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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Questions for Pedagogical and Creative Discovery

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Dance Theatre)

by

Rebecca Salzer

Committee in charge:

       Professor Yolande Snaith, Chair
       Professor Allyson Green
       Professor Tara Knight
       Professor Cauleen Smith

2011

The Thesis of Rebecca Salzer is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2011

DEDICATION

It has been a gift to be a student in this program. As a professional returning to school, I have been keenly aware that it is a privilege to have support, space, and expert guidance in the full-time pursuit of creative and scholarly discovery. I would like to thank the faculty and staff of The Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California, San Diego for making these past three years possible. I would also like to thank my husband, Kevin Kelleher, my children, Ronan and Micah Kelleher, and my parents, Deborah and Beeb Salzer, for supporting me throughout this process with unending generosity.

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Questions for Pedagogical and Creative Discovery

by

Rebecca Salzer

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Dance Theatre)

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Yolande Snaith, Chair

Being part of this graduate program has given me not only new knowledge, but a host of creative and scholarly questions. Many of these questions revolve around finding authenticity and immediacy in performance and how digital media adds or detracts from this process. This thesis outlines some pedagogical, scholarly, and creative avenues for exploring these questions, as well as some possible directions for my continued creative research.

CHAPTER 1: QUESTIONS IN CREATIVE EXPLORATION

Coming to academia after eighteen years in the professional world has been enlightening on many levels. One of my biggest discoveries has been to watch how the Theatre and Dance faculty draw inspiration from both their academic and creative lives simultaneously, and how the presence of both arenas can lead to both better art-making and better teaching. I have come to realize that an academic/creative duality is something I have always been drawn to, not only in my life choices, but in my dance-making, and I am eager to continue exploring both worlds. This thesis will touch on some of the work I have made as a graduate student, and will point towards directions I would like to explore, both creatively, and academically in the future.

Whether as part of the zeitgeist or as a result of my own aesthetic journey, many of my creative and scholarly questions revolve around immediacy and authenticity in performance. Both my attraction to making dances for the camera and my experiences with live performance at UC San Diego have brought up these questions repeatedly.

In Ann Cooper Albright's article, "Falling . . . On Screen," she challenges "the unfortunate opposition between 'real' dancing bodies and their filmed images." [1] Instead, she points out a paradoxically symbiotic relationship between improvisation and screendance, in which capturing improvisation through film or video can actually enhance the feeling of experiencing the unknown. Cooper Albright begins by quoting Nancy Stark Smith, one of the pioneers in Contact Improvisation: "Where you are when you don't know where you are is one of the most precious spots offered by

improvisation. It is a place from which more directions are possible than anywhere else. I call this place the Gap . . . Being in a gap is like being in a fall before you touch bottom. You're suspended – in time as well as space – you don't really know how long it'll take to get 'back'."[2] Cooper Albright goes on to say, "Because screendance is able to visualize that suspension in time as well as space, it may in fact, help us to think about aspects of falling off the screen, in situations where gravity really does matter."[3]

I love this paradox, and I have found it to be true in every aspect of the creation of my screendance, "Stereoblind" - a process that has drawn more on the ideas behind improvisation than any I have attempted before. I believe the paradox functioned in this way: the knowledge that I would eventually be able to exert extremely precise control over what was created added a sense of safety that allowed the performers, the videographers, and me to take greater risks and engage more with the "Gap." The result, for me, was a heightened sense of authenticity and immediacy in the performances, even though they exist on video.

The subject matter of "Stereoblind," my attempt to expand my perception through vision therapy, has always seemed to me directly linked to the philosophy and experience of improvisation, and this clear link guided me as I structured the creative development of the screendance. Vision therapy, like improvisation, is entered into with a commitment to discovery and an acceptance that the outcome is unknowable. The expansion of proprioceptive resources required for vision therapy is also akin to improvisation's heightened awareness.

I began the process of making Stereoblind by having meetings with the designers and with each group of dancers. At these meetings we discussed the scientific and metaphorical ideas behind the film, including some of the classic problems in the philosophy of perception; "How can I know that what I am seeing is real?" I showed them some vision therapy tools, and gave them some reading on stereopsis. I also gave the dancers a few images that I was considering as sources for structured improvisations during the shoots. These images included "inhabiting pockets of negative space," "a sudden doubling of sensory input," "space as inflated – with more volume and density," "unfolding layers of space," "missed spatial judgments," and "differing perceptions of intimate space." Each group of dancers discussed which images might work best for them, and in some cases added to or altered the images, and these were the structures that we began to work with when shooting.

The danced sections of the screendance were shot over three days, with a separate group of dancers on each day. I began each shoot with a neurological warm-up that included swishing water around inside the mouth, tapping the joints with the fingers, and subtle head movements - all tools I have learned through vision therapy. From there I taught each group of dancers the same basic vision therapy exercises designed to help expand the sense of periphery. These movements, beginning with the hands on the sternum and then expanding out in a variety of directions from the head, became the starting points for the first improvisations of each shoot. From there, I

began to layer on images from our discussions – always asking the dancers if they had enough structure to work with or needed something more.

The videography in "Stereoblind" was also improvised. Ian Wallace, Ash Eliza Smith and I and met ahead of time to discuss the improvisational structures chosen by each group. We mapped out the location, and choose distinct spaces and angles to be used during the shoots. However, once the dancing and shooting began, each of us found a myriad of new possibilities that went far beyond our initial plans. Ian, Ash, and I also worked closely together, observing what was being captured by the others and trying to complement it with our own choices.

I delighted in finding and capitalizing on some of the unintended results of our camera work. For example, the long upside-down duet near the end of "Stereoblind" came about because Ian had been using a depth of field adaptor on his camera, and the resulting footage appeared upside-down. I am not sure I would have thought to rotate the image had it not started out in that orientation to begin with. Also, the last shot of the screendance, in which we see light changing in a concrete space, was taken by accident when a camera was left on during one of the dancers' breaks.

My collaborations with designers for "Stereoblind" felt extremely successful and also improvisational. The designers came along for the ride of ever-changing discovery and were flexible and also generous contributors to the process. It was the best kind of collaboration in that everything my collaborators brought to the process buoyed it forward.

Perhaps the most improvisational element in the process for me was the editing. I approached the editing as open-ended, willing to let the project find a form. The fact that so much of the footage was good gave me a tremendous amount of freedom.

I spent a long time watching and cataloging what I had, which included approximately nine hours of dancing shot with three cameras, two videotaped interviews, and three audio interviews. Then, feeling that I needed to create a backbone for the film, I began with the interview footage, attempting to tell the scientific and personal story. I also began to weave in the dances at this point, but the early drafts of "Stereoblind" were very narrative heavy. As I shifted the balance more towards the dance and pared down the narration, the BBC documentary succumbed to the poetic statement that I wanted the film to be.

The highly improvisational feel of the editing occurred for me in part because I had so many good options at every stage. For example, I would start looking for a sequence of movement that had a certain feel or a certain rhythm. Quickly and easily I would find three or four possible clips that worked. What felt improvisational was the freedom to explore a decision and the string of subsequent choices it would set in motion without feeling that it was irreversible. The luxury of considering many options was incredibly enjoyable. I loved the opportunity to step back and shape the piece in an unhurried way.

"Stereoblind" was important for me not only as an investigation of authenticity and spontaneity in performance, but also as a joining of the intellectual and physical –

a recurring theme in my creative life – and one that connects back to my interest in balancing theory and practice in teaching.

The creation of "Night" for New Directions in 2009 ended up being largely about finding a balance between the spontaneous and the rehearsed in performance. While at first it seemed these two qualities were dichotomous, by the end of the process I found them to be powerfully complementary.

The piece involved the coordination of a dance alongside a revue sketch by Harold Pinter.[4] One of the first things I learned about the rehearsal process for "Night" was that, even though it contained a fully-realized and separate Pinter scene, the dance and the scene needed to be rehearsed as one entity. Early attempts with Director Tom Dugdale to take the actors aside for scene work ended up disrupting the flow of the piece. It seemed that the acting had to occur alongside the dance and the music in order to be part of the whole.

The dance, while structured, was spontaneous. When the dancers performed without the actors, they had to adhere to the overall durational confines of the music, but within that they could choose the length of each of the three sections, and also the specifics of how they would move and interact within the open choreographic structure. The Pinter scene, by contrast, initially felt much more fixed just by virtue of the need to adhere to the script. As we investigated it more, however, we found a tremendous amount of openness within it – especially within the famous Pinter pauses.

The piece, which dealt in Pinter's spare and unsettling way with a couple whose memories of their first meeting do not coincide, was structured as a series of three photographic transparencies that could be overlaid one at a time. Scene One was the danced duet with music. In Scene Two the dancers performed the identical duet without music, with the dance occurring in the midst of the actors carrying out the Pinter scene. Scene Three involved the actors re-enacting the Pinter scene with just blocking, gestures, and music, and no speaking. For this reason, each part of the performance, dance, speaking, music, and gesture needed to be temporally consistent enough so that the pieces could be overlaid and fit together.

The piece ended up consisting of a series of flexible intertwined connections. Sometimes cues were generated by the music, sometimes by the text, and sometimes by the dance, and while the cues themselves were set, the timing around them could change. These layered cues created an intense state of listening among the performers. For me, finding this quality of awareness on stage was one of the most gratifying parts of the process. Thinking back on "Night," this listening felt like a kind of authenticity in performance.

While I know that the same creative strategies do not always work a second time, I learned from "Night" how to rehearse something so that it has precision and form but can also breathe. There had to be an element of the unknown to keep the listening quality alive. Yet, it was through rehearsal that the group learned how to respond and listen as a whole.

CHAPTER 2: QUESTIONS IN PEDAGOGICAL EXPLORATION

Recently, in the process of applying for academic positions, I was asked to design a number of courses that I would like to teach.   While researching and solidifying my ideas, I realized that my teaching interests represented important questions inspired by graduate study. Below I will discuss four of the courses that I designed, consider how this graduate experience inspired them, and imagine how they might define a direction for my further scholarly and creative inquiry.

I am thoroughly enjoying teaching Advanced Ballet for Contemporary Dancers, and I have proposed this class as one that I would like to teach again. In the epilogue to Jennifer Homans' *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*, she writes:

> . . . inside today's brand-new theaters a tradition is in crisis, unfocused and uncertain. We all know it; we talk reassuringly of patience and waiting, of safeguarding the past until the next genius comes along and lifts ballet's fallen angels back into the sky. But the problem may run deeper . . . We linger and hark back, shrouding ourselves in tradition and the past for good reason. Something important really is over. We are in mourning.[5]

While I agree with Homans that ballet, in its most classical form, is in decline, I also think that this decline is part of a natural artistic cycle, and not something to be mourned. Ballet's development in the 17th century drew from Renaissance dance forms that were also in decline at the time. So ballet has and will continue to shape its descendent dance forms.

With this in mind, I have designed the class to examine and attempt to isolate what is unique and valuable about ballet technique. Topics covered include

verticality, precise use of the legs and feet and their application to quick weight changes, balon and how the physics of jumping works, and the use of musicality in ballet technique. Through a better understanding of this tradition, we play a role in its preservation. We also help to carry it forward into our practice of contemporary dance.

This class is my first attempt to combine a theoretical and practical approach in the classroom, and I am learning a lot from it. I have designed the class to include writing, reading, and video-viewing in addition to dancing. The reading is from the second half of Homans' book, covering the beginnings of Russian ballet through the rise of ballet in the United States. The assigned videos are taken from the Alexander Street Press Dance In Video site, and include interviews and excerpts from performances and rehearsals that support our reading. I have also created a class blog on which students post one-paragraph written responses to class discussions, reading, and video-viewing.

An example of an idea I have tried to approach simultaneously through theory and practice in this class is the concept of Classicism. Early in the quarter I gave a brief lecture about how Renaissance art and architecture adopted the Greco-Roman idea that there is a harmony and order of proportion to be found in nature that should be adhered to in design. I spoke about Vitruvius' *De architectura*, and how the human body, above all, was seen as an example of this harmony.

I also touched on the philosophical meaning of verticality by reading an excerpt from a chapter in A.K. Volinsky's 1925 *Book of Exultation*, entitled, "The Vertical: The Fundamental Principle of Classic Dance:"

> The Greeks clearly set the vertical in opposition to the bent and
> crooked, not only in the geometrical but in the comprehensive spiritual
> meaning of the word. To see straight, to speak straight – all this is at
> once pictorially sensible and heroic. . . Only in ballet do we possess all
> aspects of the vertical in its exact mathematically formed, universally
> perceptible expression. Everything in ballet is straight, upright, as a
> taut string that sounds a high note . . . in ballet everything – the dances
> on the ground and in the air – is the direct heritage passed down to us
> by the sublime, proud, and pure antiquity . . ." [6]

Along with these tenets of Classicism, I gave the students some definitions of Modernism, including Clement Greenberg's: "The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." [7]

The reading that coincided with this mini-lecture was Homans' chapter on Russian Classicism. The students were assigned video viewing of some excerpts from *Sleeping Beauty* – considered by Homans to be the apex of High Classicism. [8] *Their writing assignment was to pick two YouTube-accessible dances of any genre, provide links to them, and present a brief argument characterizing each dance as either Classical or Modern. The best response I received was from a student who effectively argued that Lada Gaga's music video "Bad Romance" could be seen as Classical.

The practical side of our exploration of Classicism has taken a number of forms. For example, during the weeks that we were discussing Classicism, I gave

combinations geared towards finding verticality. At the barre, I focused on multiple quick weight changes. We experimented with placing weight in different degrees over the toes and over the heels, and how that affected these transfers of weight. For the class grand allegro, I taught them the opening section of the Lilac Fairy's variation from *Sleeping Beauty*, as I had learned it at the San Francisco Ballet School.

Digging into my own experiences with ballet, and finding links to the overall history of the art form has been fascinating. The six degrees of separation that exist in the world at large seem to be only one or two degrees in the world of ballet. For example, Anatole Vilzak, one of the last dancers trained at the Imperial Ballet School in Russia and a member of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, was still teaching (in his 90's) at the San Francisco Ballet School when I was a student there. He taught Character classes, and I still remember parts of the Czardas he taught me. In addition to studying with Robert Joffrey, I also studied with former dancers from the New York City Ballet and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, and I have enjoyed imagining my connections through them to George Balanchine, Michel Fokine, and even Marius Petipa.

As an experiment in teaching history and practice together, I have designed a class called "Embodying Choreography: The Painter's Apprentice Approach," and my class description is as follows: In the tradition of apprentice painters copying the works of the masters, this investigation of choreography from the inside out involves careful observation and study of video of three dances by well-known choreographers, as well as learning selected sections of these dances. Beginning with a solo and

moving to a duet and then a group work, this class will integrate performative and adaptive concerns with a study of choreographic structure. This class is inspired by an idea that I developed with Eric Geiger's help for Margaret Marshall's seminar on Pedagogy in the Spring of 2009, as well by Eric's choreography class this past Fall.

The class would begin with a focus on theme and character portrayal through choreography. As a vehicle for this exploration we would investigate Daniel Nagrin's 1948 solo about New York gangster culture, *Strange Hero*. Discussions of the piece could bring up questions such as: What was the social and political context in which the piece was made? Which of Nagrin's gestures do you think are most effective in describing his character? Would the solo be the same without music? We would start by learning and performing (for each other) sections of Nagrin's choreography. Next, I would ask the students to create a one-minute solo without music or text in which they clearly portray a specific character. As a second step to this assignment I would ask them to add music or text to their solo, and to let these additions shape and change the choreography.

As a contrast to Nagrin's work, we would next engage in a study of formalism, musicality, and abstraction through an examination of the Pas de deux from Balanchine's *Apollo* (1928). Since learning or performing this piece would exceed the technical reach of the class, this unit would center more on observation and discussion of videotaped performances. We would discuss the musical/choreographic structures binary, ternary, rondo, theme and variation, medley, and the ideas of Formalism vs. Expressionism. In pairs, the students would make one to two-minute duets whose

goal would be to express a piece of music. The next assignment would be to accent the formal components of the duet by transferring its impact to geometry, line, and pattern.

The third piece that we would examine and enter into as a class is the first movement from Bill T. Jones' *D Man in the Water*. With any luck, perhaps I could bring in Eric Geiger to teach this movement and to discuss the piece's creation and meaning. The idea behind studying this piece would be to grasp some of the strategies for choreographing for larger groups. After learning and rehearsing a portion of *D Man*, groups of three or more would be asked to create a one to two-minute dance that utilizes repetition, unison, canon, and spatial patterns. A second assignment would be to take this newly created group piece and to insert at least one movement, spatial pattern, or sequential choice (i.e, unison, canon, repetition) from *D-Man*.

In a more traditional approach to the teaching of history and theory, I would be interested in teaching "An Overview of The History and Theory of Dance on Camera," which I describe as follows: From the advent of cinema to the development of the iPod, camera-wielders have been irresistibly drawn to dance. This class will give a broad overview of the intertwined histories of dance for the camera and modern cinema as well as examining theoretical questions of liveness and mediatization as they relate to dance.

This class was inspired in part by Alison Dieterle-Smith's class on Dance for the Camera, in which we discussed how Maya Deren's work fueled developments in avant-garde cinema, and also how cinematic practice was influenced by dance in

mainstream movies in the 1930's and 40's. Sherril Dodds' *Dance on Screen: Genres and Media from Hollywood to Experimental Art*[9] provides a good starting place to structure the class. However, since 2001, when *Dance on Screen* was published, technological change and the aesthetic responses to it have brought up a host of new topics for consideration. Among these issues is a blurring of the lines between amateur and professional screendance-making brought about by the availability and portability of high quality equipment.[10] Dodds' writing also precedes YouTube and reality TV dance competitions, both of which have changed the map in terms of how we view dance.

One of the classes I am most excited about developing has been clearly inspired by my experiences as part of Shahrokh Yadegari's Crossing Boundaries group, and by Tara Knight's class on Media Theory. I imagine my own class would include a mixture of some of the practices from both Crossing Boundaries and Tara's class, but that it would be geared specifically towards dance-making. It is entitled, "The Mediatized Body: An Exploration of Digital Technology in Contemporary Dance Performance," and I describe it as follows: A hands-on, in-studio study of digital media's many iterations within the creation and performance of contemporary dance. In leading this class I would like to both experiment creatively with a range of technologies and also to examine their theoretical implications. Topics would include the use of video as a choreographic tool in the studio, video and projection in the context of live performance, telematic performance, video for documentation of live performance, and choreography for the camera.

As with my Advanced Ballet for Contemporary Dancers class, I am interested in leading "The Mediatized Body" by integrating theoretical discussion and practical experimentation. For me, one of the ways the theoretical discussion around liveness and mediatization translates to dance is in the power play we often see between live and recorded bodies in contemporary performance. While this same issue exists when theatre and digital media meet on stage, I feel that questions of empowerment and disempowerment of the human form are hugely augmented when dance and digital media meet. This is in part because many live dancers are silent onstage, except for the occasional breath or footfall. When these subtle sounds are covered by a score, and the dancer shares the stage with a projection (or is even projected upon), the lines of presence and immediacy can be easily blurred, and it can seem like the image and the live dancer are in competition.

In addition to watching and discussing video excerpts of different ways that projections can be used alongside live dance performance, including, Andre Gingras' *CYP17* and William Forsythe's *Kammer/Kammer*, we would investigate this question of power play through our own experiments. In his article, "'She Sang Live, But The Microphone Was Turned Off:' The Live, the Recorded, and the Subject of Representation," Steve Wurtzler diagrams the spatial and temporal relationships between the "spectator-auditors" and the "event" or performance:

	Spatial Co-presence	Spatial Absence
Temporal Simultanaeity	LIVE	
	(I)	(II)
Temporal Anteriority		RECORDED
	(III)	(IV)

Position I: Public address, vaudeville, theater, concert
Position II: Telephone, "live" radio, "live" television
Position III: Lip syncing, Diamondvision stadium replays
Position IV: Motion pictures, recorded radio and television

Figure 1: Relationship of spectator-auditors to the "event" posited by representation.[11]

One way to organize our experiment would be to compose a short movement sequence that could be performed according to the specifications in each quadrant of Wurtzler's diagram, i.e. first in a spatially co-present, temporally simultaneous way, then in a spatially co-present, temporally anterior way, etc. By observing the results, perhaps we could arrive at some admittedly subjective generalizations about these space and time relationships as they pertain to movement performance.

I am also interested in exploring, through both scholarly and practical research, some of the most prevalent uses of cameras in the creation of contemporary choreography. As more choreographers use videotaped improvisation as a source of material, how does that effect choreographic form? How does the dancer's recursive game of telephone with his recorded image influence his relationship to the resulting material? What new skills are required of a dancer in this time where so much is learned from and performed for video?

Theatre has divided the craft of acting into screen acting and stage acting. Do we need to investigate the same divisions within dance? Are we training dancers specifically to perform in one genre or another? What performative strategies in dance work best on film?

To move on with not only new knowledge but also a host of new questions is the best outcome I could have wished for when entering this graduate program. My experiences during the past three years have expanded my sense of what is possible in both artistry and scholarship, and I look forward to the path ahead.

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