase that repeated a few times, followed by some improv and a lot of walking.

Again, at this point my intention was for the dance to be a little different every day, because I was going to have to look at it every night for a whole week, and I wanted to recreate that tension I feel when I see improv. The excitement of not knowing all. But by show day all of my dancers had committed to order. Despite me very rarely using counts, I noticed that backstage before each performance they would practice and make counts where I had put none. One time I even told one of my dancers, “Come take a picture foo!” and she responded with, “I can't, I have to practice your stupid dance!” I was shocked and immediately said, “What the french do you mean? Why do you practice? It's all improv!” All I had asked them to do onstage was one then two then three, do the eight-count, then improv, repeat that a few times, and when you hear the dog bark find a way to get to your ending pose.

But somehow they filled in the gaps and choreographed to every single count. Every moment of the dance was memorized by each dancer, and the dance looked exactly the same every single night. I made sure to record it every night to make sure I was correct in my assumptions of repetitiveness and I was right. I was shocked, but weirdly, I was proud and very happy.

After 6 years of ballet experience and extensive talks with ballet experts like my MFA colleague Emily Chapman, I learned that perfectionism is extremely common in ballet. (See one dancer's struggle with it at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9295d6p2>.)

Ballet dancers also have to memorize complex combinations after hearing them maybe twice while seeing their teacher move their hands to refer to leg movements and move their heads to describe arm movements. Ballet dancers are just built differently. They want to get everything right, they are aware of every part of their body at all times, at least they try to be, and the idea of chaos terrorizes them so much, my dancers went above and beyond, doing so much extra work I never asked them to get back to the structure. They preferred the repetitiveness, the comfort of knowing every day is going to be the same, the way every ballet class everywhere follows the same structure they've been following for a few hundred years. I discovered ballet dancers are made to crystallize. They were water like I wanted them to be, but they were frozen water, they were ice crystals beautiful, kaleidoscopic, rigid yet buoyant.

From what I gathered talking to audience members after the concert, I would say most people thought of my dance as air. Air, when placed in a container, remains shapeless. Atoms bounce

around from one wall to another just like my dancers seemed to randomly be moving from one side of the stage to the other. I know this because I asked my friends and relatives what they thought of the dance and most of them said they did not understand it. That it made their heads hurt and that they couldn't focus on anything in particular. I think that is because I forgot a small yet important detail about the concert. Not everyone gets to watch it every night multiple times a night for 7 days straight.

To me, and hopefully to my dancers, my dance was this beautiful crystal; to everyone else it was air molecules floating on a pinkish stage with wonderful costumes designed by Kaylynn Sutton.

And I am OK with that. I had a sense of satisfaction and self-fulfillment every night after the show was over. The audience saw chaos, the dancers got structured, and I saw a different show every night, multiple times a night, 7 days straight. And that's why I think ballet dancers don't want freedom, they want to be beautiful crystals.



Photo: Sky Schmidt

Finally, in preparation for writing this article I had a conversation with some of my dancers (those who wanted to) and they said that they felt like they did have a voice during the rehearsal process and that they knew that could have changed the choreography. In fact, some of them told me they noticed little changes each time, especially in the ending section.

If you are curious about how the dance looked:

Friday's performance

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PP-8f8D--WYzWACzW_iH-wezc_jmkvJo/view?usp=drive_link

Thursday's performance

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1K_-pbe6OqBD4VNS3K88DL-a95TvJb0yF/view?usp=sharing

If you want to see more of the rehearsal process and performances

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1--7NqG-2IoAsxzEvxsO_NbcvC7M2SsF4?usp=share link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1--7NqG-2IoAsxzEvxsO_NbcvC7M2SsF4?usp=share_link)

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<https://www.gemsociety.org/article/crystal/>