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The Music, The Mirror, and The Dance:
A Choreographic Analysis of “The Music and the Mirror” from *A Chorus Line*

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Danielle Snyder

Thesis Committee:
Professor Mary Corey, Chair
Professor Lisa Naugle
Assistant Professor Kelli Sharp

2020

DEDICATION

To my family, friends, and teachers,

Who have supported and inspired me relentlessly.

“And it’s just nice to know that you’re not alone. I think it makes people feel happier about being part of the human race. It makes you feel closer. The metaphor is a chorus line, being part of a great team. And being part of the human race is very nice. I don’t think it would be fun to be the only human being around.”

- Michael Bennett

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Music, The Mirror, and The Dance:
A Choreographic Analysis of “The Music and the Mirror” from *A Chorus Line*

By

Danielle Snyder

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Mary Corey, Chair

This thesis project is comprised of two parts. The first portion contains my research surrounding Michael Bennett’s creation of *A Chorus Line*. I primarily focus on his choreographic methods for “The Music and The Mirror,” performed by Donna McKechnie, who originated the role of Cassie. I investigate the creative process and personal ties between Bennett, McKechnie, and *A Chorus Line* to gain a better understanding of how and why Cassie’s character transforms in “The Music and The Mirror.” I connect literary resources with my own choreographic analysis to enhance my understanding of the dance solo and bring attention to the relatability of Cassie’s character. My findings convey how McKechnie’s personal experiences and insight are integral to her performance.

The second part consists of movement-based research and the choreographic application of my findings, which resulted in a work titled *[in]COMMON*. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my work was not performed, but the rehearsal process allowed me to bring many ideas to fruition. My intent was to create an authentic representation of genuine human character and

exhibit scenarios of everyday life through movement. My choreography explores arbitrary moments that are relatable to the personal experiences of both the performers and audience members. How can an insignificant moment be made significant? *[in]COMMON* develops new pathways of perspective, which enhance and challenge the connections between human character, experience, and action.

INTRODUCTION

What is it that draws a reader in to a good story? Why does a movie keep a viewer's interest? How does a dance seize an audience's attention? These answers vary, and are highly dependent upon personal opinion, plot, subject matter, mood, and venue. What draws me into a good story, keeps my interest in a movie, and grasps my attention in live performance is the transformation of a character within a narrative. With this change, comes vulnerability and honesty. I am inspired by movement's ability to depict a human undergoing such metamorphosis. This concept is not always prevalent in dance, though it is a defining motive for Michael Bennett's work as the choreographer of the Broadway musical *A Chorus Line* (1975).

A Chorus Line was a revolutionary Broadway musical, conceived from the life stories of the actors, actresses, and dancers who originated the roles. More specifically, "The Music and the Mirror" stands out as an unconventionally lengthy dance solo danced by Donna McKechnie, who originated the role of the lead female character, Cassie Ferguson. The dance solo is set up by the scene in which Cassie confesses that she is in desperate need of a job (Kirkwood and Dante 92). Denny Martin Flinn, a former member of the international company of *A Chorus Line*, deemed it "unlikely that in the history of the American musical theater there has ever been or will be a dance number as long and hard as 'The Music and the Mirror'" (127), continuing to define it as Bennett's "most complex dance" (129). Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* thought the dance solo deserved to become a classic of musical staging ("A Chorus Line"), while Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* considered the "electrifying solo" to be the "apotheosis of the show," breaking the communal chain to show Cassie in "the anxiety and glory of her ultimate isolation" ("The Kids on the Line"). Furthermore, theatre and dance historian Dustyn Martincich establishes

McKechnie's body as a "primary narrative communicator" which enables the dancer to "lose herself in a trance of emotion as she communicate[s] Cassie's exhaustive passion for the stage" (84). Martincich further declares that Bennett and McKechnie have used the dance solo to "convey a character's emotional narrative" on a comparable level to renowned songs and monologues from famous musicals (84).

Several writers have chronicled the creative process of *A Chorus Line*. Denny Martin Flinn provides detailed accounts from individuals involved in the creation of the dance in *What They Did for Love: The Untold Story Behind the Making of 'A Chorus Line.'* Similarly, *On The Line* is another chronicle of memories told by original cast members compiled by Robert Viagas, Baayork Lee, and Thommie Walsh. Though these sources reference the methods through which the show and the "The Music and The Mirror" were created, they lack substantial choreographic analysis of the final product, nor do they thoroughly investigate how McKechnie's performance of Bennett's choreography manifests a clear transformation of character from start to finish. McKechnie's autobiography, *Time Steps: My Musical Comedy Life*, reveals a more detailed understanding of how Cassie's character was conceived and what the rehearsal process was like with Bennett and co-choreographer Bob Avian, as well as what experiences in her own life were similar to Cassie's narrative. Ken Mandelbaum provides more insight from McKechnie and Bennett in *A Chorus Line And the Musicals of Michael Bennett*.

Connecting all of these resources and layering my own interpretation of the dance solo has enhanced my understanding of the metamorphosis that occurs in Cassie's movement, in order to bring attention to the relatability of her character. My methodology is comprised of consulting primary and secondary sources written by or about the original cast members of *A Chorus Line*. I

also provide a choreographic analysis of the piece, using the video recording of Donna McKechnie's live performance of "The Music and The Mirror" in 1986.¹ Access to decent-quality live recordings of McKechnie's performances from the earlier years of the show is very limited, so this was my main reference for the choreography.

This thesis focuses primarily on how the choreography for "The Music and The Mirror," performed by Donna McKechnie as Cassie, defines and displays a change in Cassie's character at this point in her narrative. In Chapter One, I provide a brief history of *A Chorus Line*, which includes details of the methods Bennett used to create and choreograph the show. Through a critical look at this background information alongside video footage of McKechnie's execution of the piece, in Chapter Two I analyze how the choreography is a unique representation of McKechnie's involvement in originating the role, as well as how the choreographic intent changes from start to finish. I claim that "The Music and The Mirror" can be seen as a reflection of multiple characters' stories, and I use the performance as a metaphor for the struggle to survive.

These discoveries have allowed me to approach my own work as a choreographer from a new perspective. Chapter Three discusses how my choreographic intent to create an authentic representation of genuine human character is not so different from Bennett's intentions. Applying some of Bennett's choreographic methods to my rehearsal process allowed me to discover the disposition and scenarios in my choreography that are relatable to the personal experiences of both the performers and audience members. The combination of Bennett's ideologies and other

¹ "The Music & The Mirror." *YouTube*, uploaded by Moonfall, 1 Jan 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9ULWsqbCpA.

choreographic influences throughout my life enabled me to coach the dancers in further humanizing their movement. My multifaceted approach parallels the many lenses through which people receive and process artistic work, as I also aim to choreograph to multiple viewpoints. Bennett's creation of "The Music and The Mirror" offers a wealth of knowledge for dancers and choreographers to use as the context for furthering their research and artistic methods, as I have throughout my creative process.

**CHAPTER I:
MICHAEL BENNETT AND *A CHORUS LINE***

The Broadway musical *A Chorus Line* is the backstage story of dancers auditioning for the chorus of a musical, who are prompted to show their true selves to the choreographer, Zach, and his assistant directing the audition (Viagas et al. 20). The characters, the script, and the lyrics are based on actual stories told in a series of workshops that choreographer Michael Bennett held with some of his dancer friends. Bennett (1943-1987) began his career as a dancer in a tour of *West Side Story* at age seventeen and developed a strong network of dancers and friends involved in theater as he continued to work in show business. Bennett was a dancer, choreographer, teacher, and director—but predominantly, he was an artist who brought truth to portrayals of humanity onstage. During the Watergate Hearings of 1973, Bennett felt intense frustration with the dishonesty of the world and shared feelings of “uncertainty and helplessness” with several of his friends in show business, and theater critic Ken Mandelbaum writes that this fed Bennett’s idea to do a show centered around dancers (94). Bennett’s creation of *A Chorus Line* would provide an outlet of expression, meaning, and a sense of purpose for fellow dancers and performers.

The first workshop commenced at midnight on Saturday, January 18, 1974, in Manhattan, and it began with a dance class—even though some of the attendees had come directly from performing in shows that night (Flinn 9). After the dance class, they proceeded to talk. Bennett asked for each dancer’s name, stage name, place/date of birth, as well as a brief personal history of their childhood and what sparked their interest in dance. This would come to be the same way the audience is introduced to each character in *A Chorus Line*. The workshop turned into a series

of meetings, which revealed that the group of dancers Bennett brought together had stories of substance and self-discovery that could form the basis for a show. With the help of a team of writers, composers, lighting designers, and stage personnel, Bennett conceived, choreographed, and directed *A Chorus Line*. Through a series of songs and dances about the dancers, the audience comes to know and relate to each of the characters auditioning. However, the show is about so much more than just dance, as Mandelbaum writes:

The show is about feelings of pain, isolation, and sexual awakening, about family problems and leaving home, about childhood, youth, adolescence, and maturity—experiences revealed by the dancers at the tape sessions, which, brought to vivid theatrical life, became experiences that struck profound chords in every observer. (151)

Since opening at the Shubert Theatre in New York City on July 25, 1975, the show has earned several awards including twelve Tony Award nominations and nine wins, and it has been performed thousands of times nationally and internationally. In a *New York Times* review from October 1975, Clive Barnes praised Bennett's accomplishment in taking "the microcosm of a chorus line and [turning] it into the macrocosm of a generation" ("A Chorus Line"). Bennett's ability to zoom out and give light to humanity through dance and theater was revolutionary for the time. In other words, Bennett did not just follow a conventional plot that features a main character and what happens to that one person. *A Chorus Line* company manager Charles Willard believes that Bennett used his intuitive artistry to make the show a "mosaic" of seventeen stories, all of which could have been experienced by one dancer (Mandelbaum 160). This gives the audience multiple reference points for relatability.

Another thing that sets *A Chorus Line* apart from other musicals is that it was cast and rehearsed before the script was even written. Bennett said, “I want to hire the cast first because I can only do this musical if I do it on the people” (Mandelbaum 112). Theater historian Denny Martin Flinn highlights the significance of this process: “for the first time in their careers, these dancers were given the chance to make a real creative contribution to an evolving musical, the subject of which was personal and dear to them” (61). Rather than just performing a role written by someone else, the dancers were actually central to inventing their roles. Donna McKechnie, who was both a close friend of Bennett and also originated the role of Cassie, viewed the experience as an opportunity to “stand up and be counted” (Flinn 61).

Bennett’s Choreographic Methods

Bennett explored several choreographic methods in order to expose the reality of the dancers’ lives at the chorus call audition. Most notably, the stories shared between Bennett’s friends and acquaintances at the workshops provided an abundance of truth to pull from, serving as the basis for the characters, songs, and monologues in *A Chorus Line* (Viagas et al. 21). The final script contains many quotations from the tape sessions of the workshops (Viagas et al. 33). Bennett was able to use the talents of his friends to create movement specifically suited for them, and in some cases, he was also able to utilize their choreographic skills. McKechnie says that “the idea of bringing story-driven realism into musical theater wasn’t new, but Michael wanted to take it to new heights” (68). She recalls how difficult it was to be forced to relive certain memories of her past and address the feelings that were revealed, as the characters’ stories were being written. McKechnie says, “Most dancers aren’t used to expressing themselves this way. By

the very nature of the discipline, dancers tend to be in denial about their feelings much of the time” (109). While dancers might be used to having to block out pain they feel in their foot while they are dancing, Bennett wanted his dancers to access those exact feelings for their performance.

Bennett was also notorious for creating real-life situations for his dancers and performers that provided them with the experience they needed, in order to apply a genuine reaction in their work. Tony Stevens—a member of the original workshops—remembers that when they would rehearse the scenes, someone would be eliminated from the scene each time. In an interview he said, “You would never know if you were going to get picked or not. You were always upset when you weren’t and it made you go through the feeling of an actual audition, which Michael wanted to maintain at all times” (Mandelbaum 123). This contributes directly to the premise of the show and is representative of how Bennett’s direction and choreography were so intertwined with the storyline. Anyone in the room during the workshop rehearsal in which Bennett pretended to hurt his knee would be able to remember how they felt in the moment when Bennett collapsed to the floor. One moment he was dancing with the group, but in the next moment he was acting seriously injured, maintaining this fiction while some dancers went running to call for help, leaving others at loss without their choreographer directing them (Flinn 63). McKechnie recalls that Bennett, wallowing in pain, eventually looked up and said “Do you all remember what you just did?” (113). She understands this as Bennett “trying to create an immediate emotional memory for each of us, to be able to personalize the scene and re-create it night after night in a spontaneous way” (McKechnie 113). This scene would become part of the show,

preceding dialogue between the characters about what they would do if they couldn't dance anymore.

Flinn speaks of how Bennett set up situations in which the dancers were “encouraged to find their own characters through a combination of themselves and their material” (58). Flinn sees Bennett’s direction of his dances as “little scenes” that build, talk to the audience, and exploit character nuances, resulting in more gratifying material for both the performer and audience members (108). Many choreographers of the time did not offer much room for contribution from their dancers, but Bennett was truly interested in what his dancers could contribute. McKechnie remembers how much the dancers would improvise and how willing Bennett was to take from them, relying on their unique talents and personalities (Mandelbaum 132).

Bennett’s ability to pull realism from life experience and incorporate it into his choreography would ultimately win *A Chorus Line* the Tony Award for Best Choreography in 1975. The real-life characters elevated the plot to become something unorthodox, yet other humans found relatability in the work. Theater historian Stacy Wolf makes an interesting point about the opportunity Bennett created for the audience in the opening scene, to better understand what it is like to be a dancer. Wolf observes, “The numerous repetitions of the same phrase of music and choreography with pauses for Zach to correct the dancers teach the audience to see the combination through the eyes of the dancers, who scrutinize themselves and one another” (120). By setting this up at the start of the show, Bennett created a pathway of communication between the characters onstage and the audience. This compelled him to dig deeper into the lives of the seventeen dancers he was working with.

Bennett's special relationship with McKechnie provided a very unique avenue of involvement in the development of her character—Cassie Ferguson. They were close friends who eventually became lovers. This is indispensable in both looking at the depth of Cassie's character and in recognizing the profundity of "The Music and the Mirror." While Bennett holds the title of Choreographer, a closer look at his relationship with McKechnie and her involvement in the creation of the show suggests that McKechnie holds a more considerable title than just Dancer. This partnership from which Cassie was conceived unfolds in the next chapter.

**CHAPTER II:
“THE MUSIC AND THE MIRROR” PERFORMED BY CASSIE**

Who is Cassie Ferguson?

The opening scene of *A Chorus Line* is a remarkable dance number in which all the dancers auditioning are learning a dance phrase, which they then perform for Zach, the director who is running the auditions. Through song and dance, the audience understands the agony of dancing at an audition. In the face of rejection and criticism, the dancers must prove that they are passionate enough and worthy of being chosen for the job. After cutting down the large group of dancers, only seventeen are chosen to proceed to the next round. They stand in a horizontal line marked by a continuous piece of tape that runs across the stage from one wing to the other. In the next several scenes, each character steps forward—on the line—to state their name, age, and hometown. However, Cassie Ferguson does not give this introduction, and it is apparent that she and Zach already know each other. Theater critic Ken Mandelbaum describes Cassie as follows:

A talented, stand-out dancer who had acquired a reputation in featured roles in two Broadway shows, Cassie now needs a job. She went out to California, did bit roles, and nothing happened for her. She now wants to start over again and be given the chance to do the only thing that means anything to her. Zach tells her she is incapable of dancing like everybody else, but she insists on putting herself on his line. (158)

Throughout the show, the audience is fed information about Cassie’s life as a dancer searching for fame and recognition, as well as details about her prior romance with Zach, which was left unsettled. Cassie is a character full of passion, though it is her romance with dance—not Zach—that drives her to beg him for a job. Jack Kroll and Constance Guthrie describe Cassie in a 1975

Newsweek article as “the failed star who desperately wants the safety of the chorus again” (“Broadway’s New Kick”), while Linda Winer of the *Chicago Tribune* criticized Cassie as an “aging semistar” who had a “maudlin affair with the director” (E4). The parallel romances set Cassie up for an emotional confrontation with her life choices about three-quarters of the way through the show. After revealing that she tried to make it as an actress in Hollywood without success, Zach deems Cassie much “too good for the chorus” and tells her that he has higher hopes for her to be a star (Kirkwood and Dante 92). It is at this point that Cassie faces an emotional revelation which propels her into her performance of “The Music and the Mirror.”

Donna McKechnie as Cassie

Donna McKechnie, who originated the role of Cassie, grew up with a strong combination of ballet training and theatrical experience, which led her to find frequent success as a dancer in musicals. At age sixteen—and without the approval of her parents—she ran away from home to tour the United States with a dance production. It was clear how passionate McKechnie was about dance. From this point forward, McKechnie continued to book jobs as a dancer, leading her to meet Bennett during her role in *Promises, Promises* (1968). Bennett was the choreographer for the show, and theater critic Ken Mandelbaum considers *Promises* the “beginning of Bennett’s use of Donna McKechnie as the most expressive instrument of his vision” (43). The praise McKechnie received for her dancing developed a further desire for fame, which led her to pursue work as an actress in Los Angeles.

After several unsuccessful gigs and small jobs, she deemed the pursuit unsuccessful and returned to New York City in search of work. In an interview with Rose Eichenbaum,

McKechnie revealed an incident in which she begged for a job after moving back to New York: “that part of the story is based on something that actually happened to me years earlier. . . . If dance is all you know how to do, you’ll beg to survive. I did get a part in the show and this incident became central to Cassie’s character” (94). The parallels between McKechnie and Cassie provided a way for McKechnie to intertwine her personal experience with the portrayal of her character. McKechnie’s attempt at solo stardom ultimately put her in need of the security of a job, which allowed her to “give special poignance and drama to the role” (Kroll and Guthrie 4). Bennett also speaks of “certain, undeniable similarities in Cassie-Donna,” and admits, “at first, I kept thinking of Donna as ‘Cassie’” (Maynard 44).

McKechnie and Bennett were not (yet) lovers at the time of the conception of *A Chorus Line*, though they had worked together previously on other projects, and McKechnie described their relationship at this time as a “warm brother-and-sister type of relationship” (57). The commonalities and comfort between Bennett and McKechnie provided a fruitful environment for them to collaborate, and McKechnie recalls how Bennett always encouraged her to be her own character and apply her choices as an actress to her dancing (69). Though Bennett and McKechnie had a very cohesive relationship during *A Chorus Line* rehearsals, McKechnie remembers that co-choreographer Bob Avian had previously complained about her in rehearsals for a different job they all worked together on. He said, “That girl is driving me crazy. She’s not doing it like everyone else,” to which Bennett responded, “It’s okay, leave her alone” (McKechnie 49). McKechnie states that this incident would resurface in Cassie’s conundrum as a dancer who is trying to homogenize her conspicuous amounts of charisma and talent in order to fit in with the other chorus dancers (49). In a scene towards the end of *A Chorus*

Line, Zach keeps pointing out moments in Cassie’s dancing which stand out: “Don’t pop the head, Cassie” and “Too high with the leg, Cassie” and “Too much pli , Cassie” and “Don’t pop the hip, Cassie” (Kirkwood and Dante 113-115). Colleague Denny Martin Flinn agrees that McKechnie stood out in a group of dancers as a “great solo dancer,” possessing “that unique blend of talent, skill, and personality” (107). Additionally, Bennett’s act of standing up for McKechnie displays his admiration and affirmation for her, which eventually became apparent to the entire cast of *A Chorus Line*. In *On The Line*, a memoir written by the nineteen dancers whose life stories were the basis for the show, it is noted that as the Cassie character grew, “the show about a chorus line of equals was ever so gradually acquiring a star, or at least a leading lady” (Viagas et al. 190).

In a 1975 interview with Richard Philp from *Dance Magazine*, Bennett declared McKechnie to be the “only girl I know who dances as strong as a man without *any* tension...and yet the dancing she does is incredibly lyrical” (64). McKechnie’s talents as a dynamic dancer offered Bennett a wide variety of skill to work with. Flinn recalls how Bennett’s choreography “made [McKechnie] look good and she in turn made his choreography look good,” which defined their “rare artistic partnership” (108). The ability to inspire one another and cohesively work together is something that a choreographer hopes for when casting a dancer. If the dancer not only executes the movement but also enhances the choreography, then this brings the collaboration to an ideal state for an abundance of opportunity to exist in movement potential.

McKechnie says that “The Music and the Mirror” was choreographed specifically for her, based on her ability to collaborate with Bennett. She recalls, “he knew my body; our sense of movement and style are similar...he liked the way I danced and he felt secure enough with me

that he would have an idea, visualize something of a step and I'd take off from that. It would be reciprocal, back and forth" (Viagas et al. 191). Theater historian Stacy Wolf points out that Bennett's choreography, which includes "leaps and turns, back-bends, and head rolls," are movements that were "conceived to accentuate Donna McKechnie's strengths as a dancer" (123). Similarly, theater and dance historian Dustyn Martincich considers McKechnie's signature "diva dancer" move to be a layout, which "highlights her long limbs, elegant neck and rubber band back" (82). She continues to state that the bodies of diva dancers "define the roles they have played throughout their careers because of these signature aspects" (Martincich 82).

There is significance in McKechnie's abilities to create astonishingly long lines and bend her back to the point of distortion, because symbolism exists in these movements. The emphasis put on stretching in opposite directions at the utmost ability of McKechnie's wingspan indicates a longing for something that is out of reach. The backbends demonstrate the strain and demands of putting oneself under the pressures of seeking fame and fighting to survive. The thirst for stardom and the struggle to be recognized are prominent themes for Cassie's character. The fine line between McKechnie's abilities and the choreography is instrumental in looking at how McKechnie, Cassie, and Bennett all simultaneously influenced each other.

Did the Choreography Create Cassie? Or did the Character Shape the Choreography?

The close relationship and trust between Bennett and McKechnie instigated an abundance of choreographic ideas for the dance monologue, "The Music and the Mirror." The solo ensues because Cassie has sacrificed everything in her life to be a dancer—yet being a dancer has left her in anguish. Bennett used metaphors within his choreography to communicate with the

audience beyond what the words and lyrics can convey. Flinn points out that many steps are repeated four times throughout the solo, which he sees as representative of improvisational experimentation (129). Movement is embodied through repetition, so a dancer often navigates a new step several times before it feels comfortable. This supports Mandelbaum's interpretation that Cassie is making up the dance in her mind as she goes along, thus she repeats movements more than once (170).

There is not a clear pathway to the end, and while the dancer is in control, there is also a sense of relinquishment in the consequence of not knowing what might come next. McKechnie remembers how her heart would race when Bennett would say to her, "Okay, go," urging her to improvise (114). Bennett encouraging McKechnie to embrace the feeling of making up the steps served her portrayal of Cassie doing exactly that. Dancing in the spirit of spontaneity portrays how exposed Cassie is at this point in the storyline. Her character has hit rock bottom, and to McKechnie's understanding, she was portraying "a character who was totally desperate and it was the last battle of her life. It was the most desperate fight imaginable for this woman" (Flinn 110). When everything is at stake, the choices made have more merit, and McKechnie had to choose which movements provided more value to the overall display of Cassie at this tipping point.

McKechnie recalls other ways in which Bennett would push her past her comfort level of endurance and stamina, in order to realistically evoke the question of whether she will make it through the choreographic sequence (119). The elliptical patterns that Cassie trails across the stage in a frenzy of large traveling steps often reverse direction, creating an illusion of more space. Diving into the unknown, the path that Cassie travels is much longer than the actual

square footage of the surface area of the stage, catapulting her to the point of exhaustion in her determination for resolution. Not only does the climactic narrative exist in an emotional context, but there is a substantial build in the physicality of the movement as well. Cassie is a survivor, so the choreography must justifiably set the dancer up with the choice to persevere when faced with an obstacle.

Bennett's application of pushing McKechnie to be the best she can be undeniably serves his efforts in trying to make McKechnie a star, which resembles Zach trying to make Cassie a star. Flinn considers Bennett's "supreme creation" to be Donna McKechnie as Cassie Ferguson (177). He compares Bennett to a "sculptor who created his finest statue and begged the gods to bring it to life so he could love her" (Flinn 177). Bennett even purposefully created situations that segregated McKechnie from the rest of the cast, and these instances would contribute to her performance. One of the earliest examples of this occurred at one of the workshops. McKechnie arrived an hour late, with Bennett (Flinn 62). Immediately, McKechnie was seen as favored by the choreographer, every dancer's ultimate dream. Flinn points out that Bennett "was intent on keeping her apart in order to create and define her role of the star who couldn't go back to the chorus" (62).

While Bennett's choreographic methods encouraged McKechnie to genuinely embody Cassie's persona, it is also clear that McKechnie's execution of Cassie's character was central to Bennett's ability to create a movement narrative. Mandelbaum considers the dance to be a "vivid, abstract, and emotional outpouring that allows the dancer performing it to contribute her own dance personality within the parameters of the choreography" (170). The concurrent relationship between Bennett and McKechnie allowed for a contemporaneous flow of ideas and exploration,

to which both individuals contributed. However, there were other individuals who were instrumental in the development of “The Music and the Mirror,” including Marvin Hamlisch, the composer for *A Chorus Line*.

Multiple Iterations of the Music and Dance

McKechnie worked very closely with Hamlisch—which was a unique experience for a dancer. This creative opportunity allowed her to play a part in deciding how the music would both follow and shape Cassie’s dramatic subtext (McKechnie 118). Hamlisch, McKechnie, Bennett, and the other songwriters developed many iterations of the song and lyrics for “The Music and the Mirror” before the final version was produced. With each version, the rhythm became stronger and the lyrics grew more aggressive. The lyrics are as follows:

GOD, I’M A DANCER,

A DANCER DANCES!

GIVE ME SOMEBODY TO DANCE WITH.

GIVE ME A PLACE TO FIT IN.

HELP ME RETURN TO THE WORLD OF THE LIVING

BY SHOWING ME HOW TO BEGIN.

PLAY ME THE MUSIC.

GIVE ME THE CHANCE TO COME THROUGH.

ALL I EVER NEEDED WAS THE MUSIC, AND THE MIRROR,

AND THE CHANCE TO DANCE FOR YOU.

GIVE ME A JOB AND YOU INSTANTLY GET ME INVOLVED.

IF YOU GIVE ME A JOB,
THEN THE REST OF THE CRAP WILL GET SOLVED.
PUT ME TO WORK,
YOU WOULD THINK THAT BY NOW I'M ALLOWED.
I'LL DO YOU PROUD.
THROW ME A ROPE TO GRAB ON TO.
HELP ME TO PROVE THAT I'M STRONG.
GIVE ME THE CHANCE TO LOOK FORWARD TO SAYIN':
"HEY, LISTEN, THEY'RE PLAYING MY SONG."
PLAY ME THE MUSIC.
GIVE ME THE CHANCE TO COME THROUGH.
ALL I EVER NEEDED WAS THE MUSIC, AND THE MIRROR,
AND THE CHANCE TO DANCE . . .
PLAY ME THE MUSIC,
PLAY ME THE MUSIC,
PLAY ME THE MUSIC,
GIVE ME THE CHANCE TO COME THROUGH.
ALL I EVER NEEDED WAS THE MUSIC, AND THE MIRROR,
AND THE CHANCE TO DANCE . . . (Kirkwood and Dante 95-96)

Flinn says that the final version of the song was the one that provided the opportunity for "Donna to present her character at her most desperate, most vulnerable, and weakest" (110). The dichotomy between Cassie's isolation and her relationship with Zach is represented in the lyrics

as well. There are several lines from the song that all start with “Give me...” followed by “somebody to dance with,” “the chance to come through,” and “a job” (Kirkwood and Dante 96). Though she feels left alone in her situation, Cassie is dependent on others to make a change. This puts the power in the hands of someone else.

The first time Cassie sings, “All I ever needed was the music, and the mirror, and the chance to dance for *you*,” but the second and third time this line is repeated, she only sings “... and the chance to dance.” The first time she sings the line ending in “for you” does not result in a dance break, whereas the second and third time she sings the line ending in “dance” a dance break ensues. The evolution of this lyric signals a change in Cassie’s approach to her passion for dance. At first it seems that she is dancing for someone else, almost to prove herself to Zach—or to any employer. The employer is in control. Then, she discovers a renewal of passion for dancing for herself, which is demonstrated choreographically. The lyrics ultimately set up Cassie’s isolation, with the power in someone else’s hands, but the dance transitions the power back into her own hands.

The musical melodies, tempo, and rhythm also transform throughout the piece. McKechnie speaks to her idea of a change in tempo as a reflection of the “emotional roller-coaster ride” Cassie experiences from the moment she encounters Zach (119). Various rhythm and tempo changes in the musical score are representative of a range of emotions including anger, seduction, abandonment, confrontation, desire, and survival. There is a clear arc in the music, from a slower beat building into a driving rhythm, and McKechnie says she used this to contrast Cassie’s “sexuality emerging from the rhythm of the drums and her yearning reflected in the plaintive trumpet line” (119). The space and journey provided in the musical score would

allow room for the choreography to grow and display the character transformation that needed to occur. Because the music was evolving as rehearsals progressed, this undoubtedly affected the various stages of development that the choreography went through.

At first, the solo was not a solo. Four other male dancers were involved as back-up dancers who danced and pushed around the mirrors on stage in a way that McKechnie felt was overdone (116). One night, Bennett told the male dancers they were cut from the piece—and made it seem like it was McKechnie’s idea—without McKechnie knowing (McKechnie 117). This is another example of how Bennett instigated McKechnie’s isolation from the other cast members. Ultimately, this served Bennett’s intentions and better enabled McKechnie to genuinely embody Cassie’s seclusion. She remembers feeling resentment from the male dancers at first, but then McKechnie came to see the change as a chance to prove herself as a dramatic solo artist (117). In an interview, McKechnie looks back on the early version of the number with the male dancers and she says, “It was exciting, but the statement wasn’t as clear and powerful as Cassie dancing alone. The number was really about her isolation, her relationship with Zach and her identity with the mirrors” (Mandelbaum 144). The parallel between the lyrics and reality is prominent—there is a shift in power as McKechnie brings the situation into her own control.

Both the musical and choreographic evolutions of the solo molded this section of the show into a rich display of Cassie’s authentic human character and resolution, with a clear arc of physical persistence and personal transformation. Flinn speaks eloquently to the progress of the piece:

The dance music and steps were altered to encompass several different moods a dancer might go through, each section expressing a separate need or feeling from Cassie’s soul

as a dancer. The changing rhythm of each new sequence gave the number the variety it needed, and allowed it to build more deliberately toward the climax. (112)

The contemporaneous unfolding of the script, the song, and the movement signifies how the choreography for “The Music and the Mirror” is a unique representation of the methods used to create the character of Cassie. The variety of moods, feelings, and needs expressed in the lyrics, song, and dance serve to convey an important part of the storyline to the audience.

The Significance of the Mirror

From the start of the show, the upstage mirrors provide a constant reflection of the dancers. Dancers in training are heavily reliant on the mirror to learn and improve their technique. Bennett spoke of this in an interview:

I’m very aware of communication, not only between people, but within myself—within the dancer. Why is the dancer always looking into the mirror? In class, you check everything you do, to make sure you are doing it right. You search the mirror for the perfect image—you look into the eyes in the mirror, asking: *Is that you?* We are always searching, hoping for approval, because approval’s real name is ‘love.’ (Maynard 45)

Two critical issues stem from this, each diverging in separate directions. First, many dancers develop the habit of using the mirror too much, and they often have trouble dancing without it. Commonly across all avenues of entertainment and literature, characters who look at themselves in the mirror too much are typically egocentric and represent narcissism. On the contrary, the mirror offers an honest reflection of imperfections and faults, which many dancers tend to obsess over. In this case, the mirror acts as a vessel for self-depreciation and judgement.

McKechnie's solo is entirely dependent upon the mirror, and she comments that it is "about someone who has no identity without the mirror" (Mandelbaum 170). The first dance section, in which Cassie turns around to face the mirror for the first time, follows the second time she sings the lyric "All I ever needed was the music, and the mirror, and the chance to dance . . ." (Kirkwood and Dante 96). Cassie abruptly turns around from the audience and advances towards her reflection, then immediately retreats to start dancing. The movements in this section are quite technical, including high kicks, pirouettes, and several port de bras lines—during all of which Cassie's focus is in the mirror. This illustrates the arc of growth in practicing dance technique. Each time a movement is performed with the application of correction, the reflection changes, displaying the proper position. It is helpful for a dancer to feel this adjustment within her own body, but it is also valuable to see this improvement in the mirror. Perhaps it is the preoccupation of striving for perfection that Cassie is addicted to. Without the mirror, she has nothing to be engrossed with in working towards the goal of being the best dancer she can be.

After the first dance break, Cassie returns to the audience to sing another verse. This verse is a reprisal of the last four lines sung in the previous verse: "Play me the music, Give me the chance to come through. All I ever needed was the music, and the mirror, and the chance to dance..." (Kirkwood and Dante 96). At this point, the mirrors quickly fly in to encircle Cassie, which Philp describes as "a semi-circle, like a trap" (64). The arrangement of the mirrors here creates multiple reflections of Cassie, which could be indicative of the black hole that dancers get stuck in, with their flaws constantly being pointed out to them, striving for an unreachable level of perfection. However, the rhythm slows down to create an enticing atmosphere for the second dance section in which Cassie's sensual side emerges. Movements in this portion

highlight McKechnie's curves, hip mobility, and musicality—rather than her technical abilities. The multiple reflections of Cassie at this point seem to be more emblematic of a proud display of herself, without shame. This is the moment in which Cassie's character transforms. Up until this moment, Cassie has been relying on the approval and admiration from others, but this has left her without the ability to do what she loves. The idea here might not be so much a rejection of ambition, but a renewal of her passion for dancing itself.

The mirrors are also representative of promoting authentic inquisition of self through transparency. The lengthy, approximately ten-minute solo suggests that it takes a good look into one's self to discover a revelation of sorts, whereas a brief interaction with one's reflection might not yield much introspection. It is also significant that Zach is seated in the audience of the theater because the location of observing this scene affects how it is perceived. Depending upon where one is sitting, the mirrors will reflect certain details that might not be seen from other areas of the audience, magnifying Cassie's struggle with how she perceives her own reflection versus how others discern her. The contrast between her actions and how they are received is a central theme to Cassie's character transformation, and this determines her character from this point onward in the show.

How the Choreography Manifests a Transformation of Character

McKechnie said “the dance perfectly reflected the idea of the lyrics, and the audience was able to see Cassie's transformation, ideally realizing that she had resolved something in her feelings that she had never dealt with before” (119). Her physical expression contributes value as the visual interpretation of the words. Mandelbaum also believes Cassie's emotional

transformation is more fiercely demonstrated through her dancing than in her spoken lines, even with a substantial amount of dialogue preceding the dance (156). In a 1975 interview, Bennett revealed that he is “interested in dancing being right for a character. Most importantly, dancing has to continue the story line. And it’s got to have a point of view. It’s got to be about something” (Philp 65). “The Music and the Mirror” is entirely representative of dancing as a continuation of the plot.

After pleading for work, the dance solo begins with Cassie running upstage to be confronted by her reflection in the mirrored panels. She immediately retreats away from her reflection, which displays her brutal encounter with reality. Cassie faces the truth that she must dance in order to survive. Dancing to survive is a continuous theme throughout the solo—it is deemed necessary for Cassie’s existential essence. What ultimately propels the choreographic intent is the search for validation in being a dancer. Where does this validation come from? Does it come from within or is it determined by the mercy of others?

The first pose she strikes—a wide stance with her arms strongly positioned reaching overhead—is immediately followed by a collapse of the torso and arms down towards the floor, hanging like a rag doll, surrendering to gravity. She experiments with the contradiction between attack in striking a pose and slack in releasing the position a few times, before maintaining more control in a sequence of strong poses and technical movements. The few moments—in which she breaks the extension of her arms and unravels the upright posture of her torso—foreshadow a rebellion against structure. The sequential extension of her port de bras ending with a sharp flick of her hands purges out the past. Cassie has played by the rules and obeyed the system her entire

life, yet she is struggling to benefit from doing so. Perhaps the structure of the system has actually limited Cassie her entire life, and she yearns for change.

There is also structure in Cassie's spatiality. Whenever she is speaking or singing, she stands downstage—facing Zach and the audience—on the white taped line which runs horizontally across the entire width of the stage. This line is present throughout the entire show, providing disciplinary structure for the audition, as a placeholder for the characters to stand on whenever they speak or sing; the taped line is a way to order the dancers to “Stand Here.” Dictating the dancer's placement while they speak is a declaration of Zach's power. Whenever Cassie dances though, the choreography takes her off the line, creating a visible indication that her ability to move elevates her essence as she rebels against the structure of the audition. What exactly does the dance offer that cannot be found in Cassie's spoken lines and lyrics? And what is she discovering for the first time?

Several directional changes in the choreography also contrast the frontal facing of the spoken word and song. During these directional changes, McKechnie's arms are often reaching one way, but her torso is pulling her in the opposite direction. She consistently follows the direction of her heart, rather than continuing in the direction of her arms. This provides an emotional context for the solo, as her passion takes precedence as the dominating factor behind the steps. The turbulent gestures are suggestive of making impassioned choices, creating an upheaval in the character's balance of work-life and personal-life with an underlying query to the need for human dependency. Both Cassie's personal relationship and her work relationship with Zach seem to be deeply intertwined. Cassie must unravel the threads that are keeping work and

passion tied together, so that she can distinguish both the emotional burden and opportunities that each have provided for her.

To get to this point, Cassie must first discover what she needs and desires. Her desire to dance is a necessity for her survival. Flinn regards the stark contrast between each section as expressing “a separate need or feeling from Cassie’s soul as a dancer,” which gives the number heterogeneity in anticipation of a climax (112). The musical narrative parallels—if not drives—the assortment of choreographic diversity that Flinn is referring to. The first dance section is very rhythmic and McKechnie’s feet almost never stop moving in time to the beat of the drums. Mostly, there is a strong grounding in the lower body accompanied by sharp, fleeting movements that strike musical accents in the upper body. The next phrase flirts with the line, bringing McKechnie downstage to face the audience, moving right and left along the line—but never crossing in front of it. After teasing with the lateral configuration of the line, the dancer turns loosely in a curved trajectory upstage, mocking the rigidity of the stagnant placeholder. McKechnie then runs back towards the line to sing the final verse in “The Music and the Mirror,” and she remains on the line for another lateral pass—which consists of her first jump, along with repeated arm reaches. The hard-hitting quality follows the percussive undertone, while the reaching motions highlight the brassiness of the other instruments. It is then that the rhythm slows down, and prolonged trumpet sounds take over, drastically changing the tone.

This next section is where a more intimate motive evolves for Cassie. McKechnie differentiates between these sections as first narcissistic, then revealing, as the eroticism unfolds (Flinn 112). Theater historian Dustyn Martincich claims that it is typical for a featured female role—such as McKechnie’s—to highlight the actress’s strengths and virtuosities, “but with the

choreography further sexualizing their bodies” (82). In the context of the plot, the eroticism which evolves seems to be a discovery intended for Cassie herself, rather than an external display for others. The ripples through McKechnie’s hands, arms, legs, and torso seem to demonstrate the reverberations of cause and effect, almost mimicking the realization that her feminine figure has the authority to demand attention. Seductive body lines are grounded in strength and power, demonstrating that Cassie is in control. Around forty seconds into this section, there is a backbend that literally tests McKechnie’s flexibility and figuratively assesses her commitment to the movement. This is an impressive gesture, which is performed effortlessly. Cassie tests her command over the audience, and then a generous sweep of her arms provides a seamless transition to return upright.

Following her backbend, a series of head rolls with her arms wrapped around her torso seem to unveil a liberation towards dancing for pure pleasure. The choreography simulates the juxtaposition of the musical score through a sharp accent on the count two and count six of each eight count. McKechnie’s focus begins to turn back and forth between the mirror and the audience, further diminishing her isolation. Eventually, Cassie opens up and directs more of her movements to the audience, so she is not so detached anymore. She now invites others to empower her to dance, without fear of being criticized. Both the music expands and the movement grows more free. Martincich believes McKechnie’s interpretation of Bennett’s choreography “acts the subtext of the scene, connecting the intention with the music. As the piece evolves, her movements intensify, reaching out in a controlled frenzy of energy and ecstasy as the woman grows towards climax” (83). The travel steps which follow this build, incorporate energetic movement in McKechnie’s torso, with a palpable connection between her hips and

shoulders. Bennett's choreography is initiated from the core in a way that resembles a living being's innate physical reaction to emotion. Cassie cannot help but move in response to the overwhelming fervor in the same way a baby might enthusiastically bounce to the beat of a song or a dog might wag its tail in excitement. Ultimately, her movement transcends words and McKechnie applies her qualities of strength and elegance in "highly erotic, complex patterns to convey what cannot be said" (Martincich 83).

The final climb consists of quick rhythmic stepping patterns, which are alive with syncopation and jubilation. At this point, Cassie commits to traveling in one direction for a longer succession of movements than earlier in the piece. Bennett's transition to phrases that move in one direction rather than in multiple directions signals a distinct shift in choreographic intent. Cassie's motives are not so conflicting anymore—she knows she must do whatever it takes to survive as a dancer, and she also trusts herself to be successful. It is at this point where McKechnie deliberately crosses downstage of the line, which proves her determination and courage in the choices she will make going forward. The boldness of stepping across the line instills confidence in Cassie's ability to not only survive, but to also thrive. She takes pride in her choice to ignore the line's definitive boundary. Cassie's journey thus far has brought her to revel in this powerful moment, executing the pulsating movement with jubilation and euphoria.

The tempo is quick and there is a tenacity driving McKechnie's last pass, retreating backwards on the line—traveling back to stage left while still facing stage right—putting her in a profile to the audience. While her feet scurry her backwards, she is reaching forwards with an extended right arm and splayed fingers. There is fatigue in McKechnie's legs, which have not stopped moving in quite some time, but the overall essence is not defeat—it is accomplishment.

This final horizontal progression along the line is symbolic of the journey taken to get to this point, with a focus on how much Cassie has evolved. McKechnie said the following in an interview:

The dance is about the need to rediscover the thing that makes you happiest. It's about the fundamentals, and trying to remember *why* you did what you did. . . . She's saying in the dance, 'I'm fighting for my life. Give me a chance to get my life back. Let me find myself so that I can go on. I don't care what anybody thinks, this is what I really love, this is what I do.' (Mandelbaum 170)

The culmination of her journey is what allows her to move forward with her life, having earned it back with a better understanding of how to move forward doing what she loves to do.

The choreographic arc of the dance solo clearly depicts Cassie's life as a dancer. Her narcissistic attitude in the beginning is emblematic of having received praise for her dancing, which propelled her to try to make it in Hollywood. Choreography driven by themes of self-examination and the need to reinvent herself are symbolic of facing the harsh reality of her profession. By attacking the traveling steps with determination, Cassie finishes by overcoming the hardship she faced. Through this climb in narrative and choreographic intent, the audience is invited to experience a renewal of self through investigation and relatability, unlocking several storylines and interpretations to stem from one work of art.

With several pathways of understanding, not everyone saw the complete resolution for Cassie at this moment in the show. Wayne Cilento, who originated the role of Mike in *A Chorus Line*, said the following about the piece:

After the mirrors went up and she ran around for another couple of eights, it shoulda stopped, and it went beyond that. I think what he [Bennett] was saying is that she was a fucking horse and she was gonna get through it. She was persistent to work, and that's what Cassie is about. I think probably he was right. Because you sympathize with her. I think it was part of the plan to sympathize with her toward the end of the number, that she was getting nowhere. In actuality the number went nowhere, and that's where she was—nowhere. And it does work. (Flinn 128)

Cilento addresses the fact that Cassie's work as a dancer will never be over. Booking one job as a dancer does not guarantee another job after that performance is over. And after the solo, Cassie still does not have a job. Even though she feels empowered, is she still left powerless? She will always be fighting the battle to prove herself, to prove her passion for dance is stronger than the fatigue and vulnerability of facing rejection. But is this just one cycle of many, that will recur at different points within her dance career? Regardless, Cassie demonstrates a change in her character to move forward, and establishes that she does not fear the unknown of what lies ahead.

To finish the dance, McKechnie strikes a pose to signify her personal victory. In a strong, wide stance, grounding most of the weight in her bent right leg, she spirals her upper body so that her shoulders are open towards the right, with her left arm reaching forwards and her right arm extended back behind her in the opposite direction. With a seemingly infinite stretch in her arms, she is arching back so that her chest is exposed to the sky and her head is looking upwards. This foundational base in the lower body allows for an expressive intensity in the upper body, magnificently demonstrating the support system needed for Cassie to sustain her passion for

dancing. In the December 1975 edition of *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll and Constance Guthrie likened the dichotomy of innocence and virtuosity in the performance to “the soft candor of a little girl,” while embodying the “sculpted power of a dancer by Michelangelo” (66). This position also implies that she has given it her all, and put forth her best attempt. She has shown what she has to offer—and Zach can choose either to take it or leave it. Every part of Cassie’s journey contributed to her arrival at a point where she is able to continue pushing forward and reinvent herself as a dancer—a dancer with a stronger sense of identity and enthusiasm. After “The Music and the Mirror,” Cassie is embarking on a new beginning.

How “The Music and the Mirror” is a Reflection of Multiple Characters

Bennett’s intention to create an emotional investment in Cassie’s life also pushes for the audience members to reminisce on their own past and future, creating a reflection of multiple people in Cassie’s narrative. From the very start of *A Chorus Line*, when all the characters specify their full name, date of birth, and where they are from—identity is a strong motive. The characters search for their own identity, so that both they and the audience can come to learn who they are. Because Cassie never states her full name, date of birth, or where she is from, she is generalized as a universal character. Cassie is representing all dancers as she fights for her life as a dancer in “The Music and the Mirror.” Theater scholar Stacy Wolf points out that while Cassie’s lyrics are personal to her character’s story, their meaning is true to every dancer’s yearning to dance and perform (124). McKechnie also said, “I used every dancer behind the scenes. I had a lot of support by knowing that I was representing a whole particular humanity in

show business” (Flinn 114). This magnifies the worth of her performance, justifying that Cassie is proving significance in all dancers’ needs and desperations to work.

When Zach tells Cassie she is more special than the rest of the chorus dancers, she responds by saying “we’re all special” (Kirkwood and Dante 122). Mandelbaum uses this response to show how *A Chorus Line* conveys that “each person is special, with feelings that must be expressed, goals that must be attempted, and an intrinsic value that must be respected” (176). Bennett also spoke about the relevance of this line, saying “Donna is talking for all of us on the chorus line. She is talking for the whole human race” (Maynard 44). However, there is also anonymity in the chorus, which dilutes the individual and prioritizes the group. Through this lens, it is remarkable that the audience’s image is also partially captured in the reflection of the mirrors as they are arranged during “The Music and the Mirror.” This includes the audience in the “we’re” that Cassie is referring to when she says “we’re all special.”

Humankind is also represented onstage through the basis of the audition itself. Mandelbaum sees a commonality between anyone who has ever applied for a job and the dancers auditioning, in that each situation consists of “putting oneself on the line, offering oneself up and facing rejection” (151). Through this relatability, Cassie’s solo attracts empathy. Anyone who has faced rejection in their lifetime can understand the conflicts in reacting to defeat and triumph, as portrayed in Bennett’s choreography. McKechnie says *A Chorus Line* is a very personal story “about anyone who ever grew up,” (Viagas et al. 20). Similarly, theater writer Olga Maynard argues that *A Chorus Line* is concerned with macro-scale issues including “the American ethos of ‘success’” and “people struggling desperately to remain ‘persons’” (38). Bennett’s visionary

talents as a choreographer and McKechnie's genuine artistry as a performer blend to designate Cassie's movement monologue as relevant to people of all ages, backgrounds, and statuses.

McKechnie also believes "The Music and the Mirror" is a universal metaphor for the struggle to survive, regardless of profession (119). In a 2006 interview she explains that people related to Cassie because of the common desire to start over, which is indicated in the character's line "give me a job, give me a chance" (Theatertalk). McKechnie learned an important lesson from the performance: "The greatest happiness doesn't have to be enormous success" (Kroll and Guthrie, "Gotta Dance"). She looks at how the small steps taken towards accomplishing something are part of the bigger element of achievement, which resembles the daily struggle to push forward. Every step in Bennett's choreography creates an over-arching battle towards surviving—not just making it through, but surviving with purpose. McKechnie believes Cassie took a look at herself and decided "This is what I want to do, no matter what others think. I deserve the right to make my life the way I want it" (Mandelbaum 146).

CHAPTER III: CHOREOGRAPHIC APPLICATION

An Unfinished Work

I return back to what maintains my interest in a story: the development and transformation of a character. I want to know why the character does what he/she does. What experiences have shaped the character to be the way he/she is? Does the action change the trajectory of his/her life? If yes, how does this action change him/her for the better or worse? What does this moment look like? What does it feel like? By studying the collaboration between Donna McKechnie and Michael Bennett, I am better able to understand Cassie's character and her transformation in "The Music and the Mirror." In supplement to my written research, my ongoing choreographic research delves deeper into moments of transformation and how they are depicted through movement-based performance.

However, my choreographic intent for this project was not just to follow a character through his/her life. Instead, my intent was to create an authentic representation of genuine human character and exhibit scenarios of everyday life. My research selects arbitrary moments from daily life to be put under a magnifying glass and looked at more closely. I intend for these "mini-scenarios" to be relatable to the personal experiences of both the performers and audience members, in order to push the performers and audience members to investigate what makes these moments significant. I see each moment not as an isolated situation, but as a link within a long chain of connected actions instead. A multifaceted approach to creating each scene allows for several variations within the interpretations of what has led up to this point in time and what will

ensue. Each choreographed scenario offers insight into why we are who we are, and the performance challenges the nature of our existence.

The performance, titled *[in]COMMON*, includes a total of five scenes and lasts around twenty-five minutes in duration. With the decision to seat the audience on all four sides of the performance space at Claire Trevor School of the Arts Experiments Media Performance Lab (xMPL), this was an opportunity to choreograph to multiple viewpoints. The cast was a combination of undergraduate dancers whom I sought out based on their strong inclination for performance, as well as dancers who approached me with eagerness to be a part of the performance. Because coinciding rehearsal times for a large group of people is limited, I restricted my cast to nine dancers—though ideally, I would have preferred working with closer to fifteen dancers. The more life experience I could bring to the piece, the better. With several different perspectives throughout the space, I could mimic the many lenses through which people receive and process artistic work.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my work was never completed in the way I fully envisioned it to be. However, the rehearsal process allowed me to bring many ideas to fruition. During a rehearsal one day, the dancer I was working with turned to me and said, “it’s almost like you are making little insignificant moments of everyday life become significant.” This was very satisfying to hear, as it reassured me I was doing exactly what I intended to do. In *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll and Constance Guthrie stated, “In the members of his chorus line, Michael Bennett has created a new kind of Everyperson, someone both special and common, someone with whom audiences sharply identify” (“Broadway’s New Kick” 66). If I am able to create a

work that persuades someone to believe something similar to this, then I would be deeply fulfilled.

Scene One

My unfinished work begins with a *WET FLOOR* sign in the space, with no announcement that the act is starting. A male in a janitor's jumpsuit begins mopping the floor. As it becomes apparent that the show has begun, the audience must walk across the stage floor, which is centered between the chairs in the xMPL, in order to get to their seats. This idea comes from personal experience, as I often find myself entering the restroom just after the floor has been freshly mopped. I feel a sudden sense of shame that I must relieve myself at that moment, in which a few steps leaving shoe prints on the shiny floor quickly diminishes someone else's progress. Is apologizing, or saying "thank you," enough to show my appreciation and embarrassment? My mind churns to a vision of the janitor in a busy subway station in New York City. Does the janitor ever feel accomplished?

After a few minutes, the audience members have taken their seats and now the other dancers make several walking passes across the stage in their street shoes, disregarding the progress made to clean the floor, stepping on the freshly wet surface unheedingly. The male janitor begins to wonder, "Am I invisible?" This sparks his imagination to create a world in which he is noticed, appreciated, and praised for his work. Time freezes around him, with all the other dancers on stage, frozen, mid-step. The first song titled "Hang On Little Tomato" begins. The janitor begins to waltz with his mop, weaving in between the other dancers still frozen on stage, stopping time to live in his dream-world. The figures around him subtly sway to tempo as

the pillars of his imaginary landscape. The character feels significant in his rendezvous with an alternate reality. Mime-like gestures and physicality inspired by slapstick comedy stimulated some of this movement vocabulary. Ideally, the scenario sets up the janitor as a relatable character, who daydreams of success, health, and happiness. As time ticks on, eventually he must resume his daily duties.

Scene Two

My sound design strongly drives the next section, as it is composed of several voicemails layered over instrumental music. The idea of choreographing to voicemails came from the chore of transferring old voicemails from my phone to my computer. In doing this task, I began to listen to the saved messages, and I realized how much can be told in just a short clip of a one-sided conversation. I envisioned vignettes of life told through movement choreographed to voicemails from friends, family, doctor's offices, and strangers—alive and deceased. My search for more voicemails led me to discover Rora Blue's digital collection, *After the Beep*. This is a collection of hundreds of voicemails that have been submitted and organized by color, in an effort to explore the relationship that exists between sound and color (Blue). Blue gave me permission to use several of the submitted voicemails for my choreographic work.

Each voicemail was initially chosen based upon the emotional content of its message, though I also considered the quality of the audio and the length of the message. By editing each roughly minute-long audio clip together, the audience gets a glimpse into that character's life for a short segment of time. There are many ways to relate to and interpret the stories of the characters, so each snapshot of their lives has the potential for several different meanings. Each

vignette parallels the way Bennet highlights each character in *A Chorus Line*. Bennett thread a narrative through each song and dance, sewing them together into one big blanket of a show: all the characters are concurrently in pursuit of making it through the audition and booking a job. In each voicemail included in my sound design, the speaker has an urge to share information with or talk to the person whom he/she is trying to reach.

The following voicemail is a prime example of the several layers of relatability and the emotional context carried in each clip:

Hello, it's your mother. And I wanted to apologize for getting so angry at you yesterday. I-I don't know, I'm driving into work very late here. But if I talk about it too much I'm probably going to cry. I don't know. I was upset with you because we were getting along before and then I went to just give you a quick kiss on the head. That, combined with the fact that you were waiting for your dad to give his credit card to pay for these things when I told you I was planning to pay for them all and I actually want to pay for them all. It's a... it's a big... um, I don't know. It's just something I've always planned for you and for Collin, and it goes way back to me and my quest to get into Notre Dame, and how my dad almost didn't want to pay for it. And after all my work that I put in and that my mom put it I almost didn't get to go because he had to pay a thousand dollars a semester. And I don't know... beyond that I just don't feel right. I can't concentrate, I can't focus on anything, I don't have any energy, I can't get anything done. I don't know if it's menopause, hormones, or if I'm depressed or what. But I... I need to go to the doctor pretty soon. I just can't deal with anything else and I don't want you to be mad at me and

cause any more drama. And I'm sorry and I love you. And I hope you... call me later.

Bye. (Blue)

This is one of my favorite clips, as it touches on independency, parenthood, hope, disappointment, mental health, and unwavering love. This provides a plethora of images and experiences for me, the dancer, and the audience to draw upon. As I got to know the dancers throughout my rehearsal process, I allocated each voicemail clip to a dancer with relatable experience from which they could pull emotional content. In working with each dancer one at a time, I applied Bennett's methods of employing the dancer's real life experience and technical aptitudes. I encouraged an open line of communication between myself and the dancers, supporting collaboration in deciding on movements which felt agreeable to them. Use of imagery was often incorporated to support and shape the emotional context of the scene. As each dancer's storyline began to unfold, I noticed that an increased investment in their character evolved with the movement.

With each dancer's solo happening one after another, I did not want this section to become stagnant, predictable, or monotonous. At a duration of ten minutes, this section makes up almost half of the entire performance. So to invent some variation, the dancers become more and more involved as part of the landscape as the solos progress. The first soloist navigates through the other dancers in the space, as if they are other characters in her own story. The stage clears for the next two solos, but then each soloist stays on stage after they dance for the remainder of the scene, forming a sea of characters for the featured dancer to tell her story with. Another idea I wanted to explore here was pulled from my observations of others in public places. So often people walk with their heads bowed down, looking at their phones. Holding their phones in their

laps, people sit slouched over, with their skulls dropping towards their knees. What if people were walking, sitting, and standing in these positions, but not holding their phones? The image would cause onlookers to empathize with sorrow, grief, sadness, and depression; but insert a phone into their hands and immediately it is understood that they are not upset—just preoccupied with technology.

Throughout this section, dancers on stage embody these images. They are sitting in hunched over positions—both with and without their phones—to play with perspective. The viewpoint and emotional climate is dependent upon whether or not the dancers have phones in their hands. This idea is relevant as the storyline in this section is dictated by audio messages left through a technological medium. Phones have become an extension of our identity, and we are indebted to our virtual connections to others—more than ever, during this time of self-isolation and social distancing. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has determined the “new normal” as talking to the faces of loved ones via little squares on a computer or phone screen. In a sea of squares, we are both isolated from and connected to one another.

Scene Three

The stage clears and the male dancer enters again, now stripped of his identity as a janitor, empty-handed and dressed in just his undergarments. He begins to spin, increasing speed with each revolution, as if traveling through time—either back to re-visit himself as a child, or perhaps propelling himself forward into a world where he is uninhibited and can be whomever he wants to be. The music is strikingly different from the previous section, creating contrast between reality and the fictional world of his imagination or his memory. I chose the music for

this scene because of the rich quality in the melody and the variation it brings to the concert. The song is titled *Bucovina* by Shantel, and it is influenced by Southeastern European Balkan music. Thanks to my dad, I grew up listening to Balkan music and Klezmer music, which originated in Eastern Europe where my ancestors are from. The association between this song and my predecessors from another place during another time period further highlights the transcending impression of the piece—another reason why I chose this song. The melody ignites an otherworldly, yet familiar, sensation for me—almost like a story that has been passed down through multiple generations, or a memory from childhood.

I originally thought of directing a small group of four dancers to continuously take off their outer-layer of clothes and put each other's clothes on, revealing their true selves every time their undergarments are exposed. The common desire to be someone else is a driving motive here, provoked by the saying "the grass is greener on the other side" and being "in someone else's shoes." However, I realized that this could be done in a much more adorned way, by using bold-colored gowns instead of the same pedestrian clothing that the dancers have been wearing through this point in the performance. I found red and pink gowns, made of sequined, voluminous fabric, to create some melodrama and juxtapose the previous scene. Dressing up in my mother's clothing as a little girl flooded my memory and became the essence of this section.

Three female dancers enter, flaunting the fancy dresses as if they are walking on a fashion runway. The ladies are not yet wearing the dresses though—rather, each dancer clutches her dress tight to her torso, as if she is holding it up in front of a mirror to decide whether or not to try it on. They each walk past the male dancer a few times, and he becomes more and more preoccupied with the dresses. Each female dances a short movement phrase while still holding

her dress close to her body, subtly taunting the dress-less character with the sparkling sequins and shiny satin material. In rehearsal, all three females were able to relate to the gender roles applied by society since a young age, which enhanced their execution of the movement.

Eventually, a fourth dress is brought on stage. Once all four characters have one, they throw their dress in the air, and the audience sees a frenzy of fabric flirting with gravity.

What goes up must come down though, and the dresses find their way back into the hands of the dancers. To put on their dresses is to become the version of themselves they want to be. The dresses are representative of what McKechnie believed Cassie declared, when she stood up for herself to make her life what she wanted it to be (Mandelbaum 146). But the dresses also represent a fictitious frivolity, masking what is beneath the layers of fabric. The dancers battle with the struggle of disguising themselves, in order to be a version truer to themselves. The dresses become a metaphor for the mirror in “The Music and the Mirror,” as the dancers’ identities throughout this scene are entirely dependent on their dresses. The dresses, like the mirror, are deceptive portals to individuality and a more truthful existence. The way the dress looks depends on the character who wears it, just as the mirror’s reflection is dictated by the perception of the character who looks into it.

Scene Four

As the song fades away, the dresses drip down the dancers’ bodies, until they lay lifeless on the floor. The dancers have shed their previous “skin” and are now in their undergarments. A metronome starts. More dancers in just their undergarments enter to stand sporadically within the space. The monotonous ticking and lack of costuming in this scene is distinctively polar to what

just happened. I designed this to intentionally ground the scene with a fundamental honesty in the bareness of the aesthetics. The movement that ensues depicts taking a shower. I use the shower as an analogy for something that most everyone exposed to this performance likely does very frequently—if not everyday. The common practice between characters and observers is what I seek to emphasize, using the intimacy of the activity to highlight its imperative function.

Although taking a shower is a basic activity, there are several variations within the action. For example, the order of washing varies indefinitely. During rehearsal, I asked the dancers how they arrange the order of their shower tasks. Does this change from day to day? Does the length of the shower range sometimes? Does the time of day the shower occurs differ? Based on their answers, I taught the dancers nine different gestures representing the following: washing face and neck, washing legs, washing arms, washing chest, washing seat, washing hair, shaving leg, feeling the water, and stepping out of the shower. By organizing these gestures into assorted sequences for all of the dancers, I was able to strategically arrange for some gestures to be performed at the same time by a portion of the dancers. When a gesture is performed by two or more dancers at the same time, this commonality catches the observer's attention. It becomes a game of who is doing what gesture when. Repetition is also a major factor in this section, as each dancer's individual sequence is repeated between six and eight times. The more times the sequences are repeated, the more recognizable the overlap of movements becomes. My intention in repeating this phrase multiple times is to create a trance for the observer, similar to the mesmerizing effect of running water.

While the choreography has been mostly independent from the lighting of each piece up until this point, the lighting design for this scene plays a more significant role. The audio is

constant with each metronome click in tempo, and the movement is steady with each redundant phrase, so there is an opportunity to create more diversification from the lighting. Through the use of spotlights, certain dancers in parts of the stage are featured at specific moments. The spotlights change frequently, creating another pattern game for the observer. The spotlights are bright, with a white hue. It is the kind of light that draws attention to the imperfections of human skin and exposes the truth of scars and other discolorations. The dancers endlessly scrub their bodies clean beneath this light to prove they are as they are, each a shameless exhibit of their own blemishes.

Scene Five

The final section brings together all the individuals to become part of a tribe, and it represents survival as a species through the support of one other. I chose the song *Hu-Ta-Nay* by Donald Harrison Jr. and Dr. John, made in tribute to the Mardi Gras Indians—a group of primarily African-American carnival revelers in New Orleans. The song begins with vocal chanting in an undecipherable call-and-response of sorts. With every call, a dancer expresses the burdens of their emotions and eventually releases the weight of their feelings with a dramatized fall. Every fall is caught by the other dancers in precise time with each response, demonstrating support and trust. Though the shouting is not entirely understandable, there is a deliberate rhythm to the chant. The rhythms of the Mardi Gras Indians came from Africa and the Caribbean, and there are speculations that the phrases in their songs may have been a secret code used to defy and badmouth slave masters or chain gang bosses (Lacy). I interpret this as a tactic of preserving humanity to survive in the face of adversity.

Ultimately, humans have an evolutionary desire to share experiences with other people, and we need other people to survive. I utilize this theme to contrast Cassie’s isolation and struggle to survive in “The Music and the Mirror.” While researching this concept, I discovered the work of psychologist Andrew Solomon. In *The Moth*, a collection of essays, Solomon writes about his experience in Senegal investigating an ancient ritual for depression. The following quote—from an East African man speaking to Solomon about the ineffective practices that westernized mental health workers imposed on his community—became a primary notion for the concluding section of my work:

Their practice did not involve being outside in the sun...which is, after all, where you begin to feel better. There was no music or drumming to get your blood flowing again when you’re depressed, and you’re low, and you need to have your blood flowing. There was no sense that everyone had taken the day off so that the entire community could come together to try to lift you up and bring you back to joy. There was no acknowledgment that the depression is something invasive and external that could actually be cast out of you again. Instead, they would take people one at a time into these dingy little rooms and have them sit around for an hour or so and talk about bad things that had happened to them. We had to get them to leave the country. (Solomon 41-42)

The rhythm of the drums and the cadence of the chanting creates a sense of community for the dancers. This section is a tribute to the bonds that form between people in unexpected situations. Inspiration comes from stories of humans who share a life-altering experience together, but who would not otherwise be connected to each other.

As the rhythm kicks in to drive the beat forward, I emphasize movements that originate in the hips and in the chest. The pelvis is powerful both figuratively as a symbol of survival and literally as a body part where many movements initiate. The chest is home to the heart, an emblem of emotion. While most of the beat is determined by the stepping of the feet, the arms are free to move as they please, in response to opposition within the torso. Some of the dancers had a more difficult time executing this movement, due to their rigid ballet training and my demand to free themselves from that structure. It was a challenge for them to navigate movement which stemmed from the hips without specific placement of their torso and arms. However, the combination of percussion, piano, and brass instruments in the music, creates a playground of musical variety and encourages experimentation. Each movement highlights a different aspect of the music in order to accentuate the weight of the beat, the groove of the saxophone, and the surprise of the symbols.

I use several directional changes to allow the dancers to find multiple pathways through each other and make several diagonal passes across the stage. I also incorporate frequent jumps into the traveling steps, thus making this the most physically demanding section of the entire show. Eventually, I emphasize elements of release and momentum to provide the dancers with some relief as they fight to finish their performance. The fatigue the dancers experience in this scene is similar to the exhaustion McKechnie feels throughout “The Music and the Mirror,” as she travels endlessly across the stage with a high level of intensity in her movement. I use this tactic to push the dancers to make the conscious decision to persevere. Everyday as humans, we have the choice to survive. As artists, we also decide *how* we want to survive: with purpose. I

want the dancers and audience members to know that—like Cassie in *A Chorus Line*—they all deserve the right to make their lives the way they want them to be.

Conclusion

Researching Bennett's choreographic methods enriched my own ability to create a performance that offers purpose and inspiration to the artists involved and observers alike. I gained a better understanding of what kind of creative process works for me, and I found patience in learning how to effectively translate ideas from the depths of my mind to others. I also grasped how to adapt to circumstances out of my control, which has better prepared me to continue my creative journey as an artist. In both creative endeavors and everyday tasks alike, I often remind myself of the following, which Bennett said about *A Chorus Line*:

The show is really about the experience of growing up. It's a group biography, and I think that people in the audience have a subjective experience when they watch the show. They watch the dancers talking about their lives, and they go through experiences of their own lives, so that they're not only watching the play, they're reliving their whole growing up. And it's just nice to know that you're not alone. I think it makes people feel happier about being part of the human race. It makes you feel closer. The metaphor is a chorus line, being part of a great team. And being part of the human race is very nice. I don't think it would be fun to be the only human being around. (Mandelbaum 176)

While there are many beliefs and experiences that divide people, *[in]COMMON* is a reminder that there are also many things that unite people. My ongoing choreographic research is a catalyst for discovering how to recognize the significance in coming together as humans to

experience life with purpose. As I continue to explore ways to create new pathways of perspective, I hope to enhance the connections between human character, experience, and action. This project confirms that “we’re all special,” just as Cassie says in *A Chorus Line* (Kirkwood and Dante 122).

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