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Training Contemporary Dancers:
Exploring the Relevance of Classical Modern Dance Technique

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by

David M McMahan

Thesis Committee:
Professor Lisa Naugle, Chair
Professor Molly Lynch
Assistant Professor Charlotte Griffin

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Professor Lisa Naugle, Chair

The legacy of American modern dance is one of change and innovation. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, modern dance training has evolved by incorporating many new contemporary styles. Through this thesis research, I explore the relevance of classical modern dance techniques in the training of contemporary dance students. My research examines some of the significant historical factors which some dance scholars have claimed as driving forces for the creation and development of American modern dance up to this current time.

The relevance of classical modern dance technique was determined through interviews with university dance educators, modern dance répétiteurs, and notable modern and contemporary choreographers. The research culminated in a dance concert performance created for the purpose of reflecting on influencing factors stemming from my own classical modern dance training and their influence on my choreographic process as a contemporary creator.

INTRODUCTION

American modern dance established itself as a new art form during the first half of the twentieth century alongside changes in technology, such as the Internet, having great impact on disseminating information on a global level. Led by modern choreographers who crafted their techniques while training dancers to perform their choreography, Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey explored the concepts of tension and release resulting in "making intensely human, dramatic, accessible dances" (Legg 21). In contrast, believing that movement "needs no overlay of emotion or dramatic intention" (Morgenroth 11), Merce Cunningham took modern dance in a different direction, focusing on creation through abstract articulation and randomization of body lines and shapes. These and other modern dance legends generated movement vocabularies that were considered unique for their time and the concepts they worked with have since matured into codified techniques that now represent the foundation of classical modern dance training.

Cultural shifts leading to the emergence of art forms were part of "the information age" and sparked an increased exchange and amalgamation of global knowledge leading to the creation of new contemporary movement styles. As contemporary styles initiated in the post-modern era of the 1960s built in popularity, and the 20th century gave way to the 21st century, many of the once dominant modern dance techniques produced by the likes of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Merce Cunningham, Jose Limón, Alwin Nikolais, Erick Hawkins and Lester Horton among others, began to lose their prevalence and accessibility in the training programs of today's young dancers: "Forty years ago, Graham-centered modern dance programs trained for commitment and consistency; now, the key principle underlying many eclectic curricula has become versatility" (Bales 60). As the genre of modern dance continues to diversify, it is becoming more difficult to

identify where modern dance ends and the new "now" genre of contemporary dance begins.

The legacy of modern dance is one of change and innovation. Today modern dance is confronted by a paradox, that of encompassing many emerging and undefined idioms of dance. At what point does modern dance cease and contemporary dance begin? And is this even the best question to ask? Perhaps the question should be more focused around adaptation and innovation. When considering dance in higher education, is the transition toward contemporary styles a result of supporting the greater stylistic adaptability required for the aspiring professional dancer? As the emerging genre of contemporary dance continues to establish itself through many unique aesthetics and philosophies of movement, will the classical modern dance techniques of the twentieth century be able to maintain their relevance amidst this new dance landscape? Will universities that require modern technique courses for dance majors change to contemporary? If the title of 'modern' is displaced by the title 'contemporary' to reflect the inclusion of many different styles, then will the practice of training in established modern techniques become displaced or replaced by the movement exploration of the individual?

Stance of the Researcher

I was introduced to modern dance during my first semester of college. As was widely prevalent at the time, my Southern California suburban dance studio training was focused on ballet and commercial jazz techniques. I had heard the term "modern dance" but had no actual idea of what it was. When I inquired to one of my early dance teachers, she responded that it was just a different dance style that she had briefly studied in college and in which she held little interest and thus, did not teach. In a time where the dial-up internet could barely handle basic email communications, the ability to globally exchange new movement information through the

streaming of YouTube videos and massive social media platforms was not even perceived. The summer before I attended college, I contacted a member of the dance faculty, Linda Sohl-Ellison, to receive guidance on which courses. Still not understanding what modern dance was, she insisted that I enroll in the modern technique course and assured me that it would concurrently aid my training in other areas of dance. With a background in Nikolais technique with references to Cunningham and Limón techniques, Sohl-Ellison provided a well-rounded modern technical curriculum which focused on instilling the fundamental elements of time, space, focus and energy. It became evident that modern dance was an entire world unto itself with a rich history and distinctive movement vocabulary. Building on the classically based modern dance foundation provided by my professors, I sought to continue my study with several of the modern dance schools in New York including the schools of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor. It was through those experiences that my understanding of classical modern dance techniques began to take root and I would later designate myself as a modern dancer. This dedication to training would later come to inform my development as a contemporary dance artist.

Overview of the Research

I question the relevance of classical modern dance techniques as foundational for the training of current contemporary dance artists. My research starts by examining some of the significant historical factors which some dance scholars have claimed as driving forces for the creation and progression of American modern dance up to this current time. Those historical factors include social, cultural, political, and economic situations that influenced the development of modern dance and what I refer to as the transformation from modern to contemporary dance.

Dance artists and scholars disagree as to whether or not contemporary dance has already,

or will eventually, grow into its own distinct genre or remain a sub-style of the modern dance genre. The first chapter, therefore, defines some of the similarities and differences between modern dance and contemporary dance and investigates that discourse. When referring to 'classical modern dance technique' I am referring to American modern dance techniques that originated in the early to mid-twentieth century, including but not limited to, the techniques of its first pioneers: Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Hanya Holm, Lester Horton, Katherine Dunham, the second-generation techniques of Merce Cunningham, José Limón, and others of this historical period. I also attempted to unpack the widely debated title of 'contemporary dance technique'.

The method used for this research consisted of interviews with nine established dance professionals, including university dance educators, modern dance répétiteurs, and contemporary dance choreographers. I inquired about their professional perceptions and experiences surrounding modern dance training and its cohabitation and potential integration with the emerging genre of contemporary dance. Since much of the professional choreography currently being created is based in contemporary styles, is it still useful for dancers to experience and study classical modern dance?

The third chapter describes findings from the interviews and provides insight into the future relevancy of classical modern dance technique. While there will always be advocates dedicated to the preservation of historical techniques, the question stands: do those modern techniques support future dance artists in the advancement of this art form into a contemporary paradigm of education and creation?

Limitations of the research

While modern dance simultaneously developed in various parts of the world, this research centralizes on the American development of modern dance techniques during the 20th century and

the contemporary application of their physical movement techniques for the training of current dancers. While choreographic creations played an undeniable role in the original development of these modern techniques, the examination of their individual choreographic and artistic contributions are beyond the scope of this research.

Interviewees for this research have experience as dance educators with a common understanding of classical modern dance techniques. They trained in modern techniques and several are currently active in the professional field.

This research process culminated in the production of this paper, as well as a dance concert presented in the Claire Trevor Theatre at the University of California, Irvine. A contemporary dance work, *current*, was created for the purpose of reflecting on some of the influencing factors and connections stemming from my own training in classical modern dance and their effect on my choreographic process as a contemporary creator.

CHAPTER 1

Modern Dance in a Contemporary World

Development of American Modern Dance

Reflecting on Selma Jeanne Cohen's statement, "by recalling what the modern dance had been when it started and by tracing it through its various evolutions, we may get a perspective on what it is today" (4) and by reexamining the early developments of this genre, I attempt gain insight into both where it has been and how it may continue to evolve.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, American performance dance largely centered around the wide popularity and accessibility of vaudeville shows. While ballet had gained its prominence as the preeminent concert dance form in Europe, working class Americans could not relate to its frequently aristocratic themes: "Ballet was a fantastical picture of femininity in alabaster imported from Europe, too elitist and foreign to speak to the American masses". American ballet became a caricature of its European counterpart and "teetered between an act in vaudeville" (Foulkes 9). This vacancy in the American concert dance scene left a vacuum for modernist choreographers to develop a new way of moving that was uniquely American and thus would provide a point of relatability for the general population.

> Modern dance gathered momentum in the 1930s because a focus on bodies coalesced with the search to find an American way in the arts that favored an experiential approach, attention to the polyglot nature of the country's population, and revivification of the democratic tradition in the midst of and economic depression and an impending crisis in Europe (Foulkes 177).

Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Katherine Dunham, Lester Horton and others began creating dance works centralized around choreographic themes that they felt were reflective of their time and would resonate with American audiences. As new understanding of the human

psyche advanced in the field of psychology, choreographers also forged new ways of perceiving and expressing the human experience. This new ground therefore required new movement to be able to adequately express the new depths of these choreographers' artistic statements. Both Graham and Humphrey explored the body's natural and universal movements to cultivate their own unique movement vocabularies.

> Martha Graham devised the principle of contraction and release based on the example of breathing. Centered in the torso, a contraction hollowed out the stomach and rounded the back; the release freed the body again, straightening the spine. Doris Humphrey's fall and recovery worked on the same principle of duality. Following gravity, Humphrey let the body fall toward earth in various way, only to reflect off and lift again (Foulkes 17).

While the choreographers' initial purpose for creating new techniques of movement served chiefly to train their dancers to successfully execute their choreography, several of these vocabularies ultimately developed into the codified techniques, now recognized as the "classics of modern dance" (Eilber).

Just as in other areas of the arts, time was required for choreographers to adequately develop a base-level understanding of the form's structure, canon, and history to then be able to uncover pathways to evolve as an artist. In his book, *Introduction to Modern Dance Technique*, Joshua Legg elucidates a paralleled relationship between this successive technical development in dance and music: "Scales, arpeggios, and theory are some of the fundamentals required in the artistic development of a musician who then becomes a composer. So, too, dance technique creates a dance artist who may move on to performance and/or choreographic prowess" (xviii). This concept of repetition over time to deepen the embodied knowledge of their craft occurs throughout the structure of modern dance technical training and concurrently conditions a dancer's physical development to execute movement.

Graham, Cunningham, Horton, Limón and other classical modern dance techniques,

provide dancers with a time-tested, technical framework which "reinforces the dancers' neuro-muscular responses and reaffirms their dedication to their craft and profession". These techniques teach dancers how to develop the necessary physical strength, correct body shape, alignment, spatial coordination with principles and concepts (Helpern 78, 68), such as "how to find the base of your pelvis . . . and the cyclical ritual and energy of breath" (Bell). Choreographer and dance educator, Jan Erkert, states "these techniques have become classics for a reason. They stem from a clear philosophical point of view and they are brilliant in their design. Eclectic approaches can lack the glue that holds technical concepts together" (Erkert 5). Through decades of maturation and development, classical modern techniques have been progressively constructed to provide dancers with tools to effectively expand their understandings and guide their integration of the modern dance concepts of shape, space, effort, and time.

If a dance technique's purpose is to provide dancers with these important movement principles, then it presses the question of what specifically defines a dance 'technique.' Merce Cunningham offers his definition as "the disciplining of one's energies through physical action in order to free that energy at any desired instant in its highest possible physical and spiritual form" (Cunningham 60). This definition undoubtedly served its purpose when applied to Cunningham's work and choreographic philosophy, focused around "training the body to move with speed, flexibility, and control . . . This devotion is perhaps most easily defined as a commitment to energy . . . to physical energy, expressed through the body moving (or still) in time and space" (Brown 23).

In a genre as diversified as modern dance, the technical training can have a broad range of connotations pursuant to the tenets of various styles. Stemming in the 1960s-post-modern era of Judson Church and into the somatic-based release techniques popular in the 1980s and 1990s,

choreographers began to challenge the requisite of traditional technical training for their dancers. Many choreographers began to focus their work on releasing bodily tensions to facilitate movement, concentrating on the resulting ease throughout the torso and limbs. However, this stylistic evolution of modern dance began to create its own predicament. Without a foundational technical training, a dancer's choices for movement can become limited from not developing an understanding of how to use their body's muscularity to their advantage: "[Dancers] may never want to stretch their legs and point their feet. Okay, you don't have to. That's [an aesthetic] choice you can make. But not being able to and making the choice not to – those are two separate things. The more you know, the more choices you have" (Panetta 239).

As we delve deeper into this twenty-first century, there persists a growing transformation in the structure of dance companies away from being headed by a single choreographer, therefore altering the way in which dance companies in the United States operate: "A continuing shift of dance company structure over the past forty years may reflect larger societal trends… in American modern dance from earlier periods – where companies sought to produce and preserve the repertory of the founder-choreographer thought a stable, hierarchical structure much like a ballet company – to today's more fluid and unstable pick-up company" (Bales and Nettl-Fiol viii). This instability causes more dancers to transition between dance companies more frequently than the previous generation, offering yet another reason for the requisite of increased dancer versatility.

> Since the dance boom of the 1970s subsided most American modern dancers are no longer members of stable dance troops that offer company classes, and they may dance with several companies simultaneously. Therefore, they can or must pursue their own training. This is often offered as yet another reason why training has become so eclectic (Bales 16).

Without the long-term commitment of dancers remaining active in their companies over the course of years and decades, "choreographers are no longer training dancers, at least not in the

traditional sense of giving technique classes that train the dancers in their personal movement style separate from the rehearsal process. The rehearsal replaces training for many" (Bales and Nettl-Fiol x). These factors give possible reason to why contemporary dance has transferred its attention away from a traditional idea of technique based in systematic physical training and instead focused on developing knowledge though individualized explorative movement processes.

A challenge that persist for both modern and contemporary dance is the limited availability of open classes for the general dance community. Many professional dancers and those generally outside an academic setting are forced to rely on other genres of movement to sustain their technical abilities: "In the professional world, modern/postmodern classes are mostly taught in workshops or at a very few company schools, whereas ballet classes can be easily found". This accessibility of ballet classes may be due in part to their improved track record of being able to more successfully acquire sources of funding and therefore provide dance classes in their facilities versus smaller modern companies. This may also be due to the 'deconstructive' use of ballet technique by modern dancers: "Many dancers use ballet training in a more deconstructive way: examining basic technical problems such as alignment by taking classes designed to allow them to hone in on certain movement principles, finding more efficiency . . . . They pursue ballet with the eventual goal of applying the knowledge to non-ballet performance or choreography rather than becoming ballet dancers" (Bales 8, 7).

As classical modern technique classes become less accessible to this contemporary generation of young movers, many are left without the opportunity to experience these historical dance vocabularies. Whether or not a dancer has specific desire to dance for a modern lineage company, the personal experience of these classical techniques act as a window into the physical embodiment of the history of modern dance: "I feel you should know where something came from;

time to have at least one beautiful contraction in your young dance career; or one semester of swing; or a semester of walking in turnout in the Graham form. It's an interesting time we live in, as far as movement" (Patterson 244). This has been echoed by prominent modern choreographers, who have also affirmed the benefits the classical modern techniques can provide. Bill T. Jones reflects on the training of dancers in the technique of Jose Limón: "There's something about the technique, the hand of these prime movers that we must not lose. People who understood how they placed the torso over the hips, how they encouraged the breathing, how they themselves inhabited a gesture" (Jones).

The Paradox of Contemporary

One of the major challenges to the relevance of the modern dance technique training is the broad range of overlap that it carries with contemporary dance styles. For many dancers, it evokes a vague and subjective response similar to that of United States Supreme Court Justice Stewart in his 1964 Opinion on being asked to define the "indefinable", stating "I know it when I see it" (Jacobellis). Since its inception, modern dance has been intertwined with the term 'contemporary'. A standard bearer of classical modern dance, even Martha Graham's school was titled the "School of Contemporary Dance" when it was initially founded in 1926. But as contemporary dance continues to evolve with the current time, classical modern dance finds its association progressively more fleeting.

As the Information Age facilitates the ever-quickening exchange of information and perpetuates the current phenomenon of social media, contemporary dance reaches toward a new horizon, attempting to emerge from the establishment of modern dance: "Where modern dance moved against the grain of ballet, contemporary moves against the grain of classical modern

techniques" (Archibald 2012). What was once used as a term for 'current,' contemporary dance has begun to define itself as a separate dance genre. The challenge with the term 'contemporary' is its paradox of trying to encapsulate both a specific style of dance and a definition of being contemporaneous. In her recent 2017 article, SanSan Kwan addresses this conundrum as it relates to different areas in the field of dance:

> "Contemporary dance" evokes both recognition and anxiety across concert, commercial, and world dance stages. For some, it is the avant-garde, process-based concert dance form evolved from modern and postmodern dance. For others, it is the dramatic, virtuosic commercial form drawn from ballet and jazz and popularized by the television show *So You Think You Can Dance* (Kwan 48).

Some dance scholars have addressed this issue cause by contemporary's many meaning, instead using the idiom of 'Post-Judson", defined by the end of the Judson church era beginning in the mid-1960s. The Post-Judson era is "an extraordinarily broad region of dance experience mapped out by one hundred years of ideas and approaches, where modern, post-modern, ballet, and somatics meet new ideologies almost daily" (Legg 217).

Historically, we are delving into an interesting time where several contemporary forms have begun to mature into a phase of codification. In contrast to many of the classical modern dance techniques which where centralized in the United States, many of these newer contemporary techniques have been developed internationally. Some of these systemized contemporary techniques include Ohad Naharin's Gaga, Anouk van Dijk's Countertechnique, and David Zambrano's Flying-Low.

Just as modern dance was born from a rebellion against the ballet, and the post-modern era challenged the canons of classical modern, contemporary dance is finding its own concepts to continue advancing the significance of dance in this contemporary world.

CHAPTER 2

Relevancy in the Field

Methods of Research

The hay-day of classical modern is recognized as developing during the mid-twentieth century, namely from 1923-1957 (Legg xviii). As new growth and advancement in dance expand prevalence to new ways of moving, the relevancy that classical modern techniques hold for the young dancers of this current generation is questioned. In order to further explore this premise and its application to current dance trends, I have conducted personal interviews with nine established dance professions, active in various areas of the current dance field with a wide range of both choreographic and pedagogical experience. While many of these dance professionals bridge into multiple aspects of the field, they were sorted into three specific categories: university dance educators, modern dance répétiteurs, and notable modern and contemporary choreographers. Both generationally and geographically, these interviewees where exposed to similar classical modern techniques in their early studies. They are able to draw on their varied experiences working in a field in which the youngest generation of dancers may have not been exposed to a similar experience in modern dance training. Due to their extensive professional backgrounds, these interviewees are able to both value training in modern dance techniques while also understanding the practical training necessities for working dancer in this contemporary field.

Interviews were conducted with prominent modern choreographer and University of California, Irvine Distinguished Professor, Lar Lubovitch; acclaimed principal dancer and Martha Graham Dance Company répétiteur, Miki Orihara; choreographer and director of Abraham.In.Motion, Kyle Abraham; choreographer and director of Sidra Bell Dance New York, Sidra Bell; choreographer and répétiteur, Katarzyna Skarpetowska; Rehearsal Director for

Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and Aszure Barton & Artists, Jonathan Alsberry; Paul Taylor Dance Company répétiteur and University of Southern California Associate Professor, Patrick Corbin; Paul Taylor Dance Company répétiteur and Orange Coast College Faculty, Rachel Berman; and University of California, Santa Cruz Professor, Edward Warburton.

Defining Classical Modern Dance Technique

Each interviewee was asked specified questions to investigate the perceived relevance of classical modern dance techniques for the training of current dancers (Appendix A). The interview process began with the question, "How would you define classical modern dance technique?". This helped distill a baseline for the collective perception of what constitutes classical modern dance and what differentiates it from other dance genres. All commonly defined 'classical modern dance technique' as centralized around the techniques stemming from the Denishawn school, namely the modern techniques of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. Some answers also included mention of additional codified techniques including Lester Horton as well as Jose Limón and Merce Cunningham, although also noted that the latter two techniques were second-generation derivative techniques evolved from the lineages of Graham and Humphrey respectively.

To qualify as a classical technique, interviewees collectively indicated that they were codified and generally designed to focus on the development of specific body alignment and physical strengthening which supports dance performance: "To be a technique it has to have a training method that prepares the body for performance . . . . You're strengthening, you're aligning, you're learning to be safe with your body; you learn to be sensitive to your bodies abilities and how to employ them" (Lubovitch). Jonathan Alsberry applies this definition further and provides thought on why modern dance was able to differentiate itself due to its development away from

other concert styles of the time: “The idea of classic modern was based on technique to support the pieces they were making and how do you do these works. But what we’re talking about with classic modern is the invention of dance aside from ballet. Before that it was just ballet so it earned the title of a technique because it was a first” (Alsberry).

Differentiation

What became a more challenging inquiry was then venturing into identifying the possible differentiating elements between ‘classical modern dance’ and what is considered as ‘contemporary dance.’ Most responses when defining ‘contemporary’ centralized around the temporal denotation of contemporaneous and being of the now. Lar Lubovitch specified his definitions of these two idioms, where “the term modern dance specifically means dance of the early 20th century and [has] evolved over the decades and gave birth to new forms. And now what’s going on is accurately called contemporary dance because it’s another idea of movement; it’s a more inclusive language of many more ideas than strictly the classical modern dance techniques” (Lubovitch).

Edward Warburton approached this same question with a focus on the differences in how dancers of the two areas differ in their approach to the use of gravitational centers in the body:

> Classical modern dance technique locates a core and center of gravity in a certain midsection of the body. For me, contemporary dancing is moving way off that center of gravity to create multiple points of gravity - in the arm or elbow or shoulder rather than always having it located in a canonical dimensional space. I think that aligns with the increasingly heterogeneous quality of contemporary dance globally (Warburton).

While classical modern dance was easier to accept and define as a specified technique, contemporary dance is not as easily agreed upon. Contemporary choreographer, Kyle Abraham explains “I don’t know what people are considering contemporary techniques” (Abraham), instead

describing his technique classes as a fusion of hip-hop with elements of Limón and Cunningham techniques. Jonathan Alsberry expands his interpretation of contemporary technique beyond the creation of movement shapings and into the spectrum of choreographic design and processes:

> I think that the differences between the two is time spent investigating what the core of it is . . . . Take Martha Graham for example; every piece that she made was rooted in her technique, even though the technique came after her choreography. So, for contemporaries, and I think that Lar [Lubovitch] is a great example, not every work that he makes is of the same vocabulary. And the things that are consistent throughout his work aren't what the dancer does; [they're] structural. [They're] what the entire piece involves; canon and flow and texture within the movement… And then to go even further with newer choreographers, in [Kyle Abraham]'s work you're always going to see these African roots. [For] Azure [Barton] the thing that is consistent throughout every process of hers is the process itself . . . . So, it moves out of the body and into the space, the mind; all the things involved in process (Alsberry).

This starts to further differentiate between what is technical training through modern technique and choreographic process in contemporary modes. But as present choreographic practices evolve away from relying purely on the choreographer's movement vocabulary to more heavily integrating their dancers' embodied movements, the dancers also need to possess the pertinent tools for exploring new movement ideas to be successful in a field that continually strived for creative innovation. Katarzyna Skarpetowska speaks on a popular trend in the creation of current contemporary choreography:

> The choreographic process in general has changed from the choreographer being responsible for everything that happens in the studio. Now it's deferring more to the [dancers'] bodies inside the studio, relying a lot more on improvisation and exercises that will develop movement that is original and not particularly connected to the physical voice of the choreographer (Skarpetowska).

With this mass expansion in both movement vocabularies and adaptation of choreographic creative process, the importance of why a dancer would need to know these seminal modern dance techniques is challenged.

Importance to the Field

After establishing consensus about the definition of classical modern dance technique, interviewees were asked about the current importance of classical modern dance training in the field of dance: "Is training in classical modern dance technique important to the field of dance? And if so, why?" Following in this same vein, they were also asked if they believe that classical modern dance techniques will remain relevant in the training of current contemporary dancers. Katarzyna Skarpetowska summarized the paradox of this question asserting: "Here's the dilemma; we want those dancers to have that ability to do all the new works, to push the dance world into those new avenues and discover new ways of moving, but then to have a reference to the purity of those older techniques" (Skarpetowska). Many of the interviewees presented different perspectives on this question. Lar Lubovitch describes the importance of possessing the knowledge from the classic techniques to drive further future innovation:

> In any arts tradition, you have to know where we've been to be present, and from being present to move forward. You can't kick off from nowhere. You stand on the past which elucidates the present, which introduces the future. Those classical modern dance techniques are absolutely imperative for people who want a well-rounded understanding of what dance is and where they came from. Dance is not like the other arts because it doesn't exist except when it's happening, so it's easier to lose traditions, or easier to devalue the past because it doesn't remain as present as the past of painting or the past of music (Lubovitch).

Miki Orihara speaks to the applicability of the general movement concepts from these classical modern techniques and their relevance to inculcate movement knowledge in the body:

> You don't need to dance Martha's work or Taylor work or Horton work, but I think that technique really teaches you how to do certain things; how to use your body, and technique gives you that idea of building your body. Knowing that, you can break it. But without knowing that, you don't have anything to break (Orihara).

As active contemporary choreographers, Sidra Bell and Kyle Abraham each reflected on the importance that the classic techniques do have on clarifying the physical movement ideas for

their dancers. Bell explains that while today's dancers have such a broad range of movement creativity, there is still an importance in being able to clarify movement from the base ideas of classical modern dance training:

> In education, I'm finding that you have to create a very focused lens for verging dancers to work through because there's so much movement with an emphasis on movement invention and that's amazing . . . but working with that, I'm trying to get students and dancers back to the very base ideas of how the body really works from the inside out. And that's something I really believe that I got from my years of [classical modern] training (Bell).

Abraham expresses a similar assertion that without this movement knowledge dancers can struggle with discerning specific movement qualities and choices yielding to the homogenization of movements:

> [Classical modern techniques] are crazy important to me because they teach dancers about how to do isolations in their bodies. It teaches them about linear movements - shape. I think what happens too often is that everything starts to get mixed and blended in a way that people aren't really sure what the origins of the movement are, and you lose out because everything starts looking the same (Abraham).

While each of the interviewees approached these questions from different perspectives, their answers each presented a similar response toward the requisite for younger dancers to embody these classic movement vocabularies from a kinetic perspective in order to clarify their performance of movement in contemporary choreography.

Determining Relevancy

The answers to the interview questions allowed for a response breakdown into different answer categories to evaluate the temporal relevance of these classical modern techniques. After reviewing and examining the interview responses several times in their entirety, I interpreted the responses into seven answer categories of relevance to facilitate determining when classical modern dance techniques held their strongest relevance, and then further infer if they would endure

as relevant in future dance training. I then compiled these seven answer categories into three overarching groups (Appendix B). Answers focused in historical importance and development of the genre were deemed to have been temporally relevant in the 'past'. Answers focused around developing dancers' skills for employment and physical conditioning were deemed to be temporally relevant in the 'present'. And answers focused on evoking new choreographic process and important in the technical dance training for learning fundamental movement concepts were deemed to remain temporally relevant into the 'future'.

Of the nine interviewees, an average of 7.5 or 83.3 % spoke on topics pertaining to the techniques' relevance in the 'past'. An average of 5.5 or 61.1% of interviewees spoke on topics pertaining to the techniques' relevance in the 'present. And an average of 5 or 55.5 % of interviewees brought up topics pertaining to the techniques' potential relevance in the 'future'. Their responses ranged a wide spectrum from one participant only referencing two of the seven relevance categories to another referencing all seven categories. While these results may be considered subjective based on the interviewees interpretation of the questions, the selected questions themselves, and my own interpretation of the interviewees' responses and resultant assignment into various relevance categories, I feel that this may provide some insight into trends of thought by those active in various professional and academic areas of dance.

As a result of this model, the 'past' held the most notable relevance; 83.3%. This is understandable due to the fact that these classical modern dance techniques were created in the 'past' and they would be most relevant to the field when they were first created and driving the development of the emerging genre. Also during this period, these techniques were widely integrated into the choreography of their creators and utilized as a primary method of modern dance performative training.

Moving into this present time in modern dance, classical techniques have experienced a decrease in their general relevance; 61.1%. This decline can in part be attributed to the creation of newer contemporary movement ideas and vocabularies becoming more prevalent due to shifts in social and economic conditions causing a change in what choreographers are asking of their dancers: "I think that nowadays what choreographers are looking for in their dancers is less and less the technical ability in the training but the mental ability, the stamina, the things that are also a part of process" (Alsberry). However, these classical modern techniques have still been able to maintain a level of relevance due to their methodical and systematic educating of the body. As Miki Orihara explains, "You teach [Graham technique], not necessarily to make a Graham dancer, but you teach this particular exercise or technique to let them understand the use of the body. Then if you have more vocabulary in you, then you can speak well with your body" (Orihara).

As we look to examine the 'future' relevance that these seminal modern techniques may hold, it is predicted that their relevance will be able to sustain a similar level of importance in the education of new dancers with a more minor decrease; 55.5%. This can be attributed to the fact that since much of the initial depreciation in relevance occurred between the 'past' and 'present' periods, it is possible that the future of these techniques will be able to sustain a similar level of relevance as to where they are held now due to their unique and established pedagogy for educating dancers.

When asking contemporary choreographers if classical modern dance training was relevant in their work, I was interested to find that they felt a clear connection between the creation of their contemporary work and the movement concept of the older modern techniques. Sidra Bell spoke about the importance of those techniques into her movement process:

> I think there needs to be those requisite years so that we're all coming from the same language space. For me and my work, I find myself more now than ever

> reaching back into those seminal [modern dance] ideas, because I think one of the things that I am constantly searching for is a sense of the movement coming from the inside out, and I think that those foundational techniques really search for that in a refined way . . . Those are things that I find now, as a more evolved teacher, reaching back into that information because to get the movement that I really want, which is in a hyper-articular hyper-mobile lens. It's impossible not to pass through those seminal technical ideas and understand how the spine and the pelvis really work; how to find the depth of the base of your pelvis (Bell).

Jonathan Alsberry further approaches this connected relationship between classical modern training and contemporary choreography through the need to understand where the choreographer is coming from in their approach to their work:

> All of these contemporary choreographers that are at the top of their game now all studied in classical modern training. They had to go through that in order to develop what it is that they are currently doing. So, to skip that step, and just jump into what they are teaching, that is a way. It's not invalid. But it is skipping a step . . . . It's like trying to do a variation without taking a ballet class (Alsberry).

Maintaining Relevance

While it can be argued that classical modern techniques can and will maintain a level of relevance in future training, many interviewees also noted a strong importance for these classical techniques to remain adaptable and pedagogically accessible to remain viable in educating future generations. Edward Warburton explains:

> Those classical forms - those set syllabi inculcate a pedagogy of formation, in a sense that, 'I want to prepare you to be a professional, so I'm going to form you in the particular way from these syllabi'. And what I think those syllabi lack, often times, is what I would think of as an important context for the contemporary moment, which is more of a pedagogy of uncertainty. Where you don't give them a shape and a substance, you decenter them and get people to question (Warburton).

This introduces an interesting question as to how the conventional model of teaching classical techniques can affect the ability of the physical movement knowledge to remain relevant. Patrick Corbin clarifies:

> These systems that were devised and codified to help build strength and mobilize

the spine in a very specific way that is good for everybody, period. Having said that, these practices have to speak to a contemporary mode of dancer . . . . I think they will always be relevant as long as they're being introduced in a contemporary framework. So, you have to speak to people in a contemporary way . . . . The mode of delivery becomes irrelevant, not the content" (Corbin).

CHAPTER 3

Conclusion

Modern Dance in the 21st Century

Just as modern dance evolved to suit the needs of twentieth century America, it must continue to grow to stay true to its form. In 1966, Jose Limón wrote:

> It is important to preserve the traditional. It is part of our heritage, and as such it is to be cherished. But the modern idioms should be left to the individual to be kept resilient, venturesome, experimental, unhampered. The individual contribution is what gave us cultural maturity and independence from Europe in all our arts. Were it not for this, dancers in America would have remained docile provincials, creating nothing original. By learning to speak in an American idiom, they have enriched the world (Limón 25-26).

Over the past 50 years, modern dance artists have continually done this and helped to further advance the boundaries of dance into new and ever evolving contemporary spectrums. However, in this age of ever hastening social and technological advancement, there is stronger need for dance to sustain and cultivate its movement heritage while supporting new creative frontiers: "This happens to any art form, but I think dance is the most fragile because of the embodied practice that it requires. That fragility is something that I think our generation needs to really take care of" (Bell).

As they seek to prepare young dancers for their professional aspirations, academic institutions are grappling with the problem of how to address modern dance training in academic curriculum. Institutions have to walk the line between offering traditional modern training while still maintaining connected to present contemporary ideas and the ever-changing demands of today's professional dancer. While the professional field has the luxury of maintaining a level of ambiguity in the categorization of their art, universities must walk a much more articulated line when specifying the material that is being taught and forecasting a student's specific learning

outcomes. This predicament can also additionally challenge smaller institutions that are limited to one full-time dance faculty who is then given the task of trying to juggle multiple stylistic and pedagogical roles within their department.

Currently, dance departments are dealing with the difficulty of deciding if the course title of 'modern dance' adequately describes the reality of what they are teaching. As SanSan Kwan wrote in her recent 2017 essay, "Historically, [the University of California, Berkeley dance] program has been known for teaching Graham technique, but in the past ten to fifteen years the classes in our department have evolved and, as is increasingly true in many dance studios and dance programs across the United States, "modern dance" may no longer be an appropriate title for the technique we teach" (38). But as this shift toward a contemporary movement curricula gains popularity in academia, students are also aware of the transition. In Fall of 2018 at the University of California, Irvine, the Community Student Advising Committee, comprised of undergraduate dance majors, presented the dance faculty with a 'Codified Modern Petition'. This letter requested the "addition of codified modern techniques, such as Cunningham, Dunham, Graham, Horton, Limon, and Taylor, to [the] curriculum" (CSAC). This request illustrates that, while only adhering to traditionally taught codified modern techniques may be limiting for a contemporary artist, not having exposure to those seminal techniques can also limit a dancer's movement knowledge and understanding of lineage. Katarzyna Skarpetowska expounds on this point:

> It is very important for dance programs to have [classical modern dance techniques], but the ratio needs to change so that it's important to have that sense of lineage and so that we know where things come from and have a particular reference in those techniques and how they developed and that we are able to process them through our bodies. But then we have to mix that heavily with whatever is happening - whatever is current. (Skarpetowska)

While many contemporary approaches to technique heavily lean on various elements of the classical modern techniques, I believe it remains important to find ways to infuse those classical

modern exercises and concepts into a dancer's contemporary education. While many institutions still grapple with the challenge of balancing modern and contemporary in their curriculums, part of the onus also falls to the individual dancer to seek out opportunities to experience those classic techniques. Where dancers used to venture outside of their academic programs to experience emerging contemporary styles, the tide has shifted and those wanting experience in the classic modern techniques must themselves seek out the opportunities.

Choreographic Process of *current*

The choreographic component to this research culminated in a dance concert performance in the Claire Trevor Theatre at the University of California, Irvine. *current*, is a contemporary dance work that reflects on the influencing factors and connections stemming from my personal training in classical modern dance and the influences of that those techniques and styles have on my own choreographic practice. Through this process, I constructed as a series of nine contrasting vignettes applying several meanings of the word 'current' to effect differing thematic choices. A deep ocean current flows along a continuous directed motion, yet paradoxically something that is temporally current is continually changing to be of the present. With the shared temporal and physical meanings, this evokes a sense of time and duality while being inevitable, unpredictable, and yet all encompassing.

As a modern choreographer fusing classical modern, post-modern and contemporary aesthetics in the creation of my work, I reflected on my personal creative processes throughout the development of this choreography. I remained sensitive to the effects that my own modern dance background had on the compositional aesthetic of my work. I decidedly drew influences from several distinctive modern dance eras, weaving the contrasting styles into one interconnected

multi-sectional dance work. Some of the modern dance eras aesthetically referenced in my work included gestural and pedestrian movement from post-modernism, modern music visualization from choreographers such as Lar Lubovitch and Mark Morris, aspects of space and athleticism from Paul Taylor, more theatrically focused elements from Pina Bausch, and many others. I remained conscious of my decisions of when to allow movement and aesthetic references to other classical modern vernacular and when to oppose them and work from a contemporary aesthetic and process.

The ten dancers involved in this project had diversified backgrounds, both in areas of techniques trained and levels of professional experience. Three of the graduate student dancers and 1 transfer undergraduate had previous experience in training classical modern techniques, whereas the remaining six undergraduates did not have this same foundational modern training and were primarily trained in contemporary hybrids of modern techniques. As had been articulated during the research interviews, I did recognize some initial challenge for those dancers without this classical movement background in sections which focused more heavily on classical modern aesthetics to be able to create and clarify specific body shapes and apply connections to their use of time and space.

Conclusion

While this study does not attempt to provide a definitive answer on the relevance of the classical modern dance techniques, it does provide insight from experts in the field based on their professional and academic experiences. In higher education, future research may include an examination of specific classical modern techniques may as most useful in their curriculum. I question whether or not second-generation modern techniques, such as Cunningham, Limón and

Nikolais, may be more applicable to contemporary, process-centered ideas due to their focus on transferable movement concepts. Another area of potential research may include compiling timelines of codification for various dance techniques in comparison to the current progression of codified contemporary dance techniques in their developing genre.

A dancer's ability to effectively express an artistic vision, depends upon the support received from teachers. Edward Warburton posed two important questions to examine effective dance training, "What are we training for? And for whom?" (Warburton). These questions must be at the core of dance pedagogy for modern dance techniques in this contemporary time. But can a contemporary dancer be fully cultivated without inheriting that established movement knowledge from our modern dance forbearers? "Dance attempts in a tacit way to say where we're at . . . Things will always be trending forward; that's the nature of creation" (Lubovitch). And so, modern dance has the challenge of existing on the dual edge of refining embodied knowledge and fostering creative risk.

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APPENDIX A

Research Interview Questions

Below are the Institutional Review Board approved questions asked of the research interviewees:

- How would you define classical modern dance technique?
- Currently, is training in classical modern dance technique important to the field of dance? Why or why not?
- What are the similarities and differences to classical modern dance technique and contemporary dance technique?
- Does study in classical modern dance prepare students for performance in contemporary styles? If yes, please describe. If not, why not?
- In your opinion, has the teaching of modern dance evolved in current dance education?
- With many of the modern dance pioneers now passed, do you think classical modern dance technique will remain relevant in current training?
- Do classical modern dance techniques have an influence in the creation of your work?

APPENDIX B

Relevancy Grid

Interview Topic Categories of Relevance for Classical Modern Techniques

Past
1) Historical Importance to the Field
2) Development of Genre

Present
3) Skills for Employment
4) Physical Conditioning

Future
5) Technical Training of Dancers
6) Creation of New Choreography
7) Instill Movement Concepts

This table was created to illustrate the relevance categories covered in interview responses from the named interviewees.

Interviewees	***Relevance Categories***						
	Past		**Present**		**Future**		
	1	***2***	***3***	***4***	***5***	***6***	***7***
Abraham, Kyle	x		x	x			x
Alsberry, Jonathan	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Bell, Sidra	x		x	x	x	x	x
Berman, Rachel	x	x			x		
Corbin, Patrick	x	x	x	x	x		x
Lubovitch, Lar	x	x					
Orihara, Miki	x			x	x		x
Skarpetowska, Katarzyna	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Warburton, Edward	x	x					x
Totals	**9**	**6**	**5**	**6**	**6**	**3**	**6**
Averages scores	**7.5 (83.3%)**		**5.5 (61.1%)**		**5 (55.5%)**		