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Idiosyncratic: The Formation of Artistic Voice Through Movement Research and Choreographic Processes

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This project seeks to answer how individual voices are formed through dance and choreography. The answer to this question was discovered through physicalized research and embodying concepts and tasks during my Senior Project choreography process. My dancers and I experimented with the idea of self versus society: how do we differentiate our own artistic voices from the voices of those around us? How do we remain ourselves when we are so greatly influenced by society? Artistic voice greatly influences and forms our identities as humans. The answers to these questions lie within personal aesthetics, the philosophical study of beauty and taste which is self-defined. Greek philosopher Plato writes about art as imitation of reality and the mimicking of other art. As an artist and choreographer, I am imitating the dance and life processes I have experienced: different choreographic techniques, dealing with injury, world travels, and other artistic practices. These processes have both removed me and surrounded me in dance. Even when I am unaware of it, I am constantly influenced by observations I make daily. Is there such thing as original ideas? The information I have cultivated is imitated, as Plato said. However, because it is being filtered through my own artistic voice it becomes my own work. I have also been greatly inspired by many processes and experiences. Does this inspiration cause imitation, or does it become an original idea? Ultimately, our individual voices, both artistic and personal identities, are influenced by those people around us and by our life experiences.

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IDIOSYNCRATIC:
THE FORMATION OF ARTISTIC VOICE THROUGH MOVEMENT RESEARCH AND
CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESSES

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Alonzo King LINES Ballet BFA
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Abstract

This project seeks to answer how individual voices are formed through dance and choreography. The answer to this question was discovered through physicalized research and embodying concepts and tasks during my Senior Project choreography process. My dancers and I experimented with the idea of self versus society: how do we differentiate our own artistic voices from the voices of those around us? How do we remain ourselves when we are so greatly influenced by society? Artistic voice greatly influences and forms our identities as humans. The answers to these questions lie within personal aesthetics, the philosophical study of beauty and taste which is self-defined. Greek philosopher Plato writes about art as imitation of reality and the mimicking of other art. As an artist and choreographer, I am imitating the dance and life processes I have experienced: different choreographic techniques, dealing with injury, world travels, and other artistic practices. These processes have both removed me and surrounded me in dance. Even when I am unaware of it, I am constantly influenced by observations I make daily. Is there such thing as original ideas? The information I have cultivated is imitated, as Plato said. However, because it is being filtered through my own artistic voice it becomes my own work. I have also been greatly inspired by many processes and experiences. Does this inspiration cause imitation, or does it become an original idea? Ultimately, our individual voices, both artistic and personal identities, are influenced by those people around us and by our life experiences.

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Introduction

Through my Senior Project choreography process, I further developed my own artistic voice through movement research, choreographic tools, and creating a final product to be performed. I explored the ideas of unique, individual dancers relating and contributing to the group as a whole. By staying true to my values and personal dance aesthetic, I was able to represent the individual dancers in my piece while continuing the community we had built by relating to the group and supporting each other in our artistic endeavors. After the performance, I continued my research more analytically to discover more about what it means to use the body as an avenue for expression and the formation of the artistic voice.

Senior Project

Idiosyncratic

Throughout my senior year as part of the Alonzo King LINES Ballet BFA Program, I have worked on, researched, and choreographed a piece for the Senior Project performance, which occurred in February 2019. Each year, the senior dance majors choreograph a piece on a cast of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. The process is entirely in the hands of the senior choreographer, including the audition, cast selection, scheduling, preparing for and running rehearsals, choreographing and composing a piece, finding and editing music, designing and finding costumes, lighting design and execution, warm-up class for the dancers, and reflecting on the process.

Over the course of my senior year, I created a piece with my six dancers which was approximately ten minutes long. The piece is titled *Idiosyncratic*, which premiered on February 22nd and 23rd, 2019 at Angelico Concert Hall at Dominican University of California. The music

I utilized includes “Slow Down” by múm, “Cello Drone G” by Musician’s Practice Partner, clock sounds by Digifffects Sound Effects Library, “Stop Trying to be God” and “SICKO MODE” by Travis Scott, and an acapella version of “My Way” by Frank Sinatra. These tracks were edited together by a classmate and fellow senior choreographer.

The lighting design for *Idiosyncratic* was created to follow the mood of each section and to highlight dancers at different points throughout the piece. The first half of the piece was lit with cool lighting with interesting shapes such as a center pool of white light, a “gobo” light with the pulse of a geometric shape being reflected onto the stage, and shafts of side light to direct the eye to certain dancers. The middle section of the piece was purposefully too warm, during Travis Scott’s “SICKO MODE,” to enhance the loud music and to juxtapose the softer light in the next section. The end section of the piece was lit more naturally with balanced cool and warm colors to emphasize the humanity of the dancers and to help soften the powerful words Frank Sinatra was singing about doing things his way.

I came upon the title for this piece by looking at the definitions of the word, idiosyncratic, and how they relate to my process. “Idiosyncrasy” (noun) is defined as “an individualizing characteristic or quality” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). However, if you break down the word and look at the definitions of the roots, it is more applicable to the themes present in my choreography. “Idio” is defined as personal, own, or unique, while “sync” is defined as harmonizing or synchronizing (Merriam-Webster, 2019). *Idiosyncratic* is the end product of a semester long process with my cast of synchronizing as one *corps* group while maintaining a unique quality of movement and sense of self. We began this process by journaling about our identities and the way different facets of our lives influence our identity. Many members of my

cast described themselves using words such as dancer, sibling, daughter/son, student, as well as adjectives such as caring, passionate, and happy. We also described our movement identities, including how we like to move, our movement habits, favorite types of movement, and songs that we enjoy moving to. In sharing our responses to these questions, we took individual traits and related them to the group.

Choreographic Process

Throughout my choreographic process, my cast and I continued to challenge questions related to our personal identities and develop our artistic voices through movement research. Other questions my cast and I addressed include: How do we remain individuals within a group? And how do we use our individual voice to relate to others and exist in a community? My dancers and I answered this question through movement research: choreographic tools, improvisation, and reflecting movement styles in choreography.

One choreographic tool I used in my rehearsals was word prompts. Some of these exercises I did on my own and brought the prepared material to rehearsal, while other exercises I used to direct my dancers' movement and creativity. For example, I came up with a list of verbs, directions, and actions: twist right, relax something, slice, pop, bones are made of lead, split, feel the rays of the sun touching your skin, crumble, halt, and oil your joints. My dancers created their own versions of this phrase by embodying the word they heard, researching what it felt like in their body, and following their instincts. I created my own version of this phrase, however, with a slight change. I reversed all of the words so the movement would also contrast the phrases my dancers created. My words (vs. the first set of words) were twist left (vs. right), tense (vs. relax), elongate (vs. slice), compress (vs. pop), bones filled with helium (vs. lead), connect (vs.

split), feel a chill on your skin (vs. rays of sun), build (vs. crumble), go (vs. halt), and feel your joints rust (vs. oil your joints). I find imagery very helpful in creating movement, and writing a list of this imagery allowed my dancers to contribute to the piece with their own voices, while following a structure I created.

Another form of movement research I utilized throughout my rehearsal process was improvisation. We began many rehearsals with a guided improvisation warm-up. This improvisation (or “improv”) created a common space and a community between the seven of us (I would participate as well), while giving us the freedom to move and experiment how we desired. I had prepared imagery and descriptive words before rehearsal, but in the moment I would follow my intuition and how my body and mind felt in the moment. I enjoyed being able to move with my dancers and experience the energy we created as a cast. Some words I used in the “improv” warm-up include: spiral, bounce, endless circles, jellyfish, stretch, oil, sifting sand, and full body connection. Similar to learning and creating choreography, the dancers would follow their instincts, hear the words, and experiment with them in their own bodies. Because we were all moving similarly without the requirement of repeating or remembering what we did, there was another element present: visual cues. We were able to be influenced by the movement we saw around us and absorb that information into our bodies. We were just as influenced by watching another dancer embody spirals as we were by hearing the words. Everyone’s embodiment of these images was completely different, which inspired others to look at the image differently in their own bodies. Our own physical voices were created through the feedback from those around us and built up from the experiences we have with other dancers.

Reflecting movement styles in choreography was also an important movement research tool throughout my process. Part of this reflection was influenced by words and imagery, but another part of it was reflected in how the dancers' perceived my movements and how they embodied those movements. When I choreograph a phrase of movement to teach to my dancers, no one will look exactly like me while dancing it. I think this is one of the most beautiful parts of dance. Some of my favorite parts of my piece were the unison sections, where all dancers are executing the same movements, but because no body or mind is completely alike, slight personalizations were visible. The dancers still looked completely insync, but, especially as I got to know them as movers, I could see individual artistry in their movement.

These tools helped me to develop material to create a full length piece for the stage. In participating in these tasks alongside my cast, I was able to further develop my own voice through collaboration. I was greatly influenced by my dancers: their vulnerability, hard work, and trust in me impacted my voice and assisted my ability to be a leader in this process.

Life Experiences

Everyone is impacted by life events, the people around us, and the experiences we go through, whether it is subconscious or fully intentional. My life experiences, from people to places to personal struggles, have all greatly influenced my artistic voice, and I can see the influence of these experiences present in my choreographic process.

Choreographic Influences

Choreography is defined as “the sequence of steps in dance... especially in ballet or other staged dance” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Choreography is the movement that I created prior to my rehearsals, during rehearsals, and the movement my dancers created based on different

prompts and tasks. The word “choreography” comes from the Greek word *khoreia*, “dancing in unison,” from *khoros* (chorus), combined with -graphy, “combining form” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Dancers are constantly learning new choreography for performances, creating choreography, improvising movement, and learning short phrases and combinations during class and workshops. Our day-to-day lives incorporate choreography. A choreographer is someone who creates movement phrases with the intent of creating a performance piece. Every choreographer has a different process for creating movement and composing a piece. These processes have developed through their past experiences with choreography and life.

I am influenced by the creative processes that I am a part of. These experiences affect how I created material, ran rehearsals, edited my music, and composed a piece. Some significant choreographers who have influenced my work include Alice Klock, Christian Burns, Kara Davis, Alex Ketley, Katie Sherman, Sidra Bell, Arturo Fernandez, Gregory Dawson, Hofesh Shechter, and Ohad Naharin. Being a part of different pieces taught me what tools work for other creators. Many of these choreographers used tools such as word prompts, improvisation, unison, and story-telling. Because I was a part of the research and composition with these choreographers, the tools felt natural to me when I went to create my own composition.

In the Summer of 2018, I traveled to Amsterdam, in the Netherlands to attend the Henny Jurriens Summer Dance Intensive. This dance intensive consisted of three dance workshops over two weeks, dancing five days per week, 4-6 hours per day. One workshop I attended included a Gaga movement class and a choreographic process workshop with Keren Rosenberg and Tony Markus. Gaga is a movement language created by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin. Gaga/dancers defines a Gaga movement class as something that “deepens dancers’ awareness of

physical sensations, expands their palette of available movement options, enhances their ability to modulate their energy and engage their explosive power, and enriches their movement quality with a wide range of textures” (Gaga, 2018). During a Gaga class, the teacher gives verbal and physical cues that the movers interpret in their own bodies. This practice awakens the mind-body connection through the use of imagery. I often used imagery to create movement for my piece, as well as during improvisation with my cast. Using imagery for improvisation gives the mind a visual idea to embody through movement; it takes the internal idea and showcases it externally. For example, pretend there is a ball in your abdomen; try to throw this ball from your stomach into your extremities. The internal image is the ball inside the body; the external image that an outside viewer observes is a flinging action traveling from the stomach to the fingertips. This technique can be very useful in creating unison within a cast of dancers, while maintaining unique movement qualities. Each dancer is imagining the same idea, but will have a slightly different execution of this idea.

Another part of the workshop with Keren Rosenberg and Tony Markus included a look at the choreographic process through the lens of personal identity. This course was an investigation of what it means to be oneself through self-identification and exploration during improvisation and set tasks. One task was to improvise with one action word in mind: spiral. We continued to find spirals within and outside of our bodies for 15 minutes. The mind ran out of ideas for spirals within a couple of minutes, but the body was able to find spiral after spiral after spiral.

Another workshop I attended was a movement and repertoire class taught by two dancers from the dance company, Hofesh Shechter. Hofesh is an Israeli born choreographer and the director of the London based company. He collaborates with his dancers to create new works

which the company performs on tour all over the world. I had the pleasure of learning repertoire from one of his works *Grand Finale*. This workshop involved a significant discovery in my personal identity and my artistic voice. I felt so at home while dancing and moving with the Hofesh philosophies. In a journal entry during my time in Amsterdam, I wrote, “I have never understood my mind and body this much in dance; my body felt very comfortable in the mindset and movements. I have never felt so at home, even though I am the furthest I have ever been from ‘home.’” I feel very connected to the way the Hofesh dancers move and explore movement. Retrospectively, I read Hofesh Shechter’s Artistic Statement, and was pleasantly surprised at how much it related to my own philosophies during my own movement practice:

“[Hofesh’s work] portrays something raw, real – the essence of the human spirit, its helplessness in the face of self and outer oppression and pressure but its ultimate victory; the ultimate victory of hope; an account of the tensions between the collective and the individual; control and the abandonment of control.

When my dancers are on stage, they are themselves, without pretence. We aim to cut through layers of artifice to reveal things for what they really are, the raw truth, biting life at its core, and in revealing the truth of the pathetic and beautiful human existence we want to make people aware, awake, and in turn understand they hold the power to change. It is that sense of brotherhood, comradeship in the battles of life, victory of spirit through persistence, through support that is my greatest ambition” (Hofesh Shechter, 2017).

The parts of this statement that are significant to me are about “the essence of the human spirit” and dancers being “themselves, without pretence.” There is such a highlighted form of individuality and being unapologetically yourself within Hofesh’s work; this was an influential concept in my choreographic process and something I value in my artistry. Another important component is the “sense of brotherhood, comradeship... victory of spirit through persistence, through support” (Hofesh Shechter, 2017). In harmony with the value of individuality, the support of community is important in developing voice; we achieve the essence of the individual

human spirit through support from others. This idea represents relating to the group while remaining yourself, which was present in my piece and process. The piece would not have achieved the same without the energy we had created together as a supportive group. The support of the full cast allowed my dancers and myself to be ourselves and bring our artistic voice forward, without pretence.

Injury and Recovery:

While my artistic voice has been significantly influenced and formed by other artists and their choreographic processes and personal movement styles, it was considerably impacted by my experience with an injury and recovery process. During my sophomore year of college, I injured my hip: a labral tear (a part of the cartilage cushioning the hip socket). The pain of the injury itself removed me from dance, as did the cause of the tear, hip dysplasia, a structural instability in my acetabulum (hip socket) due to the shallow formation of the joint. I took a semester off of dance to undergo two surgeries: an arthroscopic procedure to fix the tear in the labrum and a reconstructive procedure called a Periacetabular Osteotomy (PAO), the restructuring of my pelvis through two fractures which were held in place with two 6-inch screws. While this surgery removed me from dance physically, I struggled most with being removed mentally and emotionally from dance.

Being removed from dance allowed, or forced, me to reflect on my life as a dancer. I did not know if I would be able to return to dance, depending on how my body recovered. I struggled greatly with this thought: not being a dancer. I have been dancing since I was two years old. How do I define myself without dance? During my time off, I began exploring other facets of my identity: I took an online anatomy class, which had been my favorite subject in high school; I

obsessed over my physical therapy exercises and progress; I binge-watched television like never before; and I spent time with my family. Through this process, I learned that I have many facets to myself other than dance, and each of these facets influence one another to create my voice.

While recovering from my own surgeries, I read a dance memoir, *A Body of Work: Dancing to the Edge and Back* by David Hallberg, a Principal Dancer with American Ballet Theatre in New York City. Hallberg was at the peak of his abilities when he became injured, leading to two surgeries on his foot, a retreat from dance, and the rebuilding of his body. He returned to the stage as a “new artist, and a new man” (Hallberg, Forward). I was very inspired and relieved to read Hallberg’s book. This was the true story a dancer who experienced exactly what I had and who came out the other side stronger and more passionate about dance. Retrospectively, this happened to me as well. Being away from dance greatly influenced who I would become as a dancer.

My recovery over the last two years has lead to the development of my artistic voice. This experience has taught me who I want to be as an artist and how I want to build my life as a dancer. The strength I have developed has given me the confidence to discover my voice. At first, returning to dance felt scary and new. I had a new hip to train and dance did not feel like the same art form I had left. As time progressed, however, I was able to be more involved in my art; it became more honest and authentic. My joy in returning to dance revealed itself in my curiosity and imagination, which changed the way I moved as a dancer. After returning to dance, I felt like my eyes were more open. I found joy in the curiosity and exploration of dance; in the work and effort of dance. I began to use imagery more in my improvisation and creation of movement, like in my choreographic tools, which brought my mind and imagination into my

dancing. Ultimately, this experience contributed to how I create movement and the message I want to put into the world through my art.

After returning to dance for the first time since his injury and recovery, Hallberg writes, “I felt the power of the stage. I had weathered the unimaginable for more than two years, in the depths of depression and doubt. It was as if everything had unraveled around me, and through the year I had collected all the pieces slowly and laboriously and, with the help and support of my team, put them back together again in a new way. All of that brought me there, standing at the barre, crying, listening to [the pianist] playing and looking out into a vast, empty theater” (Hallberg, 394). Sometimes, I feel like a completely new artist, but I cannot discount the experiences I had before my surgery and recovery. As Hallberg so beautifully writes, it is as though my artistic voice pre-surgery unraveled and came back together to form and reveal the artist I am today.

The Philosophies of Dance

The philosophy of dance differs from person to person. Each dancer and mover has their own philosophies which they follow to develop their artistic values and voice. Former ballerina and now philosopher Aili Bresnahan, JD, PhD, writes that dance cannot “be reduced to or compared to anything like a score or a text” (Bresnahan, 2018). Dance has “salient bodily aspects” which assist, yet complicate, in the definition of dance as a fine art through the mind and body connection (Bresnahan, 2018).

American philosopher, Monroe C. Beardsley (1982), writes “expressiveness might be a necessary if not sufficient condition for dance as art,” characterizing movement with expression as the defining quality which changes “motions” into dance “movements” (Bresnahan, 2018).

Beardsley's definition of dance is rejected by philosophy professor and author Haig Khatchadourian, who believes that dance actions are "non-action voluntary activities that 'consist in patterns of movement... made by parts or the whole of the human body, creating dynamic visual, or visual and auditory forms' (Khatchadourian, 1978)" (Bresnahan, 2018). Ultimately, dance can be described as and created through both of these philosophies, as well as the many other philosophies that exist around dance. One way to create movement is from the influence of an idea, emotion, image, or other factor which the choreographer wishes to express. Sometimes, however, we dance for the sake of dance. This is to say, in reference to a performance, a choreographer can create a movement phrase because they derive pleasure from the way it looks or feels to dance.

Both of these philosophies of dance are valid and were present in my choreographic process. Some movement phrases, visual arrangements, musical choices, lighting decisions, or gesture actions were simply because I enjoyed them. Other compositional and choreographic choices had a clear purpose in expressing something that is important to me. For example, the first group section of my piece was set to fun music which was driving the movement. As a choreographer, I was not trying to express anything specific, I enjoy the song and decided to create a pattern of movement which incorporated the entire body and created a pleasing visual on stage. There was no conscious influence behind the movement or the music. In contrast, there is a section of my piece where one of my dancers, Drake, has a solo in the downstage portion of the stage, while the other five dancers are repeatedly walking across the back portion of the stage. Drake, the soloist, is the first individual to break away from the group, which represented the establishment of an individual in my piece. The movement Drake was dancing was created

through a letter prompt: I abstractly spelled out Drake's name through a combination of motions to create a solo phrase for him. Drake also created a phrase of movement which we called the "epic phrase," where each dancer took any choreography from the entire piece that they enjoyed dancing and created a phrase full of their favorite movements, which they embellished and revelled in to make their own, "epic" solo. Drake is stepping out as an individual, portraying a phrase of movement that was created completely unique to him. This solo is juxtaposed by the unison, machine-like walking occurring upstage, where the other dancers are creating a moving frame. This section of movement was purposeful, as I was trying to show how the individual relates to a group. I wanted to express individuality by contrasting it with conformity through movement and a visual composition.

Dance as an Ephemeral Art

Dance is a performing art. Its visual and kinesthetic aspects allow it and cause it to constantly move and change within a performance itself as well as within the art form over time. This change provides evidence for the impermanence of dance, defining it as "an ephemeral art" (Bresnahan, 2018). The temporary visuals of the art show "that there is something vital about dance performances and events that disappears as it is being performed" (Bresnahan, 2018). Dance critic Marcia Siegel (1972) writes, "dance 'exists as a perpetual vanishing point,' [meaning] that dance exists in 'an event that disappears in the very act of materializing'" (Bresnahan, 2018). A dance performance that is created for the stage only exists in the exact moment of the live performance, even if the performance is repeated or filmed. For some philosophers, this impermanent aspect is a negative part of the art form of dance. Its inconsistency and unpredictability contribute to problems in reconstructing and preserving

dances. In opposition, Bresnahan writes that some philosophers believe that “we ought to appreciate... dance’s ever-changing and disappearing nature as something... that will not happen again the same way into a vital experience for both the dance performers and the audience” (Bresnahan, 2018). The live nature of dance contributes to the power and relevance in the kinesthetic response to a performance. Dance’s ephemerality gives aesthetic value to the performance by creating an exclusive, “you had to be there” atmosphere (Bresnahan, 2018).

I agree that dance can be positively described as an ephemeral art form. The unique conditions of dance creation and performance accentuate the individual within a harmonized community of dancers. Dance is an ephemeral art, which contributes to the idiosyncratic tendencies of the art and gives value to a performance. The beauty of dance lies within its impermanence. The uniqueness that each human holds cannot be replicated in any form.

Kinesthetically Viewing a Dance Performance

While working on my piece, one of my mentors and LINES Faculty, Christian Burns, gave me feedback about how my piece would read to the audience. I was a part of the process the entire time, so I knew exactly what each detail meant: each gesture that represented something to me, every musical note that was significant, and where I wanted the audience to be looking during a given section; but what would the average person see? Christian challenged my cast and me to exaggerate everything: make movements larger and more refined, emphasize the words of the song, and reflect on the themes we had been working on throughout the process. This work would be consequential in how the audience construed the ideas through the connection the audience members made with the piece and the dancers.

The use of the human body in dance can create a bodily response in the audience when viewing a dance performance. This bodily response is a “kinesthetic” response. Kinesthesia, as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is “a sense mediated by receptors located in muscles, tendons, and joints and stimulated by bodily movements and tensions” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). The causal process by which kinesthetic responses occur when watching dance is not well understood, for example, “how ‘empathy’, understood in the broad sense as the ability to feel something based on what we perceive as someone else’s experience, like a dance performer’s, informs our kinesthetic and other appreciative responses” (Bresnahan, 2018). Just as we can be empathetic with someone’s emotional feelings, we can be empathetic with their physical feelings. This is especially prevalent in dance performances. Research in cognitive science and neuroscience can ascertain answers to why audience members experience empathetic and kinesthetic responses to dance performances. Dance critic and theorist John Martin’s theory about these kinesthetic responses is called “metakinetic transfer.” Martin says this transfer is “due to ‘muscular sympathy’ and ‘inner mimicry,’” meaning that similarly to our ability to sympathize with emotions of others, our muscles can sympathize with movements of others (Bresnahan, 2018). This being said, however, it is unknown just how much kinesthetic empathy affects the reactions of an audience. Other factors such as education and cultural resources allow a viewer to know more about dance and can influence how they view it.

It was important to me as a choreographer presenting my work to a live audience for the viewers to understand my intentions behind the piece. My experiences heavily influenced the outcome of the piece and I wanted the audience to see my ideas about how we remain ourselves while relating to a group. It was very difficult as the choreographer to remove myself from the

piece enough to see what an audience member would see when viewing the piece for the first, and probably only, time. I had to examine the piece from an unbiased eye and determine what was really important to me. The most important themes in the piece were then exaggerated physically to emphasize their value.

Improvisation

Philosopher Curtis Carter (2000) has identified three types of improvisation in performance dance: “1) embellishments where set choreography persists, 2) improvisation as spontaneous free movement for use in set choreography, and 3) improvisation for its own sake brought to a high level of performance” (Bresnahan, 2018). It could be argued that there are many other variants of improvisation, but for the sake of this project, I will refer to these three types. In Susan Leigh Foster’s book “Taken by Surprise: Improvisation in Dance and Mind,” Foster discusses her shared view with Danielle Goldman “that it is the moment right before an actual dance movement within a performance that matters to the special aesthetic experience of dance improvisation... ‘it is this suspense-filled plenitude of the not-quite-known that gives live performance its special brilliance’ (2003)” (Bresnahan, 2018).

While my piece when it was performed did not involve specified improvisation, the process was heavily built on it. The first identified type of improvisation includes “embellishments where set choreography exists” (Bresnahan, 2018). In a fair amount of contemporary dance, this kind of improvisation exists. This type of improvisation involves being present in the moment of the performance and leaving it all on the table, which means embellishing and enhancing each movement to make it your very best, adding more emotion or expression through the body according to what feels right in the moment. My dancers took this

type of improvisation instruction without being told. They tried something new each time, expressing just a little more with their bodies, and made the movement their own each time.

The second type of improvisation described is “improvisation as spontaneous free movement for use in set choreography” (Bresnahan, 2018). This was the type of improvisation I used to create movement for my piece. When my dancers created phrases based off of word prompts, they were improvising with instructions to create choreography that would become part of the piece. It’s almost as if all movement that is created is improvised, even though there can be a premeditated idea behind the motions.

The third type of improvisation includes “improvisation for its own sake brought to a high level of performance” (Bresnahan, 2018). This kind of improvisation occurs within the performance and is specified beforehand. This would mean there is a section or a whole piece in which the dancers improvise and make decisions while on stage. In my piece, there were multiple sections where the musicality and rhythm were improvised, which means that the dancers knew the movement phrase they had to complete in a certain amount of time, but the value of time they gave to each movement was up to them. This created the individual within a group, self versus society, aspect I was researching: the dancers were doing the same movement but in different timings, so they related to each other as a whole while executing the movement based on what made sense or felt right to them in the moment.

There is a great amount of agency involved in improvisation: Foster equates the “lived experience of improvisation with a ‘middle voice,’ in which a dancer finds herself in a flow of movement that takes the middle position between deliberative choices and passive direction” (Bresnahan, 2018). Whether or not there is a specified improvisation within a piece being

performed, improvisation is present in every live performance. Decision-making and problem solving are forms of improvisation, alluding to the agency required by dancers. According to Bresnahan, “all live dance performance involves improvisational artistry to at least some extent... this can be seen as a kind of embodied and extended agency under embodied and extended mind theories” (Bresnahan, 2018). My piece did not include noticeable sections of improvised dance, but the dancers were constantly making decisions about musicality, physicality, and spacial readjustments, while giving in to the flow of the piece and their muscle memory as the piece was performed.

Plato’s Aesthetics

Towards the end of my process, as my piece began to take form, I began to research other artists, philosophers, scientists, authors, who had similar views on creation and art. I have always been curious about the idea that art is imitation. I disagree with this idea, which is shown through my emphasis of the individual in my work. However, I wanted to know more about why art is thought of as imitation. This interest led me to Plato’s philosophies about aesthetics, which include ideas about imitation. Retrospectively, I see different ways Plato’s philosophies manifested themselves within my process and my piece, even though I had not yet read his work in detail. I was fascinated with the similarities between two unrelated artists, Plato and myself, and decided to further explore Plato’s philosophies.

Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher born circa 428 B.C.E. He was a student of famous philosopher Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle. Among the many subjects which Plato’s writings discussed, he explored justice, beauty, and equality (Biography.com Editors, 2019). In Nickolas Pappas’ article about Plato, the author discusses the philosopher’s views on

aesthetics, or “the philosophical inquiry into art and beauty” (Pappas, 2017). In this philosophical inquiry, Plato has written that art is imitation. There are three possible forms of imitation through which art can be created: beauty, imitation, and inspiration.

According to Plato, beauty has a form, which “engages the soul and draws it toward philosophical deliberation, toward thoughts of absolute beauty” (Pappas, 2017). Form (with a capital F) is created by God, according to Plato, and we humans imitate it. Imitation is the English translation of *mimêsis* (Greek), however, as with many Greek words, the translation is not direct, but meaning to mimic; “‘Imitation’ like *mimêsis* can refer either to a process or to that process’s outcome” (Pappas, 2017). Mimicry is described by Plato in almost a negative way, because the viewer of an imitated object is looking at a copy, which can negatively affect the image being viewed. Beauty, by comparison, is described more positively because it is a form that already exists, created by God. But how can humans create beauty? Not every artistic influence comes from imitation, which begs the question: “is there anything human beings can produce that would function oppositely to [mimicry]? Inspiration is the most promising possibility” (Pappas, 2017). Inspiration is defined by Plato as a “divine” way of creation. Therefore, it seems that inspiration, rather than imitation, would be the ideal way to create art. According to Pappas, “a clear opposition between imitation and inspiration, or any clear relationship between them, would suggest a coherent whole that can be titled ‘Plato’s aesthetics’” (Pappas, 2017). However, I think positive outcomes have occurred due to imitation and inspiration alike. So perhaps, as Pappas states, the relationship between imitation and inspiration does not need to be opposite, but could instead coexist as creative tools in art.

Plato famously wrote “art is imitation,” which contradicts what I have been exploring through movement and choreography about finding our personal and artistic voices through art. How can we be individuals and have our own artistic voices if what we are defined by (dance) is a physical form of imitation? Perhaps that is the struggle and part of the journey in finding your own voice, differentiating it from other's voices. The idea of imitation relates to how I have been influenced by many artists, people, and experiences, mostly in dance. I am imitating what I have learned from other choreographic processes, but this information is being filtered through my individual voice, so it becomes my own. The process began as an imitation of choreographic tools, visuals, and experiences, but the end result is the important answer to the question of imitation. Even though the processes similar in structure, my piece did not turn out as a copy, or imitation, of Alice Klock’s piece, for example. I was emulating her throughout my process because I was greatly influenced by my positive experience in her process. Ultimately, it is impossible to know if art is imitated or inspired because we are so influenced by the experiences we have. However, once it is filtered through an individual, it becomes something completely different and undeniably beautiful.

My Reflections

Pragmatic versus Analytic Approach to Studying Dance

Bresnahan considers the philosophy of dance: how it is created, appreciated, experienced, and perceived. These are traditional questions about different forms of art. However, Bresnahan disclaims theoretical research and explorations when discussing dance. Dance can be explored and researched, perhaps better, through a pragmatic approach because it is an experienced and lived art form.

During my research in my Senior Project choreographic process, I experienced the difference between pragmatic and analytical approaches. As I was developing a thesis for this project, I continuously got stuck in my research. I was trying to force an analysis of a piece that had not been created yet. I let go of the academic part of my thesis and delved into the movement research, exploring a kinesthetic approach. Through this physical practice and movement approach, I was able to use movement to explore the ideas I had about personal identity and artistic voice. The experience of moving and creating allowed me to organize my thoughts and create a thesis on paper, after creating it on the body and in space.

While I am a firm believer in movement practice and the power of physicalized research, I have learned much more than expected from my analytical research. Having the opportunity to reflect on my choreography and my process has allowed me to become more aware of my artistry and what influences me. The Senior Project process happened so quickly; it was over just as quickly as it began. This analytical reflection has given me the opportunity to look at my piece retrospectively and notice aspects and connections that I did not see before.

Conclusion

Idiosyncratic individuals are inherently involved in art, especially dance. Dance can be positively described as an ephemeral art form. I think one of the beautiful aspects which drew me into dance as a young girl and continues to appeal to me as an artist is the experience of witnessing or performing a piece. The experience is unlike any other. It could be the most beautiful piece you've ever seen, but all you have to take with you is the feelings it brought and the images it left in your memory. The fleeting emotions and images take your breath away even more because you want to hold onto that beauty. Perhaps this creates a precarious instability in

performing, but I think this makes it more human. The uniqueness that each human holds cannot be replicated in any form, which is where the beauty in individuality lies. In creating my piece, I was influenced by many choreographers, musicians, other dancers, and my own life experiences. No one else has had the same experiences as me, and, therefore, no one would have been able to create the exact same piece as me. I was greatly influenced by the individual dancers in my piece and the community we created as a cast. The piece would have turned out completely different if there had been one less person, or a different person. The situational conditions of my piece influenced the final outcome.

From the beginning of my process, I wanted to create a safe space with the group of talented dancers I had the opportunity to work with. This sense of community would foreshadow the value I would give to the theme of unison and the group. By creating a space that only existed when the seven of us dancers were in the studio together, we created an ephemeral piece. The beauty of this group was that the dancers were able to stay true to their independent, unique voices as artists and people. Even in making the piece “my own,” I was creating my own version of the six artistic voices that I was working with; the individuals within the whole, like each individual, different color of a painting making up a complete image through the harmony and variation.

Individuals, consisting of both artistic voices and personal identities, are influenced by those people around us and by our life experiences. These influences are the driving forces which form the artistic voice. We continue to grow and develop our artistic voices through research and the curiosity to go deeper into our art form. My artistic voice has been greatly influenced and formed through my experiences over the last few years. I have become more aware of the growth

and changes to my artistic values and aesthetics through my choreographic process during my senior year. I have progressed and changed through the movement research and philosophical concepts I have embodied through this process, however, it is important to recognize the impermanence of my own artistic voice. My voice was only the way it was for *Idiosyncratic* for the fleeting moment in which I set a piece of choreography. It has already changed in the few days, weeks, months since the performance because I have new experiences which are influencing my voice every second. Dance itself is ephemeral, as is each dancer and their voice. I look forward to the continued growth and formation of my artistic voice as I encounter new experiences.

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