

THE SEARCH FOR INDIVIDUALITY IN THE
CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

by

Alyssa Suzanne Tolman

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Modern Dance

The University of Utah

August 2014

Copyright © Alyssa Suzanne Tolman 2014

All Rights Reserved

The University of Utah Graduate School

STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The thesis of _____ **Alyssa Suzanne Tolman** _____

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

_____ **Pamela Geber-Handman** _____, Chair _____ **4/24/2014** _____
Date Approved

_____ **Sharee Lane** _____, Member _____ **4/24/2014** _____
Date Approved

_____ **Shaun Boyle** _____, Member _____ **4/24/2014** _____
Date Approved

and by _____ **Stephen Koester** _____, Chair/Dean of

the Department/College/School of _____ **Modern Dance** _____

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines various techniques of highlighting dancers' individuality. In this document I examine choreographers and past creative investigations that influenced creative choices I made. I also discuss Laban movement analysis as a tool in finding an individual's authentic movement signature. In various chapters I reflect upon choreographic exercises I led which utilized repetition, memories and journaling as scores for improvisational exercises, and relate my struggles and observations in the creation of my final thesis piece. The research reveals ways of analyzing movement and discovering nuanced idiosyncrasies from dancers. Finally, I share how this project has changed my creative process as well as the impact it has on my future as an artist.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Chapters	
1. INFLUENCES ALONG THE WAY.....	4
Laban Movement Analysis.....	4
Raja Kelly.....	6
Pina Bausch.....	9
Sympathique.....	11
2. THE PATH TO <i>WHISPERS BENEATH</i>	13
Starting with the Self.....	13
Working with the Cast.....	16
3. WHAT THE LABAN LENS REVEALED	21
The Soloist.....	23
4. AFTER THE FACT.....	28
CONCLUSION.....	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	35

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my husband Gideon for being unfailingly loving and supportive throughout this journey. Thank you for being my biggest fan, my most faithful editor, and for always seeing me, even when I felt invisible.

To my devoted parents and my inspiring sister, thank you for encouraging me to pursue my dreams, and for never doubting my potential.

Thank you Pam, Sharee and Shaun for pushing me to challenge myself, and especially for your dedication and support.

INTRODUCTION

As I look back on the past several months, a whirlwind of images flutters through my mind. I see memories of intricate fingers, long and delicately precise as they measure invisible spindles of a web on the slippery wood floors in the faculty studio. Billowy white fabric reflects soft light onto the dancers' skin one moment, and in the next it casts a dreamy shadow across the studio floors. In this whirlwind of flashbacks, I see my dancers one by one; each a dazzling soloist with unique characteristics and idiosyncrasies. It is the small details I remember best. For instance, as I watch one dancer move through the space, I hone in on the delicate shape of her profile or focus on the way her black hair has an unruliness about it. I remember another dancer's knobby knees and unfailingly winding, supinating feet. Another dancer I remember for her solemn focus and professional dedication in the rehearsal process. I treasured how another performer managed to be quirky and lovely simultaneously with such ease and nonchalance.

I recall one particular rehearsal day sitting in the back of a studio, looking at the dancers from behind. I could not see their faces directly; I was only able to witness parts of them as they observed themselves in the mirror. At one point, my focus came down to meet my own gaze in the reflection I faced, and I just stared at myself for a moment, allowing my dancers' movements to settle with a Gaussian blur into my peripheral vision.

Allowing myself to slip into a small trance, I encountered one of those inevitable reflective moments when time is allowed to stand still and I find myself wondering,

“How did I *get* here,” and “When did I start to look like this,” and “Gosh, why do I feel so tired?” I observed the way I was sitting, my back settled into the wall comfortably, one knee bent, my elbow resting on it, as the left part of my chin rested lightly on my knuckles. I noticed my right leg tucked neatly underneath my left, and for a moment, I was transported to my 12-year-old self at my first day of cotillion class. “A lady never crosses her legs, only tucks them,” the coral-lipped instructor warned dryly as she walked past my desk and I attempted, and failed, to inconspicuously uncross my legs.

My adolescent and adult years alike have provided me endless memories of feeling responsible to reflect what I have been taught to be correct. I believe these experiences have influenced my desire to seek authentic individuality in my peers as well as myself. The early training I received as a gymnast led me to believe that bodies were tools—a means to an end—meant to assist in attaining a specific goal that had been clearly laid out: the “perfect” routine. There was no need for individuality in gymnastics; in fact, my fellow gymnasts and I strived for the same specificity within our skills. If anything, we wanted to look the same, not different. Since beginning my study of dance in college and continuing research of the body in graduate school, I have not only recognized more acceptance and encouragement of individuality but also a personal affinity I have towards it.

My creative thesis, *Whispers Beneath*, has been an investigation on how to highlight individuals’ movement signatures within a choreographic piece of work. My interest in memories, meaning making, and repetition led me to create this work. Utilizing these subjects has allowed me to create a piece of choreography that found meaning and a truly personal method of expression for my dancers and me. This written

thesis is a compilation of reflections and research around my understanding of movement and my choreographic approach.

The past year I have been studying Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) through the Integrated Movement Studies (IMS) program. In this document I discuss using LMA as a tool in analyzing one soloist's use of space and effort and define what is referred to in the LMA system as an "authentic movement signature." I have also chosen to write about two choreographers as well as one of my own choreographic investigations that I found especially influential to my creative research. Finally, I examine the choreographic techniques found through my thesis research, describe how I incorporated them in my thesis project, and discuss the final product that was created.

CHAPTER 1

INFLUENCES ALONG THE WAY

Laban Movement Analysis

*“Movement expression reveals the
uniqueness of an individual...”
-Ed Groff*

Two of the main philosophical premises within the Laban system served as cornerstones of my thesis creative research. The first principle states,

“Movement expression is a manifestation of either an unconscious or conscious motivation or both simultaneously. It is this process of bringing aspects of unconscious behavior into conscious awareness that yields conceptual understanding of movement” (Groff, 1990).

Laban’s core belief was that man always moves with the objective of fulfilling a need or desire. He says the motivation for movement can be made consciously as well as subconsciously but insists that when any human moves his or her body, there is *always* an explainable reason. This belief system goes hand in hand with the LMA concept of inner and outer, which suggests that when the inner, intellectual part of the body has a motive, the outward part of the body uses movement to attain a solution satisfying the inward desires. In his sourcebook, *Mastery of Movement*, Laban says,

“[Man] aims by his movement at something of value to him. It is easy to perceive the aim of a person’s movement if it is directed to some tangible object. Yet there also exist intangible values that inspire movement...” (Laban, 1950).

Tangible movements are more functionally motivated, task oriented and goal directed while intangible movements are more expressively motivated and emotionally influenced. Though at times it may be unrecognizable to an outsider (or even the host), Laban believed an individual's movements responding to inward desires could be witnessed and explained at any moment. For example, an individual's interest in a discussion could be seen through the advancing of the torso's direction, or a clear intellectual and/or physical focus in the discussion location. A deep inhale and long, sustained exhale could be seen as an example of both the body manifesting an inward need for new oxygen as well as the body exposing a need to take a moment to clear the mind. Both of these instances could be examples of conscious meaning making, implying that the mover could most likely explain his or her individual body language. Laban scholar Ed Groff says,

“The process of differentiation is seen as a part of a larger process which is to gain understanding of the whole. The elements of movement that are identified are recognized as ingredients of the gestalt and that it is through the interrelatedness of its parts that movement is a carrier of meaning. This basic conception of whole/part relationship is evident at all levels of distinction that are made up within the LMA system” (Groff, 1990).

Using the LMA system as a tool in this project has illustrated how movement, as a form of expression, is instinctual as well as representative of the mind. The second principle states, “Movement expression reveals both the uniqueness of an individual personality and the characteristics of commonality possessed by any grouping of individuals; cultural, regional, ethnic, familial, etc...” (Groff, 1990). Laban believed that movement had the ability to expose uniqueness in an individual as well as reveal archetypal characteristics of humankind. The LMA system defines this as an *authentic movement signature*: “an individual's motion style, composed of repeated recognizable

movement elements that can be notated” (Hackney, 1998). In Chapter 3 I write about a method using the LMA system to analyze one soloist’s authentic movement signature.

Raja Kelly

*“The dancers are the material.
They are what make the choreography.”
-Raja Kelly*

Raja Kelly, a contemporary dance artist who came to develop a collaborative piece with my graduate class became an unexpected influence in my thesis work. In an interview regarding his most recent work: *the feath3r theory Presents: Andy Warhol’s Drella (I love you Faye Driscoll)*, Kelly describes himself as a director more than a choreographer: “I’m interested in making something out of what a dancer gives me... the dancers are the material... I am molding their movement into something that supports my idea” (Kelly, 2013).

Rachel Pritzlaff, one of the dancers in *Andy Warhol’s Drella (I love you Faye Driscoll)* defines Kelly’s process as highly collaborative, describing the rehearsal process as a series of assignments given to the cast with the intention of creating movement sequences. Using similar creative methodology with my graduate class, Kelly developed a piece titled, *Things Fall Down, People Look Up, and When It Rains, It Pours*. For the sake of flow, I will refer to this dance as simply *When It Rains, It Pours*. One of the first tasks Kelly gave the cast was to create an individual solo that represented movement we believed only we could do. This assignment was intentionally vague, challenging us to ask ourselves what made us unique, and then find a way to translate it into a 30 second

movement sequence that we alone could perform. Kelly requested this assignment be completed in silence and watched our rehearsal process while privately taking notes.

After presenting our individual solos, Kelly then tasked us to learn each other's movement sequences, again in a silent rehearsal while he took notes. His technique of restricting verbal discussion resulted in the dancers making unique decisions on how to pick up choreography in a short amount of time. This allowed for unique interpretations of the movement being taught. A third assignment the cast was given was to create and perform, in less than 15 minutes, a score including any combination of the material we had thus far accumulated. Kelly referred to this minipiece as our "dream dance" assignment. In an email with further assignment details, he wrote:

"It's simple-- imagine a performance, the whole thing. All six of you, somewhere; What are you seeing? What are you feeling? And WHAT do YOU want to communicate? I encourage you to consider exactly where you are in your lives, as artists, and students, and citizens, and people, as bodies, as teachers, as friends, as colleagues, as lovers, mothers and a mix of blood, bones, tissue, water and gas. In your pocket, purse, backpack, mind, and body you have some phrases, some words some sentences; these are your dance steps, this is your material. What are you going to say? You must communicate something" (Kelly, personal communication, 2013).

In addition to creating a score, we were assigned to bring something to light our work, come prepared with costume ideas for each person, and have at least one entrance and exit. Within the "dream dances" each of the cast created, Kelly also instructed each individual to choose five significant moments to remember within their respective project: an essential moment, a pivotal moment, and three other moments of their choosing. Making a concrete decision on moments worthy of highlighting was a new experience for me as a dancer, one that forced me to choose what about the dance I wanted to be remembered. So often when contemplating my work, I find myself thinking

every moment is equally valuable; each an important ingredient blended to make a carefully prepared choreographic dish. Being forced to choose what remained and what was edited out helped me clarify choreographic decisions in my dream dance. In the development of *When It Rains It Pours*, Kelly revealed that his practice of note taking was based on the same idea of editing; he was writing down the moments he felt were important as a means of later assembling and organizing the full piece of choreography.

In the choreographic process, Kelly also incorporated something he terms “reliant duets.” Paired in groups of two, dancers explored how to rely on each other through cause and effect games. Working in duets prompts partners to respond to each other’s movements. For example, when I chose to lean on my partner, she initially had no choice but to feel the weight I was giving her. In response to this, my partner could have chosen to support my weight, redirect my weight, or collapse under my weight. If my partner made the choice to push me, my body’s reaction would be affected by the direction and force my partner had used. These moments of action and reaction were not preplanned, and often I could not premeditate the response my body had to my partner’s actions. Because of this I felt my movement was more authentic during the exercise. After improvising using this technique for several days, Kelly had us choose 10 positions to memorize as a structured duet. For example, standing side by side with my partner I chose to lean on her, shifting enough of my weight onto her that I relied on her to remain standing to maintain the position that I was in. From there, my partner chose a position that forced her to rely on my support. After finding and memorizing 10 reliant positions collectively, my partner and I were challenged to perform the same movement as soloists. Finding my own way of making the duet happen as a soloist brought to light nuances I

carried, differentiating me from my partner, such as a tendency to bring my focus inward or my habit of giving into passive weight in transitional movement. In the final performance of *When It Rains It Pours*, the performers utilized each of our respective picture moments and used our reliant duet exercise as a repetitive score throughout the entire piece. Because I was rehearsing Kelly's piece as well as my own thesis work simultaneously, these exercises crossed over into my thesis rehearsals sometimes intentionally and other times unintentionally.

Pina Bausch

*"I'm not so interested in how they move
as in what moves them."
-Pina Bausch*

Another choreographer from whom I feel inevitably influenced is the iconic Pina Bausch. What I find particularly interesting about Bausch's choreography is the way she uses repetition, allowing audience members to make meaning for themselves. In one striking scene from Bausch's *Café Müller*, two dancers engage in a long repeated sequence of embracing, falling and carrying movements. Audience members have interpreted this movement phrase in various ways; some translating it as a story of unrequited love, while others see a relationship of caregiver and patient. Steven Rawle said of Bausch's work,

"It is not an invitation to escape from life, but to plunge even deeper into it... it is not a seamless and sculpted whole presented to a passive audience. Starting with the daily social experiences of the body, she translates and alienates them into sequences of images and movement which only makes sense once the audience member relates to his or her personal physical experiences. [Her work] needs to be completed by each audience member's own thoughts and emotions" (Rawle, 2009).

Bausch begins with emotion and builds movement around it, “using repetition to highlight it, expand it, explore all sides of it, and drive her point home...repetition becomes an important structuring device: she makes sure that we do not get away from the emotions she wants us to feel. We must stand at attention. We must feel it again and again, sometimes without end” (Ceccoli, 2012).

Another creative method used by Bausch was questioning her dancers about their emotions and personal relationships and then incorporating their experiences into choreography. In an interview regarding her creative process, Bausch said,

“Each of the dancers is, in a different way, important. Each has their own dances and their own different way of dancing, and it's very complicated. It's not just doing choreography, but it's being aware of the feelings we all have and what we are knowing. The best is just to see it” (Bausch, 1999).

Bausch's practice of using emotions, memories and experiences allows performers to find more emotional connectivity to her work, resulting in an intimate lived experience on the stage. Suzan Kozel, a performer, choreographer and writer said of Bausch, “Her work is merciless because it is so real. Being in the audience of a Bausch performance is participating in it. Her work is not removed from life; it is a part of life. It does not pretend, it is” (Kozel, 1993).

As I prepared to create *Whispers Beneath*, I had a strong desire for not only audiences to feel connected to my work, but also my dancers. I anticipated that applying the technique of incorporating dancers' memories as part of the choreographic score would allow my dancers to not only feel more intimately linked to the work, but also that it would remind them of their individual and unique place within it. Rawle says, “An image, which could seem simply surreal or meaningless, becomes powerful once each person develops it with his or her own experiences. The inner experiences of the

individual are invited to arise to the surface and engage with the spectacle...” (Rawle, 2009).

Sympathique

The creation of *Sympathique* served as fertile soil for the creative process of *Whispers Beneath*. In the creation of *Sympathique* (Tolman, 2011), I investigated the difference between an individual’s perception of themselves and others’ perception of them, and found inspiration in characteristics with which I had been associated by others, or associated with myself. In preparation for this piece I observed myself in a mirror while engaged in pedestrian movement, and later in the semester I asked peers to observe and take note of tendencies that reappeared in my actions. For example, I asked one classmate whose schedule I shared to observe me at some point during the week for approximately 10 minutes. Giving my peer a broad frame of time to observe my movements made it difficult for me to know when her analysis was occurring. Getting feedback from a peer assisted me in gaining distinct views of my movement from an outside perspective.

After pouring over a combination of peer observations and my own experiences, I created four stylized movement sequences based on qualities I observed in myself or that others observed in me. One of the movement sequences in this piece was a recreation of pedestrian movements I had investigated early in the choreographic process. Another movement sequence reflected the same movements with added nuances in the upper body that my classmate noted in her feedback of my movement. Developing the technique of using observations and experiences from my life allowed me to get an intimate

perception of my identity and my experiences from a choreographic standpoint. *Whispers Beneath* is a continuation of this research, expanding out to the memories and experiences of my dancers in hopes of highlighting their individual nuances.

CHAPTER 2

THE PATH TO *WHISPERS BENEATH*

*“Through repetition you reach deeper levels than
any number of infatuations can ever give.”
- Henrik Høgh-Olesen*

Starting with the Self

Because *Whispers Beneath* was informed by memories and personal experiences, the creative process demanded a strong foundation structurally and emotionally for my dancers and me. Developing a practice of studying myself as an individual before working with the cast gave me a clear idea of the steps necessary to find uniqueness within a soloist’s movement. During these rehearsals, I spent the majority of time improvising, sometimes while I talked to myself as a video camera patiently listened, taking record of every confused stumble and syllable. After my rehearsals, I would review the footage, attempting to see what stood out, what kept returning to my body.

Steven Connor defines repetition as a “central and necessary concept within all attempts to understand individual and social being” (Connor, 1988). The technique I developed of looking for returning movement, proved to be a profound statement in my search of the self. The reoccurring movements of my body revealed my individuality through idiosyncrasies and nuances. As I watched myself in a playback of movements again and again, I began to recall consciously, or subconsciously, a glimmer of memories

from my past experiences making their way to the surface of my being through repeated movements.

One of the first things I observed in myself was a tendency to mimic the movement style of the instructor with whom I was studying during this project. I recognized varied echoes of sequences and combinations from technique class, my muscle memory taking over during the improvisation. I noticed a “home base” of weight, sensing bounces with diminished flow fluxing in my torso to which I consistently returned. A second theme that continued to return in my improvisations was a winding in and out of twisted spirals, wrapping in and out of the midline of my body. As I watched myself in the playback one evening, I noticed a consistency of enclosing, crossing, and curving poses, and in my notes wrote “S-curve.” Later in the process I connected this note to my training in fine-art photography: “S-curve” is a traditional art concept said to originate in Greek and Roman sculptures that describes the human body situated “off-axis” with the weight unequally balanced. Perhaps the most famous use of the “S-curve” is the *Venus de Milo*, an ancient Greek sculpture depicting Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. The “S-curve,” whether standing, sitting, or lying, remains a posing technique associated with flattering the human body visually. As I looked at the clips of myself improvising, I saw three-dimensional “S-curves” abounding in and throughout my movement as a major theme. This wrapping movement style is perhaps a manifestation of my desire to be what I was taught to be, beautiful. In the search for my authentic movement style, studying my tendencies exposed not only my individual movement instincts but also shed light on social constructions within my memories. My memory of cotillion class comes back to mind; my legs being crossed had to do with what felt

familiar in my body, yet the moment my instructor prompted me to do differently, I instinctually followed. Ed Groff says this is what many individuals experience in maturation between childhood to adulthood: “An acquired ability to master inner impulses and adopt a behavioral style that is consistent with the expectations of culture” (Groff, 1990).

Developing a practice of filming myself in the process of improvising taught me that some returning movements did not necessarily look how they felt. For example, seeing the “S-curve” in my body was only apparent to me after watching a playback of my movement. While in the moment of the improvisation, I did not make the connection. Studying my improvisational movement allowed me to recognize my unique idiosyncrasies intimately. I found it poetic that my perception of what felt harmonic in my movement could not be exactly replicated by anyone else. In his work, *The Language of Movement*, Laban says, “There are general harmonies resulting from the structure of the human body, and individual harmonies which come from both the physiological and psychological state of the individual.” He goes on to say:

“...there are considerations such as individual expressiveness or taste which can influence the personal conception of harmony in movement. Graceful movements will suit one person more than vital or bizarre movements, or the contrary may be the case. This is a question of individual temperament; some will prefer narrow and restrained movements, others may like to move freely in space, and so forth” (Groff, 1990).

Investigating myself prior to working with a cast proved beneficial to the research process. I found that going through the experience took time; allowing the ebbs and flow of my movements to be unveiled was truly an intimate and personal test of patience.

Working with the Cast

“When you move you stand revealed for what you are.”
-Doris Humphrey

The rehearsals for *Whispers Beneath* began with me sitting with each member of the cast engaged in casual one-on-one conversations accompanied by a small video camera. This was different from any previous choreographic processes I had directed. *Whispers Beneath* had a cast of five dancers, so I made arrangements to meet with each of them separately; discussing significant memories, relationships, and mostly what we felt made us who we were.

Doris Humphrey said,

“The human body is the most powerfully expressive medium there is. It is quite possible to hide behind words, or to mask facial expression. But the body reveals. Movement and gesture are the oldest language known to man. They are still the most revealing” (Denhardt, 2006).

The dancers’ conversational, gestural movement during our discussions revealed hints of their unique movement style and ultimately paved a foundation for the score of their movement sequences in the piece. I had not anticipated that such small motions would provide enough information to set the groundwork, but each gesture, each idiosyncratic nod and articulate indication, planted a small seed and inspired how the movement for the rest of the piece would transpire.

A proverb kept coming to my mind during these interviews: “Talk to a man about himself and he will listen for hours” (Andrews, 1987). Giving the dancers opportunities to contribute to the choreographic material was meant to aid them in becoming more interested and dedicated to the work. In doing so, I believed they would become more compelling to an observing audience. Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite said this is a

key to good theatre making: “When the viewer really has a sense, a feeling that the performance is about them, then they are going to be more invested” (Pite, 2012).

After our one-on-one interviews, I developed a practice of giving the dancers assignments in order to assist them in finding their own individual movement expressions, and becoming more invested in the choreography. The first task I gave was a movement assignment similar to the one Kelly gave the cast of *When It Rains It Pours*. Each of them was responsible for creating a solo they felt represented their own movement style. The solos created were allowed to evolve and change throughout our time together, and the dancers presented during our rehearsals in silence if requested, or to a random playlist of my choosing. I tasked myself with the responsibility of taking note of unique ways each dancer made creative decisions and searching for nuanced qualities in their movement signatures.

This part of the research was simple: I gave the cast a challenge, and they were allowed to complete it however they chose. One of the tasks I assigned was a collage of words and pictures from magazine scraps. On one side of the paper the cast was responsible for portraying, “How I perceive myself.” On the other side the theme was, “How I believe I am perceived.” As was expected, each dancer returned with unique interpretations. One dancer painted, drew and glued objects onto her collage. We also would take individual time during rehearsals to journal about our discussions or about the projects we shared with each other. Steven Nachmanovitch says,

“It is well known that one can jump-start the creative process by writing, just letting words flow without censoring them or judging them. One can always throw them in the trash later. No one needs to know. The social form of automatic writing is brainstorming, in which a group of people sit together and blast out ideas without fear of shame or foolishness. The therapeutic form is free association, drilling down into preconscious and unconscious material and letting

it emerge in a free form way” (Nachmanovitch, 1990).

Accustomed to an academic environment in which students are often expected to explain work, the dancers were eager, even anxious, to defend their artistic creations and journal statements. I allowed each individual some time to explain their projects and then opened the conversation to the rest of the cast. I believe this practice of discussion after presenting assignments developed a sense of community among the dancers, enabled them to better understand themselves and each other as individuals, and provided a foundation for a safe creative space.

Following discussions, I had the dancers engage in an improvisational score based on one chosen element of the assignment we had just examined. Inspired by the collage discussed above, one dancer used the shape of letters and words as a score for the pathways of her arms. This improvisation inspired the opening duet in the piece *Whispers Beneath*. Another assignment included having each dancer make a short movement sequence based on the same painting. Having the individuals perform these solos together highlighted their unique ways of interpreting the same piece of art. In reference to finding individuality Burrows says, “When two speak in unison you are hearing the same thing simultaneously which reveals small differences in voice and personality.” This quote is, of course, examining differences in two separate voices. When having two dancers “speak” about the same topic with their entire body, there are vastly more differences to be seen between the two individuals.

Establishing the practice of utilizing words, images, brushstrokes and journal entries as a score for improvisation brought out especially nuanced and idiosyncratic movements from the cast. I believe creating a foundation of writing, crafting, and

speaking inspired an attention to detail and a deep investment in the creative process. In past works of choreography, such as *Sympathique*, I made a practice of creating the choreography before rehearsals, teaching it to my dancers, and then altering the order, time, space, or flow of movement in the rehearsal process. In creating *Whispers Beneath*, I utilized improvisation as a tool during every rehearsal. Because of this, the dancers were able to become more intimately aware of their own idiosyncratic movement styles, and I was able to take note of their nuances and apply them in the final choreographic work.

In his thesis, Ed Groff says,

“Without attempting to offer even a sketch of the history of the world, in particular occupations, in cherished aesthetic creeds or utilitarian skills, some attributes of the body are preferred and more frequently used than others... it is easy to understand how the selection and preference for certain bodily attitudes creates style... Laban also recognized that within a particular culture, there was further personal idiosyncrasy, the unique movement style of an individual” (Groff, 1990).

For me, this presented both recognition and a challenge: I realized that as individuals within my cast came from a similar culture, geographic region, and educational background, they would inevitably have similarities within their authentic movement signatures. All of my dancers were raised in middle upper class Christian households within the United States and were born within the same decade. If I were to have access to dancers steeped in different cultures, time periods, and religions from around the world, I believe the diversity in my cast’s movement signatures would have been far broader. The challenge became to look past the similarities to find the uniqueness, to recognize what was not obvious at first glance.

At one point in the choreographic process, anxious with the fact that my dancers’ individualities were not blatantly apparent, I chose one specific idiosyncrasy to magnify

in each dancer. For instance, one of the cast members had a tendency to move in what LMA calls awake state, characterized by quickness of time and directness of space. These tendencies led me to describe this authentic movement signature as animalistic.

Experimenting with the magnification of this tendency, I had this dancer incorporate quickness and direct focus in all of her improvised movement. Doing so made her sequence of choreography come across as a frenzied spectacle and portrayed her as competing for attention with the other dancers on the stage. Even though the dancer inspired the spastic movement, the magnification made it feel fraudulent and a misrepresentation of who she was. Because of this, I chose to highlight the dancers' individual nuances as they were, rather than transforming them into something they were not. This decision led to less extreme examples of individuality in the choreography.

Similar to Kelly's description of his creative process, I associated myself more as an editor in the development of *Whispers Beneath*. Taking in consideration of video clips, written and artistic projects from my cast, their improvisational creations, as well as my own notes felt like I was facilitating a compilation project more than it felt like I was working as a choreographer. To use Kelly's words, "The dancers are the material. They are what *make* the choreography" (Kelly, 2013).

CHAPTER 3

WHAT THE LABAN LENS REVEALED

*“Movement reaches our deepest nature,
and dance creatively expresses it.”
-Anna Halprin*

As discussed earlier, a great deal of my research was influenced by my investigation of the Integrated Movement Studies program. Laban movement analysis provided me a way of defining and analyzing what movements I saw coming out of the dancers, and, armed with the Laban lens and language, I was able to clearly distinguish different effort natures they would repeat as well as recognize patterns of moving they maintained. This enabled me to define idiosyncratic traits and characteristics within the dancers’ movement. As part of my thesis project, one soloist’s 4-minute section of movement was analyzed with the LMA system.

In order for the reader to understand how Laban is incorporated into my research, the basics of the system need to be explained. The Laban system is divided into four main categories: body, shape, space, and effort. I chose to focus my LMA research in the effort and space categories.

In the LMA system, effort references the scope of *expression* that can be used in movement. This part of the system also shows the emotional content within movement, and uses the physical properties of flow, weight, time, and space. Each of these physical

motion factors has alternating qualities within them. Flow is the ongoing progression of movement fluctuating between a binding and a freeing of the flow. Another motion factor in the effort category is weight, the assertion of one's gravity sensing, fluctuating between lightness and strength. The next factor in the effort category is time, with the opposing qualities of quickness and sustained. The final factor in the effort category is space. This motion factor fluctuates between a direct focus and an all-encompassing indirect focus.

Of course, being multifaceted, individuals usually embody several motion factors and qualities at one time. In the LMA system, the combinations of two motion factors are called states. The four factors can create six states: the dream state (flow and weight), awake state (time and space), stable state (weight and space), mobile state (flow and time), rhythm state (time and weight), and remote state (flow and space). The combinations of three motion factors are known as drives in the LMA system. The effort factors can create four drives: passion (weight, time and flow), vision (space, time and flow), action (weight, time and space), and spell (weight, space and flow). Combinations of all four effort factors (known as full effort actions) are less common; in order for movement to be considered a full effort factor, all efforts must be clearly seen. It is because of this that states and drives are more frequent in their occurrence than single effort elements or full effort combinations. Laban believed that by utilizing this system, "We are able in time to analyze the formal structure of a movement, as well as the nuances of the flow which underlie the meaning of the structure" (Laban, 1966). Using this effort system, particularly the states and drives element, allowed me to narrow down the movements the soloist most often used in her authentic movement signatures.

In the LMA system, space refers to various approaches to kinesphere from an individual. The three approaches are central, peripheral, and transverse. The central approach to space radiates out from and returns to the center of the body. The peripheral approach refers to the outer boundary of kinesphere, a sort of tracing of the edges. Finally, the transverse approach to kinesphere reveals the space *between* the center and edge by cutting and carving in between.

The Soloist

“We cannot mask who we are at our core being.”
-Irmgard Bartenieff

Part of my creative research included the study of qualities within one soloist’s improvisations that continued to reveal themselves time after time, even in different scores. The moments I have highlighted are those that have specific significance to my research regarding finding a soloist’s authentic movement style. Referencing Bartenieff’s research, Dr. Claire Schmais says that finding consistencies within a range of unique improvisational exercises is the key to finding an individual’s movement signature. Peggy Hackney suggests that using the system of states and drives allows for further clarification in the analytical process.

The soloist’s movement turned out to be different than what I anticipated. I predicted her movement signature to reflect a deep sense of strength; she poured her weight into the earth, with sustained reaches lengthening time with indulgent stretches. I expected her movements to be clear and distinct, endlessly extending into her kinesphere. I expected the soloist’s movement to reflect who I knew her to be as a person: firm, resolute, and powerful.

As part of the analysis process, I began by looking at the soloist's interview from our first meeting. This informed me of her movement tendencies outside of a studio setting. It quickly became apparent that the clearest effort consistency the soloist showed was found in her ability to allow movement to flow freely throughout her body. As I looked over the video clips of her interview, I found she often nodded smoothly throughout the conversation or would sway while contemplating how to respond to a question. The soloist also maintained a direct, sustained focus both on the question we were discussing and me. This combination of space, time and flow showed a tendency towards vision drive, at least during conversations.

In our improvisational exercises, the soloist moved most frequently with a foundation of free flow, sustained time, and would alternate between incorporating weight and spatial directness. This back and forth from passion drive and vision drive showed me that as a mover, what she seemed to value most was the outpouring of her movements as well as the speed in which she moved. It also showed me that as an individual, she possessed a great deal of endurance. Allowing her body to travel quickly with free flow, she would often alternate between light jumps and small leaps to indulgent rolls on the floor, succumbing to passive weight and the pull of gravity. I also found the soloist's movement to switch back and forth from polarizing qualities. For example, after spending a significant amount of time moving in passion drive (weight, time, and flow), or vision drive (space, time and flow), the dancer would often find moments in stable state. This state is the combination of weight and space; most often the soloist would use light weight and direct space, standing firmly without any flow, and clearly and directly moving part of her upper body.

The dancer's tendency of jumping back and forth between polarizing worlds of constant free flowing movement and stable, low energy movements showed her affinity for finding times to rest and recuperate in her improvisational solos. In the LMA work, the concept of exertion and recuperation is a sacred principle. In her book, *Making Connections*, Peggy Hackney says,

“Sometimes even fundamental truths like... [exertion and recuperation] need conscious attention for full benefit. Unfortunately our culture has trained us to think of recuperation in terms of ‘collapse,’ rather than an active rebound to different movement for replenishing ourselves. Thus, many people are not finding their own natural recuperative phrasing in their lives and are not regenerating and refreshing themselves” (Hackney, 2009).

Hackney teaches that true recuperation is not only about collapsing into passive weight, rather it serves as more of an active rebound to allow movement to continue. Similar to this belief, the soloist's movement tendency never came to a dead stop. Instead, her moments of stillness and weight sensing were consistently followed by active regeneration; movements that propelled her into a new kinesphere. I found great significance in the symbolism of this tendency; the rest and recuperation necessary after venturing out to the edge of her world; the importance of taking moments to the self after reaching out to something further out.

In regard to space, this dancer had a tendency to seek the very edge of her kinesphere, maintaining her outpouring reach to the peripheral edge before snatching it back with directness of space and quickness. Another tendency this soloist had in her improvisations was a preference in utilizing the upper half of her body for these reaches. Because of this tendency, she often fell off balance.

The soloist's transitions incorporated fleeting balances that fell into and out of stumbles. These transitional steps alternated between weight sensing and succumbing to

passive weight altogether, taking her into a new reaching spoke that forced her to travel out of her kinesphere. Because of the force with which she pulled herself back into her center, her movement often took her off balance. This also acted as a metaphor in her solo: the desire to reach out to find something only to come back to the most core part of who she was.

The LMA system served as not only a magnifying glass, clearly assisting me in defining tendencies in the soloist's movement in the effort and space category, but also as a unique way of coaching the dancer with vocabulary I had not typically used in past choreographic projects. For example, rather than directing my dancer to, "stay in that reaching position until you fall out of it, and make your way to the floor," I would instead say something like, "continue sustaining your arm in a reaching pull until you lose balance. From here, come down to the floor with strong weight, but don't abandon the free flow throughout your body." Using the LMA terminology while coaching this dancer through her solo served in pulling out clearer movements from her. The LMA terminology also assisted me in clearly defining repetitive tendencies found in this soloist's movement in the effort and space category. Had I the appropriate amount of time, I believe it would have been beneficial to use the LMA work to further analyze each of my dancers, instead of just one of them for a small section of the piece. Delving into one person's individualities was so empowering for her as a performer but also for me as a facilitator, and I regretted not having the time or resources to use the same process with each of the dancers. During one of our final rehearsals the soloist mentioned that her solo felt familiar, as though she had done it years ago. I believe the solo felt familiar because it was part of her artistic innate movement vocabulary. Because of this,

and especially because it was created based on her own improvisations, she was able to perform it with a heightened sense of commitment and honesty.

CHAPTER 4

AFTER THE FACT

Applying these new methodologies in the creation of *Whispers Beneath* was a risk that brought a great deal of anxiety to me in the creative process. However, looking back it has brought me a deep sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. During the tender beginning of our work together, I found it beneficial for myself as well as the cast to dedicate space and time for one-on-one conversations. Doing so contributed to our safe environment and showed them that I valued their uniqueness.

Utilizing the dancers' improvisations as the main source of movement provided *Whispers Beneath* with a vast vocabulary of material, and the choreographic techniques I used, inspired by Bausch and Kelly, gave me a unique perspective of a facilitator's challenging role. The practice of filming dancers' improvisations and assigning choreographic projects seemed like a good idea initially in the search for dancers' unique movement signatures. I had no idea how much extra work I was giving myself by considering video clips, written and artistic projects, improvisations, and my own notes. In this project, I never felt starved for inspiration, rather I felt overwhelmed with where to begin. This is why, if I were to continue this research in the form of another piece, I would narrow my study material. Contrary to what I believed before creating *Whispers Beneath*, focusing on one dancer's repetitive movements alone would have provided me

with ample material to create a piece on the study of individuality. Attempting to study five separate dancers' individuality based on their unique memories, ways of making meaning, and repetition was a welcome challenge, but doing so had the potential to limit the depth of my research. The choreographic methodologies I used proved successful in creating large quantities of material with which to work, and my personal note taking aided me in making clear decisions of how I wanted the movement to be manifest in the choreography.

Incorporating LMA in my creative research aided me in defining movements created by the soloist, and also offered me a unique language to use while giving my dancers feedback. In my experience, the LMA system served more effectively as a descriptive magnifying glass and coaching tool than it did a device of generating or inspiring choreography. Particularly, using the effort element in the LMA system allowed me to narrow down the dancer's movement qualities so that I could determine her authentic movement signatures, but when I needed to move forward in the choreographic process, I often revisited the material generated from improvisational exercises. If I had an enormous amount of time to dedicate to a project, the LMA system would serve well in making clear definitions of dancers' repetitive movement tendencies.

I found the development of a safe environment fundamental for inviting the cast to participate in exercises meant to tease out their individuality. Any kind of collaboration has the potential to be difficult due to unique personalities, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings. During one rehearsal with Kelly, two cast members got into a seemingly superficial argument that escalated into one of the performers storming out of the studio

and leaving the rehearsal minutes after it had begun. When conflicting instances such as this occur, the entire environment in which the work is being created is compromised.

Hoping to avoid potential contention and negativity, I made a practice of encouraging the dancers to openly express their opinions in the choreographic process (particularly in the parts of the piece in which they were performing). A common phrase I have heard in educational and athletic facilities is, “Check your feelings at the door.” As a youth I associated this phrase with professionalism and quickly developed a belief that being able to control/mask emotions was a sign of competency, while showing emotion was a sign of weakness and fragility. Contrary to the old adage of leaving a part of yourself outside, I found it helpful to always dedicate a small amount of time at the beginning of each rehearsal to allow my dancers to voice any emotional experiences they felt necessary. Often the emotions my dancers were feeling during our rehearsals influenced the movement we created. Following exercises in the studio, I found at times my dancers expected me to give them conclusive feedback on their performances, asking me questions like, “Is that what you were looking for?” The perspective from which they approached me is common; dancers often see themselves as working *for* the choreographer, and understanding expectations is often associated with the idea that there is potentially a correct or incorrect response. I found that when the dancers understood they were safe to present anything that felt authentic, they became more emotionally attached to each of their own creations, empowered in the concept that they did not need to be correct. They just needed to be themselves; that was more than enough.

Allowing my dancers to have a free voice began to alter the hierarchical status of choreographer and dancer within our movement investigation. Johnathon Burrows said,

“The relation between choreographer and dancer is a difficult one, fraught with questions of control, ownership and collaboration... the choreographer easily slips into the role of controlling teacher and the dancer assumes the passive resistance of the student, each triggering the other in a cycle that is hard to break” (Burrows, 2010). I feel that having an emotionally open community served our piece well: the dancers took ownership of their respective choreography and developed an attachment to it. At the end of the day, it was understood that I had the final say in how the choreography of the piece unfolded, but I did so with the very clearly expressed knowledge of what that choreography represented to the dancers in the cast, which was a heavy burden to negotiate.

This project successfully brought awareness and familiarity to the dancers in regard to their authentic movement signatures. As a facilitator, I was able to point out nuances of each of the dancers with clarity, and the cast was able to differentiate their movements from each other's. My research regarding the dancers' movement styles aided me in making distinctions between them similar to focusing a lens that I suspect may have remained blurry for others in the audience. To me, this does not mean the work failed; rather, I take a deep sense of pride in the honesty the dancers were able to successfully experience in the creative process and performance experience. In my opinion, taking the dancers' tendencies and augmenting them would have compromised their freedom to fully experience their authentic movement signatures.

What I did not realize before creating *Whispers Beneath* is that individuality does not always scream for attention. In my experience it instead manifested itself quietly. Seeing the dancers execute the choreography that they themselves inspired with such distinct refinement brought me great satisfaction as a choreographer.

CONCLUSION

Suddenly, I realize the semester's moment has passed; the whirlwind has finally calmed, and all of the tiny puzzle pieces that made *Whispers Beneath* are surrounding me, waiting patiently to be picked up, brushed off and neatly documented in this written thesis. I look back on the last several months, carrying with me a changed understanding and relationships with the people with whom I had the opportunity to work on this choreographic collaboration.

As I watched the finished piece from the silent cry room at the back of the theatre, I felt as though I was peering into the blurred memories of dreams my dancers were trying to remember. Had I not allowed my dancers to have a voice in the process, to be able to honor their experiences and histories, the piece would have been denied the insight and depth I believe made it unique and special.

There were several unexpected challenges within this experience. Many times I walked into the studio with an intense desire to start over, to just begin choreographing a dance that was entirely created by *me*. I had experienced fear in the creative process before as an individual; worrying that my choreography would be found lacking or uninteresting, but I had never experienced fear while a facilitator of collaboration. I did not expect to feel I lost a piece of ownership in the creation of *Whispers Beneath* because I had invited, encouraged, even *required* the cast to contribute to the compositional

foundation. I did not expect to feel concerned that perhaps my cast had too much control in this project for me to claim it as my own.

Also, there was the issue of integrity; the sections of choreography created by the cast that I did not particularly love. *Whispers Beneath* was dedicated to honoring individualities, yet at times I found it difficult to embrace movement styles that were unfamiliar to me. For instance, I found myself altering one dancer's movement sequences on a regular basis. I would leave rehearsals confused and frustrated at myself for wanting to change the movement she produced from my assignments. When I began incorporating LMA into my rehearsals I realized the states and drives the dancer returned to were exactly opposite from my own authentic movement signature. Questions of how to honor individualities without abandoning my own voice in the choreography haunted me in and out of the studio. At times, even though I knew I played a key role as editor, I felt like I was watching a piece of which I had no ownership. I found guidance through the help of mentors, peers, and, once in a while, just letting go of the issue for a day or two and then taking a look at it with a new pair of eyes. Ultimately, I found other ways of manifesting my unique style in *Whispers Beneath*. For example, I took full control of elements such as the music, costumes, lighting and set design. These elements not only added to the production of the piece, but also shaped its feel, the story that it told, and the environment in which it took place.

Allowing my cast to have such a strong voice in the choreography was terrifying for me initially. Looking back at my personal journal entries from our rehearsals, I find myself amused at the stressfully scribbled "to do," "to clean," and "to fix" lists, an obvious manifestation of the grasp I was determined to maintain on the piece. In the end,

my grip relaxed. I see now that it did so because the pieces of our puzzle were finally falling into place, and it was precisely because I had not cut the pieces myself.

Each of these bumps in the road, the unexpected surprises and fortunate accidents alike, have served as insights allowing me to feel more prepared in further delving into the research of creating work that highlights the individuality of its movers. The Laban movement analysis work has given me a unique and specific approach to clarifying and refining authentic movement styles in myself as well as dancers with whom I have worked and will work. I feel optimistic in continuing the investigation of how unique experiences and memories influence art-making and look forward to further developing my skills incorporating individuality in the choreographic process.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrews, R. (1987). *The columbia dictionary of quotations*. (1 ed., Vol. 1, p. 90). New York City, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Bayles, D., & Orland, T. (1993). *Art and fear*. St. Paul, MN: The Image Continuum Press.
- Bluestien, J. (2001). *Creating emotionally safe schools: A guide for educators and parents*. (1 ed., Vol. 1, p. 16). Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc.
- Burrows, J. (2010). *A choreographer's handbook*. New York City, NY: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Ceccoli, V. C. (2012, 11). Feeling pina: How the choreographer moved people. *Psychology Tomorrow Magazine*, 1(3), Retrieved from <http://www.psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/feeling-pina-how-the-choreographer-moved-people/>
- Connor, S. (1988). *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, theory, text*. Oxford: Balckwell.
- Denhardt, R. & Denhardt, J. (2006). *The dance of leadership: The art of leading in business, government & society*. New York, London: M.E. Sharp.
- Groff, E. (1990). *Laban movement analysis: An historical, philosophical and theoretical perspective*. (Master's thesis, University of Utah).
- Hackney , P. (1998). *Making connections*. New York City, NY: Overseas Publishers Association.
- Kelly, R. (2013, 12 14). Interview by A. Nina Austin-Edwards. *Dance up close to Raja Feather Kelly*. Retrieved from <http://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/view/Dance-Up-Close-to-Raja-Feather-Kelly-2013-12-04/>
- Kozel, S. (1993-1994). Bausch and phenomenology. *Dance Now* Vol. 2 n. 4
- Laban , R. (1950). *The mastery of movement*. Boston, MA: PLAYS, INC.

- Laban, R. (1966). *The language of movement*. Boston, MA: PLAYS, INC.
- Manuel, D. (1999, 10 20). German choreographer Pina Bausch in rehearsal. *Stanford News Service*. Retrieved from <http://news.stanford.edu/pr/99/991020bausch.html>
- Moore, C. L., & Yamamoto, K. (1988). *Beyond words: Movement observation and analysis*. (1 ed., Vol. 1, p. 17). New York City, NY: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers.
- Nachmanovitch, S. (1990). *Free play: Improvisation in life and art*. New York City, NY: Penguin Putnam.
- Pite, C. (2012, March 17). Interview by C Jowers., Retrieved from <http://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/10/50/view/The-Dance-Enthusiast-Asks-Crystal-Pite-2012-03-17>
- Pritzlaff, R. (2013, 12 14). Interview by A. Nina Austin-Edwards. *Dance up close to Raja Feather Kelly*. Retrieved from <http://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/view/Dance-Up-Close-to-Raja-Feather-Kelly-2013-12-04/>
- Rawle, S. (2009). Performance in Cinema. *Film Crit.* 34 1. 58-75
- Schmais, C. (1981). An interview with irmgard bartenieff. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 4(1), 5-24. Retrieved from <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF02579523>
- Tharp, T. (2003). *The creative habit: Learn it and use it for life*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks.
- Tolman, A. (Director) (2013, December 6). *Whispers Beneath*. Multitudes. Performance at University of Utah, Salt Lake City.
- Whitman, W. (1855). *Leaves of grass*. Brooklyn, NY: Fulton Street Printing Shop.