

THE BEAUTIFUL BEAST: THE SUBVERSIVE POWER OF  
MONSTERS IN THE AESTHETICS OF DANCE  
AND INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

by

Li Zhan

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## STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The thesis of Li Zhan

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

Donna White, Chair April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013  
Date Approved

Abby Fiat, Member April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013  
Date Approved

Sharee Lane, Member April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013  
Date Approved

and by Stephen Koester, Chair of  
the Department of Modern Dance

and by Donna M. White, Interim Dean of The Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

Monsters have been traditionally regarded as large, aggressive, and ugly creatures that live in our nightmares to terrify us with their abnormal bodies and hideous appearances. They are generally relegated to the realm of evil in our fictions, folklores and mythologies, and used as symbols to describe the darker sides of humanity, the things that most frighten us about ourselves and things we do not understand about the world we live in. This thesis seeks to expand our sociocultural and aesthetic definitions of monsters, and to reframe them as sources of inner strength and individual freedom. The creative potential of these classical creatures in the dance world is limitless, as they have the power to subvert our preconceptions of morality, social boundaries, aesthetics, and personal limitations. For this thesis, I have investigated my own experiences from my dance training in China and the revolution that has taken place in my choreographic creative processes here in the United States; I search for the monsters that surround my life and those that live inside me. As I have sought to redefine the monster as a source of our courage, a protector, and even a hero, I have regarded monstrosity as a potential source of aesthetic inspiration for redefining the possibilities of movement creation and performance potential in dance.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and all dearest family members

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The power of monsters is their ability to fuse opposites, to merge contraries, to subvert rules, to overthrow cognitive barriers, moral distinctions and ontological categories. Monsters overcome the barrier of time itself. Uniting past and present, demonic and divine, guilt and conscience, predator and prey, parent and child, self and alien, our monsters are our inner-most self. – Gilmore, 2003, 194

#### A Theory of Monsters

I began with a simple question: what are monsters, and why do we need them? From traditional European-Christian art to postmodernism, Shakespearian drama to contemporary movies, the arts to the sciences, the idea of the monster is embedded in nearly all of our cultural discourses and popular mythologies. Why are these creatures so important for human civilization, and how do they function for us mythically, psychologically, and aesthetically? What are the deep connections between humans and monsters? These were the questions that led me into this thesis research, and inspired me to begin broadening my definitions of ugliness and beauty in the dance world.

This research has also led me to unexpected realizations about my self, and allowed me to value monsters in a profound way, to gain awareness of these darker parts of humanity in a more holistic way. It led me into a remarkable area where I could

recognize that monsters play an essential role in my personality, my artistic works and my life. The study of monsters became an essential part of my creative and theoretical research in the dance field, allowing me to open new aesthetic lenses and performance potentials on stage. This thesis stands as a testament to the possibilities for abnormality in the body, pushing the comprehension of what a body on stage can be, and “subverting the rules and cognitive barriers” that can often restrict a choreographer’s individual expression. In the choreographic component of my thesis, I wanted to construct a unique world of monstrous bodies that brought together all the characteristics of our unique monster-selves.

In each chapter of this written document, I will explicate my own theory of monsters through the exploration of my creative processes and my theoretical research. In the first chapter, I will describe the classical characterizations of monsters from various mythological and literary sources. I will analyze the characteristics of these traditional monsters through their images in different cultures, and the terrors and powers that they represent through their superhuman bodily symbolism. As social constructions, each monster represents a unique fear or abnormality, an “otherness” that we have constructed to give form to a certain sociocultural fear or discomfort. Through these classical representations of monsters, I will begin to deconstruct our image of monsters as mere representations of evil, and instead look at them as complex beings with a unique place in our psyche and mythos.

In the second chapter, I will discuss my own training experiences in Chinese traditional dance in China, as well as in modern dance after coming to the United States. I will describe my own battles with external forces (the monsters outside me), and how my

own inner monster rose up to empower me and lead me to express my individuality in the face of all these challenges. From my first experience with my own inner monster as a child on the playground, I will delineate the evolution of my own personal monster and how it became the inspiration for this theoretical and creative work.

I will discuss the creative portion of this project in the third chapter, and illustrate all of the ways in which monsters influenced the creation of “I See You Through Covered Eyes.” Drawing from research ranging from formulating exercises with my dancers to image collection and movement generation, I will lay out the many ways in which each individual dancer came to fully embody their unique inner monsters. Then, I will describe the ways in which the performance of this work functioned to deconstruct many traditional aesthetic principles of the dance field, traditional aesthetic principles I was accustomed to accepting and how it resulted in a unique, unknowable, and expressively “monstrous” dance.

Finally, I will conclude by discussing the many philosophical dualities between monsters and the heroes that destroy them. They have the potential to fuse opposites, and to bring us beyond the limitations of tradition, aesthetics, and societal boundaries. Here, I want to propose the idea that a monster can be beautiful, and in my life my monster has always been my hero. Ultimately, my goal has been to develop a theory of monsters that acknowledges their presence as a reflection of alternative sides of the human condition; the acknowledgment of this presence in each of us can provide a renewed sense of creative potential and individual expression, and bring us the strength to overcome challenges, resist conformity, and gain a more holistic view of ourselves: both the light and the dark within each of us.

## CHAPTER 2

### OGRES, ANIMALS AND US

Our monsters are our inner-most self. - Gilmore, 2003, 194

In this thesis project I was able to research and create monsters, the strange yet familiar creatures that exist both inside and outside of each individual, playing both the roles of fearful incarnations and guardians of our innermost selves. With this simultaneously repellant and fascinating nature, monsters have inspired the imagination of humans since the beginning of recorded history. The images of monsters throughout our mythological past appear as both destroyers and creators, uniting the duality of our societal existence and the troubled nature of our relationships with one another, with nature and with ourselves. Humans construct monsters through their surrounding environments and life experiences, and then portray them in fictions, literature, fairy tales, and the arts to reaffirm our complicated relationship with the darker side of ourselves.

Though we have created them in our sociocultural representations and myths, our monsters continually speak back to us from the void of their creation: together, humans and monsters form a circle that have dialogued and inspired each other from ancient times to present day. We have constructed this circle not because monsters are an unreal fantasy beyond our reality, but because monsters are symbols and metaphors of our

reality. From the beasts of dark forests to the monsters hiding in the ocean, from Frankenstein's creature to aliens from outer space, our monsters are reflections of human revelation and human fear. They are a part of how we know this earth and our place on it. Monsters are old, mysterious accompanists who play an important role in human civilization:

The monster is a sign, a horrible image that must be interpreted. The contested origin of the word—from *monstrare* (to show) or *monere* (to warn)—points to this double function. - Russeil, 2004, 75

Russeil (2004) points out that the two root words of our English word “monster” relate to a process of “showing” or “warning.” Both of these ideas indicate that monsters are beings that show us something, or exist as a warning. Perhaps it is a “showing” of abnormality, of something that is very different from the norm, unusual and aberrant from the ordinary. Monsters as creations in human culture present numerous visual distinctions from other categories of the human mythos. We traditionally recognize monsters as extraordinary creatures with gigantic size, ferocious appearance, formidable strength, insatiable appetites, and often diabolically opposed to humans. Steffen Hantke (2002), in his review of David Gilmore's “Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manners of Imaginary,” summarizes these common constructions and highlights some of the traditional features of monsters: “Monsters are large in size, the product of combinations of naturally occurring features, and largely defined by their mouths, which link them to cultural taboos about cannibalism (p. 200).” According to Hantke's summary, monsters illuminate exaggerations of the ideas that are directly caused by their formidable monstrous appearances, which usually contain a massive body that displays muscularity, ugliness and aggressiveness (often linked to cultural taboos about violence,

eating, primitivism, and beauty).

Oftentimes monsters also have mixed body parts constructed from combinations of various objects from the real world, which illogically but functionally combine together, like human body parts hybridized with that of an animal. Hantke (2002) also highlights monsters' mouths and how the beastly hunger of these creatures strongly relates to our sociocultural morals about killing and eating people, a representation of humanity's basest fears. Some examples of monsters, as categorized in both Western and Eastern cultures, are listed below in a more concrete way, so that we might understand the diversity and complexity of these mythological creations.

#### Fears of the Mouth: Ogres

“... ‘till he came to a great big tall house, and on the doorstep was a great big tall woman.”

‘Good morning, mum,’ says Jack...

‘It’s breakfast you want, is it?’ says the great big tall woman, ‘it’s breakfast you’ll be if you don’t move off from here. My man is an ogre and there’s nothing he likes better than boys on toast ...’” (Jacobs 1890, 62)

--- *At the Ogre’s House*, Goldberg 2007

Ogres (see Figure 1) carry the most classic and typical appearance of monsters as we traditionally understand them, and “the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that ogre is an Old French word from the twelfth or thirteenth century meaning ‘fierce pagan’ or ‘man-eating giant’” (Krell, 2009, 16). In many fairy tales, folk stories and mythology, ogres are commonly described as gigantic and abominable humanoid beings with a fondness for eating people, especially children. “In visual art, ogres are often depicted as having a large head, abundant hair and beard, a voracious appetite, and a strong body (Wikipedia).” These large beings are terrifying, revealing the puniness and pitiful frailty



Figure 1: *Ogres* by Gustav Dore, 1765

of the human body. Ogres thus exist as a physical incarnation of our deep human fear of feeling weak and helpless, but they also represent our fantasies of being more powerful and more free from society's laws than we are. But it is not just their size that matters, because large beings do not necessarily incite fear in us if they do not have instincts of aggression or violence. Krell (2009) describes it this way:

The ogre's appetite is monstrous. Young, raw flesh is his food of choice, taken in the most violent ways. Yet the act of consuming is only apart of his nature; the victim descending the digestive track metonymically produces a myriad of themes. The ogre not only bites, he swallows, he digests, he defecates, and revels in his excrement. – Krell, 2009, 25

So, what make the ogre monstrous and threatening is not only its tremendous physical size but also its sanguinary appetites for the human body. Cannibalism is perhaps the most desperate and horrifying act a human being can commit, this combination of atrocities is represented in the ogre, and with it our fears about infanticide, cannibalism, murder, violence and all the terrible things a human being is capable of. So why create a monster that is so close in its physical appearance to human beings, and why give it physical form? In a way, ogres are representations of the many moral evils

perpetrated by human beings; we enjoy the creation of monsters because it simultaneously warns us against committing evil acts, but also allows us to vicariously fulfill our species' violent impulses through their actions. Moreover, ogres in these stories always die at the end: we have given physical form to the most terrifying and horrific aspects of ourselves so that we may then kill it, if only symbolically. When the hero comes riding in on his horse, sword gleaming to slay the fearsome monster, in a way we are witnessing the symbolic triumph of humanity's will for justice and good over its baser impulses to eat, kill, and destroy.

These symbolic representations in our mythology also say interesting things about our constructions of the body. Like Gilmore said, the mouth can be a malevolent organ and socially complicated one, nearly every culture on earth has moral and social codes about how and when we use our mouths. By projecting this organ onto an otherworldly beast, we have made an imaginary representation of all our fears and moral codes about the mouth: "monsters are depicted as having yawning, cavernous mouths brimming with fear-some teeth, fangs, or other means of predation" (Gilmore, 2003, 176). In a way, the teeth of monsters are more akin to an animal's than to a human's, but we see a human-like creature here (the ogre) with teeth like a tiger's or bear's. As Gilmore (2003) notes in his article, this may represent our species' early fears of predation, from a time when humans were routinely hunted and eaten by animals and this was a great threat to our survival. On the other hand, it is possible that these portrayals of animal-like mouths on a humanoid body represent our inability to reconcile the fact that we are predators. Humans eat animals, we are carnivorous, and this fact lays bare our own animal natures. Though constantly seeking to separate ourselves from the animal world, these monsters embody

our fears of our innermost animalism. The ogre's, or other man-eating monster's mouth, is thus a feature that represents the brutal and fierce past of the human being, and its animal potential to eat the life of other beings, and respond only to primal impulses.

### Animal-Human Hybrids: Harpies and Medusa

Besides a huge body frame and representations of the mouth, monsters often appear as human-animal hybrids, which “provokes horror and wonder by virtue of its refusal to be confined within any categorical system other than its own and yet its imminent arrival allows space for the consideration of a host of new possibilities, of new modes of being and doing” (Dixon, 2008, 671-672). In folklore and mythology, there is often a dichotomy created between the extreme beauty of princesses and human heroes, which is set against the extreme ugliness of the monster. Usually, the more complex and horrific the monster appears, the more satisfaction we get from their distinction. In the case of the two classic creatures, Medusa and the harpies (see Figures 2 and 3), we see



Figure 2: *Harpies in the infernal wood*, from *Inferno XIII*, by Gustave Doré, 1861



Figure 3: *Medusa*, by Caravaggio, 1595

representations of hideous women with bodies that are hybridized with animal anatomy. As we will see, these creatures represent complex social stigmas about women and the fear of women with power.

When we consider the harpy, one of the creatures in ancient Greek and Roman mythology, it is described as “a rapacious monster... having a woman’s head and body and a bird’s wings and claws or depicted as a bird of prey with a woman’s face” (Oxford Dictionary on-line). The Oxford Dictionary says the word harpy comes from the Latin word harpyia or from the Greek harpyiai, which means “snatchers.” They are represented as greedy thieves and man-eaters, who often seduce men from their heroic tasks and famously battle Greek heroes in direct opposition to their given quest. They are placed directly opposite of what might be called the “heroic male.” As a bird-human mixture, harpies are an uncompleted subhuman since the majority of their body is animal, but simultaneously they are the superhuman because they can fly and are superhumanly intelligent and conniving. They are always naked, and so cleverly powerful that they are

often able to challenge heroic men in violent and often destructive ways. Perhaps they represent an ancient fear of giving power to women, a version of men's fear of the seduction and "moral evils" of women in an age before gender equality.

Another example of this hybridity is the Gorgon Medusa, one of the most famous monsters in Greek mythology. Though born as a beautiful creature, she was later cursed into monstrosity. In Evslin's (1987) *Medusa*, she is portrayed as the youngest and the most beautiful daughter of the Ceto-Phorcys branch (a family of monsters), but Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, grew jealous of her beauty:

Very proud of yourself, aren't you, snarled Athena. "Well, take a last look. I'm going to make you even uglier than your sisters."

Shrieking, she reached up and grasped the snake, trying to pull it out of her hair, but its tail was rooted in her head; to pull it out she would have to rip away her scalp... now the snake became two snakes, then three! Every lock of her hair was becoming a snake. They stood on their tails, weaving their coils, darting their tongues, hissing. – Evslin, 21-22

Thus, Medusa's monstrosity became the product of her beauty, and her curse gave her the superhuman power of turning even the strongest men into stone. Like the avian body of the harpy, Medusa is another human-animal hybrid that perhaps speaks to our human turmoil with the primal side of our natures. But snakes are usually symbolic representations of evil and the Biblical downfall of Eve, so perhaps Medusa is a complex representation of the traditional male construction of women: seductive, morally questionable, and with the dangerous power to control men. In this way, human societies also construct monsters to embody our fears about sexuality and gender, and how our animal natures interweave with our human moral codes that may conflict with the primal impulse to procreate. But if Medusa and the Harpies are symbolic demonizations of women in classical cultures, then they also represent the subversive power of women, and

the superhuman aspects of the female sex. The first feminists, in a way, could be seen as these hideous human-animal monstrosities.

### Eating the Heart: The Chinese Fox Spirit

Perhaps the most elusive and dangerous types of monsters are the shape-shifters, powerful illusionists that can trick the mind and challenge conceptions of visual truth. Monsters are mysterious and ambiguous, existing in the unpredictable realm of imaginary fears. Their unfathomability is constructed through the constant processes of showing and hiding, making their appearances shift through the known and the unknown, through the surprises and revelations of darkness and light. The showing acts as the first clue and enticement that triggers curiosities, seducing the viewer to go deep. Eventually, the monster's hideousness is revealed from beneath the allure of curiosity.

Huli Jing, the fox spirits in Chinese mythology, are analogous with the trickster fairies of Western folklore. They are often depicted as foxes who can shift their shapes into human forms, usually that of a very beautiful and enchanting woman. In many Chinese folk stories, the fox spirits play various roles, but one particular spirit shows us these monstrous shape-shifting qualities. One of the most famous stories tells us that of one such fox spirit, who at night paints a beautiful face on dead human skin, and then wears this skin to turn into a charming and beautiful woman. In order to stay alive forever and maintain her youth and beauty, she uses this second skin to seduce men and eat their beating hearts. In contrast with the more huge and hideous monster types, the fox spirit embodies the illusions of beauty and attractive appearance, and the male sexual weakness for women: this spirit metaphorically seduces them and eats their hearts. Like Medusa

and the harpies, the fox spirit challenges the truth of our eyes and our most fundamental preconceptions about love and lust. Yes, she represents the male fear of weakness in confronting the beauty of a woman, but she also represents our innermost fears that we cannot trust the truth of our eyes or our hearts. By shifting her shape and stealing our skin, this monster shows us the limits of our senses and feelings as human beings.

### Monsters and Us

Gopnik describes the human body in this way: “We are all meat, trembling and fresh, dying and spasming, and we enter into our humanity, as we leave it, by way of our animalness. We are beasts eating beasts, and the real bestiality... lies in avoiding the truth of it” (Gopnik 15). Ogres, harpies, Medusa, and the Chinese fox spirit all display a desire for human beings to deny the animal nature of our existence. So we have taken these baser sides of our nature and projected them on fantasy images of monsters, all of which contain irresistible powers and superhuman abilities: they symbolize all the things that we simultaneously admire and fear about ourselves. For example, we created Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, zombies, and the aliens of outer space; they contain greater extremes of ugliness and horrific appearance, and stronger lethality than these ancient monsters in mythological books. They are new monsters, for new times, and tightly connect with science, biology and all the other innovations we have had in our civilization. And so we must question why we are so obsessed with monsters. As Stephen King points out: “We love and need the concept of monstrosity because it is a reaffirmation of the order we all crave as human beings” (qtd. in Carroll, 1990, 199). Like its primary meaning, monsters can be regarded as moral warnings. King says we

love monsters because they are bad examples that show all the parts of us we do not want be, so that we can be proud of the order and normality in our societies. And yet, even though we do not want to be a monster or behave like a monster there is still a curiosity to witness the freedom from moral rules and the unrestrained animalism of these creatures.

“Despite their hideousness and evil deeds, classic monsters bore a strong resemblance to the dark side in all of us” (McCormick, 1996, 37). This is one of the common understandings of what the monster is: through the hideous and evil mutations of their bodies, they are able to enact dark, horrific and powerful things. We create monsters as an embodiment of all the ugliness, hideousness, moral decay, and violence inside of us: all of the things that we do not want to be, but somehow still want to see. So not only do they represent the fear of these parts of ourselves and the stigmas we have created in society, they also provide a vicarious outlet for the fulfillment of our violent and carnal impulses. They ask us to imagine, “What if I were that powerful? What if I could break free from society’s rules and do as I please?” This is the power of monsters, and why we obsess, create and continue to love them. They are us.

This thesis work has aesthetically provided me with the same kinds of empowerment and freedom that the monster represents. In the choreographic process of my thesis work, the monster became an awe-inspiring visual image that was simultaneously fascinating and hideous. These images were a source of inspiration but also a source of freedom for my dancers and myself, as monsters represent the freedom from conventional codes of behavior and aesthetics. As they challenged our humanity in classical mythology, so they challenged me artistically in the creation of this work. They

challenged me to create something different, abnormal, and superhuman. My intention was not to create a sense of horror or violence on stage, nor to assault the audience with atrocities or scare them with violent or disgusting images (though monsters often are). Rather, my goal was to go deeper into these creatures and to discover the monsters within us all, how they can fascinate us and show us their power, which expands beyond our limitations of imaginations, beliefs, strengths and abilities. We searched for our demons, and found them as a source of strength, individuality and freedom.

## CHAPTER 3

### PLAYGROUND PRINCESS AND THE TINDERBOX

The origin of my research traces back to my distinct body-training experiences, a source of comparison between my current modern dance training in the United States and my past training in Chinese traditional dance. These two different cultural educations have greatly impacted my aesthetic, artistic work and personality, but also made me recognize the existence of monsters in my experiences of dance training and throughout my life.

I started my Chinese traditional dance training in a boarding school when I was 9 years old, which is also when the high-intensity physical training and fierce peer competition began. For the next 8 years, until my graduation from high school, the harsh training of Chinese traditional dance became the most unforgettable part of my life, because I repeated its rigorous training regime every day for 8 years. The instructors gave punishments frequently and for no reason, creating competition and pressure during class, they judged our movements through insult and degradation, adding extra training hours and rearranging our life schedules at their whim. There was no concept of time because we were required to be ready for training anytime, and anywhere; we were expected not

to think or ask questions, and those that questioned risked punishment. It was an atmosphere of fear, we were afraid to explore.

There is the modality: it implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than the result, and it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement. These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed on them a relation of docility-utility, might be called “discipline. – (Foucault, from *Discipline and Punish*, 1975, 181)

The discipline and the whole training environment of Chinese traditional dance was the first intangible but also incomparably real monster that accompanied my life for a long time. It does not have a concretely monstrous appearance like ogres or harpies, but it does encompass the real and irresistible power to manipulate my body and mind. Like monsters, it was unknowable, frightening, ominous, and silently powerful in its influence.

Monstrous as it was, I have since realized that Chinese traditional dance training has offered me two essential things that have benefited me as an artist and a human being: the first was getting accustomed to self-breakthrough. With the high-intensity rigor of my training schedule, strict requirements and punishments were the external monsters that forced me to build the strength of my flesh; yet these monsters also cultivated a strong spirit, an internal toughness that spurred me to overcome my own physical and psychological limitations. By being exposed to the monstrous rigor of traditional training, I was forced to find my own inner monster, and harvest its strength.

After years of discipline, my body and mind were left totally unquestioning and servile, but underneath my broken will was a growing and indomitable pride built through trial and survival. These external monsters formed my confidence and strength to break through the docility, as my inner monster allowed me to overcome the limitations

of my self and the challenges of my training. But as my inner monster began to show itself more and more, it bred a plethora of new desires and needs. My monster told me to learn hip-hop, that forbidden technique that my teachers deigned as “wild, with its ugly attitudes.” They thought it would pollute the beauty of our traditional training, somehow infect the body with its impure aesthetic. My monster lured me into secretly watching modern dance videos, and it reveled in the abstract and nonnarrative gluttony on the distortion and liquidity of expression that modern dance gave. For years I had to quell the voice of my monster, as it urged me to explore new realms and rebel against my training, my teachers, and perhaps my culture.

My new overwhelming urge to explore and experience was the second great power that my monster gave me. It grew in a setting of isolated training, and this restrictive atmosphere stimulated my curiosity to explore other aesthetics and different forms of dance. The strict disciplines, requirements, and uniform aesthetic standards were not enough to sate the hunger of my inner monster. When I was learning Chinese traditional dance, there were immovable definitions about what was beautiful, what was ugly, what was right, and what was wrong. In this method of education, my instructors and peers focused on what we should do rather than what we could do, they pointed out what was wrong rather than choose to explore what could be right. Of course, the standards and exclusivities of Chinese traditional dance exist to preserve the pure, professional and traditional aspects of this dance style. However, I felt (and my monster did too) that it limited the potentials of human movement and expression.

In this place of rigidity and aesthetic intolerance, my own creativity and drive to create “abnormal movement” was not tolerated. In a way, I wanted to create movement

that reflected my body and the individuality of my spirit. But like my kinetic idiosyncrasies, my body was similarly in constant friction with the Chinese ideal. I have a body that is distinct and unique, perhaps not well-suited to the curves and circularity of Chinese traditional dance. My joints are knobby and my bony edges are sharp, protruding, and a little bit awkward. At cattle call auditions, traditional dance choreographers in China operate under a standard of the ideal body, with tiny joints, long legs, small torsos, small heads, long necks, and long arms. Luckily, I was skinny and lanky enough to at least be a partial match to this ideal and get cast, but this was a rarity in the traditional dance world. Girls in these dances were supposed to represent flowers, fairies, and weepy maidens, never characters that I particularly identified with. My movement was never seen as correct to the instructors, as my angular body type set me apart from the ideal, and as my inner monster drove me to explore. I was the hybrid, my own body was the monster: “the term monster is another name for hybridity or ‘otherness within sameness’” (Sharpe, 2007, 385). I became this “otherness,” the proverbial black sheep in a group dance, a monster-dancer as defined by Chinese traditional dance body requirements and aesthetics.

Ultimately, this repression stimulated my curiosity beyond those qualities and aesthetic standards to investigate the vast possibilities of movement and the numerous capabilities of the human body. This repression actually became the motivation that helped me seek out my own answers and begin to break out of these lines and rules. If I had been a wonderful traditional dancer, I probably would have never attempted modern dance or become curious about the mobility of the body. I was glad to investigate the rebellion and destruction of monsters because of my sense of dissatisfaction within that

environment.

After graduating from college, my unsatisfied inner monster provided the courage that brought me to the United States and the University of Utah Department of Modern Dance, to seek for the unknown in the realm of modern dance. In this department, the pedagogy has provided much more than the virtuosity of the physical body because it has encouraged me to realize that my abnormality is actually my strength, and to take pride in my unique artistic voice. The openness and diversity of American education has spurred me to this realization, which in turn propelled and inspired me to be brave in the development of what is authentic for me as a person, what is interesting for me in my choreography, and the value of intellectual questioning in my dancing. Within this open and comprehensive environment, I received the freedom to investigate transgressive aesthetics and the otherness of monsters. Monsters exist in this kind of freedom, in places of not dancing correctly but being honest, within new ways of thinking, doing and being.

Coming to the United States has allowed me to experience and embody the delicious transgressions and aesthetic violations that I had longed to commit during my training in China. I feel a sense of joy and freedom now that I have let my monster loose to explore and devour the new and uninhibited world of movement that I have found here. Truly, the raw amount of styles and aesthetic possibilities that I have found in the United States will sate the curiosity and hunger of my inner monster for years to come. In this dance environment free from harsh judgment, it has thrived. Nonetheless, this freedom comes with a sense of guilt, because a large part of the creation of monsters “stems from fear, a fear not only of the dangerous external world, but of the self. The monster embodies, also, the sense of guilt” (Gilmore, 2003, 193). Indeed, our fears do not only

come from the direct impact of ominous external forces, in my case the Chinese training experiences, but also from our inner selves, the most slippery and hidden parts of ourselves.

My monster is my greatest strength but also the source of my guilt, from the self-blame of perceived disrespect; it makes me feel as though I have disrespected the traditional Chinese aesthetics in my rebellion against what I have learned from my culture. Eight years of traditional training and 4 more in college is a long time to be indoctrinated by a system of beliefs. During this long dance journey in China I feel as though I am supposed to show my worship and loyalty to the Chinese traditional aesthetic, but shamefully I feel that I have not. Still, there is a deep ambivalence for me, because I know that given the chance again, I would have the same feeling and make the same decision again to come to America, despite the guilt. And this is the power of my monster, to help me break through the “I’m supposed to” and “I should be,” and to pursue the life that I want to lead.

This power can not only overcome the sense of guilt but also bring me a sense of pleasure when I trample on my guilt and shame. It is the feeling of doing something one knows to be morally “bad,” but not being ashamed about it, that unabashed monster that is present in us all. Thinking of my monstrous side, I recall the only serious fight I had when I was in primary school. As an extremely docile child, my interpersonal philosophy was always forgiving and forgetting; but that day, the playground princess (for whom all of us serfs had to carry things and give her anything she desired) asked me to give her my new pencil box. It was a gift from my mother, and I refused, and her arrogance lit my inner tinderbox on fire. Suddenly a powerful energy rushed through me that was far more

powerful than my skinny frame, a bubbling from my stomach that suddenly rushed to my head. It filled my eyes and my whole body, I became like a fierce and unstoppable chimpanzee, an animal that almost frightened me, but my goal was determined and clear: knock her down. Even though adults had taught me fighting is so wrong and only for bad kids, I did it anyway. We fought an epic battle, that lasted until I got tired and eventually lost the fight, but I kept my pencil box. I felt guilty about my behavior, but also proud that my monster had saved me from tyranny, and I know I would willingly choose to do the same thing again if given another chance.

My monstrous transformation and daring defiance of the playground princess reflects the power of our inner monsters, frightening as they may be. Fighting, aggressiveness, and moral violations are the characteristics of monsters that carry the “bad” part of us, and we are the only carrier of our “bad” monsters. They are violent but also liberating, and we often need a little moral gap to release the inner monster, to follow the truest desire, which has the potential to hurt others but a greater potential to fulfill the self. Certainly, these inner monsters can be difficult to control and extremely dangerous, because they ignore the societal constructions of what is “bad and wrong,” and after the transformation had passed, I felt guilt over the violence and unpredictability of my animal self. It ignores the objectives, the goals and the potentialities of the future, but rather augments our willpower to respond to immediate threats and needs. It is frightening and unpredictable, but also gives us the strength to overcome challenges and leads us into the unknown.

## CHAPTER 4

### A HARMONY OF DISUNITY

The experiences of my own inner monster have led me into the unknown, giving me the building blocks for the creation of my thesis work, “I See You Through Covered Eyes.” The need to transgress and to violate the aesthetic principles of my training led me to explore distortion, different uses of weight, and hideous imagery. The freedom and openness of American pedagogy set my monster free, and led me into new methods of collaboration with my dancers. The guilt and shame of the inner monster, which I felt so keenly on the playground as a child, was the basis for a central exercise with my dancers in the studio. All of these frightening and powerful qualities inherent to the inner monster became my creative process, its ambivalent energy of fierceness and unpredictability led me to the creation of the dance.

For the creative work of this thesis, I began with questions of ambivalence that monsters present us with morally, emotionally, and imagistically. I questioned the idea that monsters are merely incarnations of evil and ugliness. As I discussed in the last chapter, my evolving relationship with my own monsters, both external and internal, affect me in a paradoxical way. They are frightening and unpredictable, but also empowering. It was this idea that inspired many of my exercises with my dancers, and

gave me the tools to help them discover their inner and outer monstrous embodiment. Thus, my creative investigations revolved around the power of monsters to help us fully recognize the sides of our humanity that blossom from our imperfections.

I used an assortment of “the monstrous” in all parts of the creation of “I See You Through Covered Eyes,” from the title of the piece to my performers’ personal stories, and their own illustrations of how they view their inner monsters. We deconstructed their body types, joints, and muscles, and connected each dancers’ unique body to the creation of monstrous movement. Emotionally, we delved into personal fears and guilt to further embody the monster inside. For my dancers in performance, the goal was not to “act out” or “show” the monster, but rather to fully feel this creature that is a deep part of them, and to feel the satisfaction of releasing their other selves. Through various mechanisms of movement generation and performance quality (which I will describe in a more detailed way in the following sections), we explored the relationship between these monster-like expressions and human nature. One of the most important questions I had to ask myself was: how could I make these human-monster hybrids become believable on stage? Rather than pantomime the standard sociocultural preconceptions of monsters, I urged the dancers to create their own personal monsters: we strove to harness the inward connection between their monster and their inner selves, so that they truly became the monster on stage.

### Studio Exercises and Image Collection

Have you ever done something that was forbidden or been told it was bad, yet if you had a chance to do it over again, you would do the same thing? - Li Zhan

This is the question that began my rehearsal process with the dancers, because I believe the answers would help lead my dancers to the discovery of their inner monsters. This heightened awareness of the “bad self,” which I discovered on the playground as a child, would help them to realize where and when this monstrous willpower had dominated their moral decisions, and those moments in life when this subconscious primal drive takes over and leads us to commit, become powerful, and simply do. In these moments of monster channeling, it is often not controllable or consciously chosen, but full of willpower. When the inner monster takes over, as it did with my encounter with the playground princess, the feelings that come afterwards are often tinged with guilt, shame, and self-hatred. The inner monster exists beyond moral and societal restraints, and thus can be a dangerous and frightening thing. But I was interested in those moments when people would have consciously gone back and done the same thing again, being unashamed of the “bad self.”

Each of my dancers had their own story about their “bad self,” with a unique inner monster somehow battling against society, the inner “other” yearning to break free. One of my dancers spoke in rehearsal about his homosexuality, and the constantly fracturing relationship between him and his parents. The breaking of his family bonds was a major source of anxiety for him, encompassing feelings of guilt and regret; though his parents told him that his life was “evil” and “curable,” he felt that this part of himself was simultaneously his monster and the most beautiful part of himself. So he chose to let this familial disintegration happen, in order to fulfill himself and find happiness within his so-called “abnormal” sexual orientation.

Through their acknowledgments of inner “abnormality,” moments of unashamed provocation, and knowing violations of the social fabric of their worlds, I gradually helped them become aware of their monstrous willpower. We then used their personal stories of inner evils to find the kind of monster-embodiment that was essential to “I See You Through Covered Eyes.” Together, we strove to combine these conflicted attitudes of fearlessness and anxiety, of shame and certainty: “This is my monstrous side, and it frightens me, but I can be unashamed of its power.” This paradox became a challenge of embodiment for myself in the choreography and for my dancers in the performance, approaching the complexity of being our inner monsters. What resulted were diverse moments of arrogance, defiance and animalism that were fiercely direct and decisive. Our monsters, in times of adversity, rarely hesitate. But we also found moments of tentativeness and cautiousness, moments where we question our actions in the face of the unknown. We delved into the unpredictable, and the unknowable willpower of the darker sides of ourselves.

Image sourcing was another significant tool for me to explore the possibilities of characterization for the dancers’ physical movement and visual presentation. I started the image collections from my dancers’ drawings and illustrations, which provided a substantial part of the imagery that inspired the creative process. I asked my dancers to draw a profile of their personal inner monster, as well as write down its superpower. I encouraged them to exaggerate the features of the monsters so that later we could embody these physical characteristics in their human bodies and physically explore these exaggerated images on stage. Gilmore describes these explorations of monstrous imagining in this way:

As anthropologists like Turner and Douglas have argued, our monsters indeed help us to think and imagine; they facilitate thought and they encourage us to confront deep fears. Monsters are our guides, our entrée into the mysterious worlds that lie both outside of us and within us, monsters also contribute to the development and growth of the imagination. As such they are indispensable in dealing with the challenges of life. - 2003, 190

From what Douglas and Turner say here about our monsters, one function is that they significantly extend our imaginations through their abnormality. In the rehearsal process, we used the internal sense of abnormality and otherness to create unique images and visuals taken from these “mysterious worlds that lie both outside...and within us.” When the dancers were explaining the uniqueness of their monsters to each other, I noticed that most of them highlighted the physical part that also embodied its superpower. Archetypally, this matches the characteristic superpowers of monsters, which are typically derived from their most hideous deformity: power from abnormality. Each monster’s superpower reflected the fears, weakness and vulnerabilities of my dancers; however, the drawing process forced them to use their imaginations to materialize and give form to their monsters, to observe and create their details, to portray their hideousness and describe how it debilitates them. They had to confront and immerse themselves in their own fears and terrors, and reflect it in their drawings.

One of the dancers drew an octopus-like monster, but instead of tentacles it had numerous infinitely long and thin antennas. Its superpower was that everything it touches rots and dies. This creature represented the fear of death, and of destroying everything and everyone it came into contact with. Its long and thin antennas were flexible and changeable as water, an embodiment of her fears and anxieties of coming into contact with others. The dancer’s challenge was to embody this ephemerally terrifying creature. Another dancer’s monster was a duck-like animal with a big duckbill whose superpower

was a mighty sonic voice that is able to destroy flesh. The sonic voice was his representation of anger, because the power of his words often scared him, but empowered him to fight back and make himself heard. One of the monsters was more abstract, which at a cursory glance seemed like a bunch of tangled wires or cords. But the dancer had embellished its cavernous opening mouth, her inner beast that sucked away her energy. It was vampiric and parasitic, the monster inside her that ate her joy and good feelings leaving her weak and unable to exercise her will. She described it as a “black hole that sucked up everything inside her,” perhaps representing a fear of being lazy or a feeling of helplessness, an inability to affect the world around her. Through these monstrous self-creations, we were able to begin exploring the idiosyncratic movement vocabulary and behavioral status of each monster, and begin forming the unique world of this piece.

We began the process of transposing these two-dimensional images into the three-dimensional embodiment of movement. According to these self-generated monsters that the dancers generated on paper, we focused the creation of movement vocabulary on the strangeness and distinctiveness of each creation. This was a difficult task, because in many of the group dances I have made before, I tend to find dancers with the same body type and movement quality in order to create a sense of unification on stage. In this piece, however, my six cast members all had very distinct body types and movement styles. One dancer was over 6 feet tall, semi-awkward, and very muscular, another was very short and thin. Some were heavily trained in ballet and modern dance, others were working from a more beginning level of technique, but this provided a myriad of possibilities for movement creation. Considering the uniqueness of their body types and training backgrounds, in combination with their monster-drawings, we had a vast diversity of

personalities and characterizations. When I combined these disparate images together, it created a kind of harmony, a harmony of disunity.

I intended to transform these monstrous images into physical movements, which became a mixture of my dancers' inner monsters and their human bodies. We tried to create unexpected moments and to explore the possibilities of the body's movable muscles and joints, instead of just moving the ways it had been trained. Depending on the drawing, I required the dancers to create three gestures that could embody their superpower and the characteristics of their monsters. This was an enjoyable procedure, just to see how the dancers would transform their abstract, animal-like, or hybrid imaginary creations within their human container. For instance, the dancer who drew an octopus-like monster put jiggling fingers on her forehead and used wide opening legs to embody the long and thin antennas. The dancer who drew a bunch of tangled wires used an opening hands gesture to reflect the cavernous opening mouth, meanwhile shifting the "monster's mouth" (her hands) in front of her stomach that made this simple movement immediately gain multiple meanings: suddenly it not only looked like an opening mouth on her stomach, but also a blooming flower on her belly or the birth of some strange, alien baby.

It was simultaneously digestion, birth, voice, death, and life. These shifts of shape, created through gesture and deconstructing the geography of the body, were logical and necessary to demonstrate her monster, but could have seemed illogical and confusing for a viewer without any knowledge of the monster-image itself. "Monsters serve as the polar opposite of normal, yet their abnormality makes normality possible. Their disorder serves

order” (Russeil, 2004, 77). This illuminates the strength of monsters: to make the illogical logical, and to make impossibility possible.

The unpredictability of monster-like movements became part of the fascination within this unknown movement vocabulary: they are interruptible as well as combinable, a composition of movements that can be arranged illogically and even ridiculously. We created a movement vocabulary that does not belong to any specific dance genre, without specific rules or regulations to obey. The monster allowed us to bring movement into an aesthetically transgressive realm, occupying the liminal space between beauty and ugliness. In this space there was more freedom to merge multiple elements and simulate an unrecognizable and mysterious world. The generation of these monstrous movements in many ways mirrors the mythological construction of monsters, which humans, for millennia, have created as “a mixture of realms, the animal and the human, of bodies, of sexes, of life and death” (Dixon, 2008, 680). As reflections of our own hybridity, the imagistic representations of monsters take on multiple meanings, straddle the grey space between the known and the unknowable.

Traditionally, human beings could only imagine the monster’s appearance from verbal story telling or from depictions in tales, mythology, and literature; in my generation, however, advances in film and internet technologies have expanded the visual world and allowed monsters to become movable and even palpable in our daily lives. The actual pictures and visual impacts of monsters make the unrealizable imaginations convert to a materialized “living being.” These vivid creatures, alive in the minds of our generation, became a central part of our creative process; they did not replace imagination and individual creation, but they did influence the image sourcing of the

process. So, in addition to gathering images from my dancers, I also collected monstrous images and sounds from many different sources: films, animations, paintings, fairytales, animal behaviors, nightmares from childhood, and even my own imagination. Then, I translated them into exaggerated movements that were embodied by the performers onstage. For sounds, I gathered auditory source material that supported the characterizations and movement qualities created by my dancers. Some were whispers and shuffling against the ground, representing the ominous and unknowable that exists in the dark. Others, as in the piece's chilling soundscore by Ran Bagno, were an illogical combination of instruments, vocals, and sung consonants: "umaye, umaye, umeh." Strange bird-like whistles and arrhythmic percussion punctuated the space, and augmented the sense of chaotic harmony and the beautiful power of the things that frighten us. All of these musical elements were added much later in the process, in order to supplement the sense of "abnormality" and indefinable "otherness" in the movements.

### The Pale Man

The title of my creative work and the main gestural motif of the piece were similarly inspired by "the Pale Man" in the movie *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006). In the film, the Pale Man (see Figure 4) is a slumberous pale monster whose body type resembles that of a human but there are no eyes on his drooping face. He sits in a lavish and elaborate dining room with a table covered in food and lit by candles; he tempts and waits to eat greedy children who dare to take a bite from his table. When we see our heroine tentatively reach for a grape, he immediately awakes and puts a pair of gruesome red eyeballs into his palms, then uses the eye-palms to see his prey. And indeed, the ensuing



Figure 4: *The Pale Man* from *Pan's Labyrinth*, by Guillermo del Toro, 2006. (Screen shot from my personal DVD).

scene is utterly terrifying: with outspread eye-hands he chases her, ravenous for child flesh, until she narrowly escapes through a tiny hole in the ceiling. This monster represents the sum of all cannibalistic fears, infanticide, and true horror; however, the scene is also beautiful in its ingenuity and fascinating in the mythology and creativity of its motion. The complex dance of monster and heroine, chilling as it may be, was a stunning act of choreography and imagination.

This wicked creature showed me that when we place the hands in front of our eyes, this ordinary human body part immediately turns into something fascinating. It deconstructs our most fundamental assumptions about the logic of the body; in the world of monsters, hands can be eyes, parts can be missing, and others can be made grossly out of proportion. It challenges our ideas about symmetry, beauty, and how we see the world. What if we all had detachable eyeballs and could only see things through covered eyes? Choreographically, I became obsessed with this idea, and created the motif of placing the hands in front of the eyes, rendering the dancer effectively blind. But in this distorted sensual state, I asked my dancers to pretend that they could in fact see the audience

through this monstrous veil, and have a fantasy interaction with the observers. This world of fantasy interaction, created by the Pale Man motif, allowed the hands to become a magical tool for triggering their curiosity, and a form of protection against judgment. By giving them the power to see things that do not exist in real world, this allowed the movement to exist in its purest state, allowing them to inhabit these uniquely abnormal beings without the fear of being judged, criticized, or laughed at. Their task was to inhabit their monster, the parts of themselves that exist outside the realms of sociocultural mores and body taboos, and so the blindness of “covered eyes” allowed them to exist in the fantasy space of monsters, liberating the mind and letting it inhabit its darker physicality in an uninhibited way.

The old adage “don’t judge a book by its cover” seems particularly relevant here, as our eyes can be both devices of truth and of great illusion. Eyes give us the ability to receive visual information, but also lead us into arbitrary judgments and to dismiss the “other” without thinking. Often we choose to trust the eyes more than deep thought, we choose to judge the surface rather than see what is buried deep underneath. Coincidentally, this is how we construct monsters, and many monster stories deal with this issue of truth and illusion. Some monsters are indeed raw visual-physical manifestations of evil, like ogres and trolls who look exactly like the aggressive, cannibalistic, and depraved beings they are. Other monsters, however, look charming and beautiful like the Chinese fox spirit, but behind the beautiful face is an evil will to eat someone’s skin and heart.

Taking this analogy even further, Frankenstein’s creature provides us with an opposite example: “an 8-foot-tall (2.4 m), hideously ugly creation, with translucent

yellowish skin pulled so taut over the body that it ‘barely disguised the workings of the vessels and muscles underneath’; watery, glowing eyes, flowing black hair, black lips, and prominent white teeth” (Shelley, 1797-1851, 45). But like the choreographic creation of this piece, he is more complex than his surface appearance. He is both externally hideous and inwardly beautiful, and represents the oppressive force of society to judge based on appearance alone. In Shelley’s novel, this creature is produced by Doctor Frankenstein’s unorthodox science experiment, but Frankenstein abandons his “child,” frightened by its monstrous and hideous appearance. However, this poor creation still wants to learn human behavior, coexist with society, and be accepted by human beings. Ultimately, this monster is only able to build a relationship with a blind old couple who see him through their “covered” eyes. But his monstrous appearance is too appalling to be accepted by the world so this story ends as a tragedy, the judgment of society upon the “other” wins in the end.

It is human nature that we tend to believe only what we see on the surface, and this quasimedieval idea that we can somehow read someone’s moral character “on their bodies” has perpetually dominated human judgments. Like my Chinese traditional dance teacher who dismissed hip-hop as a “wild and ugly” form, and the all-too-common classical views of modern dance as too grotesque, distorted, and abstracted to express beauty, these surface-level views of aesthetics were what I was trying to subvert in the creation of this work. As my dancers “covered their eyes” to preconceptions of training and aesthetic beauty, I encouraged them to let the inner monster out regardless of external judgment, to let their creative energies make something unique and abnormal, and let that

abnormality fill them to the brink and shield them from anxiety and insecurity in performance.

### In Performance: Shadows and Embodiment

A narrow diagonal of light splits the darkness on stage. Heavy footsteps bring a disorganized large-framed body into the audience's vision, and when this awkward character crosses through the light he soon disappears again into the dark. A quick pitter-patter of footsteps then brings other characters into and out of the light quickly, causing the audience to laugh at this image of dancers skittering and scampering about so quirkily, so oddly; perhaps the audience wonder: "what are they, why are they moving in such a strange way?" The sound of footsteps in and out of darkness indicates the arrival of the unknown, as the dancers embody miniatures of their own inner monsters. The scene of silence and sound, strangeness and darkness became a wonderland of monstrous creation, embodied by my dancers through their own personal veil, their "covered eyes."

In the stagecraft and performance of this work, there are many layers of monster at work. In the beginning, before the lights come on, the darkness on stage is one of the monsters. "Monsters are seen vaguely, fleetingly, and are then shielded again by the darkness; indistinctly observed like dreams" (Gilmore, 2003, 191). Darkness has the ability to cultivate the unknown, and to create its own monstrous environment; it forms an undirected and unlimited space that obscures the visual and contains many possibilities and fears. Without visual signs, when the first shrouded character comes stumbling onto the stage, the monster is communicated through the sound of footsteps in the dark. When the audience can hear something that they cannot see, there is a mixture

of curiosity and anxiety that comes with the presentation of something unknown. The dark unknown triggers this curiosity and sense of insecurity, because the lack of visual stimulation combined with the impact of sounds in the dark tricks the mind into imagining something more fantastic, more terrifying than the real. This is the first construction of the monster, in the mind. The monsters are in these imagined places, and in the dancers who embody the abnormal and the grotesque with the movements of their human forms.

Even though my creative goals were not to frighten or instill horror in the audience, like a B-grade horror flick, I still tried to play upon the hidden terrors of imagination and darkness as a method of creating tonal resonance with audiences. Throughout the piece, I collaborated with lighting designers to constantly create an atmosphere of mystery through the use of lighting and shadows on stage. During the performance, dancers' shadows were cast from both directions: front and back. By moving closer to and farther away from the lights, the dancers' shadows became as big as a giant or as tiny as a gremlin, like devious shapeshifters dancing on the syke. Through this juxtaposition of real body and shadow body, I aimed to create the kind of indefinable multiplicity that influences our human perception of that which we do not understand. This "shadowplay" reflected the complex relationships of our imagined external monsters and those within us, quite literally forming the silhouette of our darker halves. This dark reflection became an integral (though not the only) part of my dancers' performance quality, allowing them a secondary projection of their bodies for the visualization, shape and dynamics of their monstrous embodiment.

After generating the movement material, we reached this monstrous embodiment by exaggerating the qualities of each motion: a simple raise of the arms was pushed further by pushing the scapulae extremely close together, and distorting the position so that the arms were far behind the body. Open mouths were brought to their maximum openness, like a gaping maw of the beast, to mutate the body into something that was no longer human in appearance. This was one of our rules: there was never a moment within the choreography where the dancers could stand in neutral, like normal human beings. The body always had to be distorted, mutated, and made extreme to exaggerated degrees of abnormality. Sometimes, I asked them to think of themselves as insects on stage, attracted by the lights, like mosquitos buzzing around a lamp. Other times, I asked them to embody the furtive curiosity of a meerkat by always nervously looking about their environment, at the audience, or at each other, as if surveying an alien world in which they did not belong. By asking them to embody the nonhuman, and by precluding the possibility of “humanness” on stage, we reached a level of alien embodiment that heightened the connection between my dancers and their monstrous inner selves.

When they performed the piece, I told my dancers not to try to make the audience laugh. The movements may be quirky and funny, and the audience may laugh, but I needed them to hold their seriousness on stage: “no matter how much the audience laughs, what you are doing is not strange to you. You are normal within your own world of monster.” I even encouraged them to regard the audience as aliens, as though the people in the audience were the strange ones. There is a part of the piece when three dancers whisper to each other, so each night I required them to choose one audience member and judge them, and then whisper about it to each other: “Look at him! He’s texting, can you

believe it?” or “Look at her! Those clothes are so weird! What is she thinking, wearing a hat like that?” By reversing the roles of “the other” and turning the awkwardness and weirdness back at the audience, the dancers were able to reframe the processes of alienation that occur between audience and performer.

This was simultaneously a process of empowerment and a tool for deeper embodiment: though the movements were raw and revealing, even vulnerable, I encouraged them to find the strength of their inner monster and its own sense of identity. Thus, rather than being an object of audience humor and judgment, they gained ownership over their monstrous embodiment, were empowered by its otherness, and found pride in its abnormality. In a way, my dancers used the power of their monsters to become heroic in the performance of this piece, perhaps even complex antiheroes in a myth of their own making. But whether they became monsters or heroes, at the very least they became superhuman.

## CONCLUSION

### The Duality Within

As I fought against my training in traditional Chinese dance, my monster was the source of inspiration and freedom to break free from barriers and boundaries. This is the true power of monsters, as Gilmore states, to “fuse opposites, to merge contraries, to subvert rules, to overthrow cognitive barriers, moral distinctions, and ontological categories...uniting past and present, demonic and divine, guilt and conscience” (Gilmore, 2003, 194). Without the brutality and ferocity of this inner strength, we would not be able to express our individuality, our abnormality, and our own unique aesthetics. This subversion of traditional aesthetics has been a true revelation for me during this process. As choreographers, we can always choose to construct movement based on traditional concepts of beauty, symmetry, lines, curves, and statuesque classical shapes, but the images of monsters have allowed me to find new possibilities of creating more nontraditional movement with the human body. Da Vinci’s (1490) *Vitruvian Man* (see Figures 5 and 6) portrays all the “natural” symmetries of the human body, and yet, as I have found through my investigation, there are so many other possibilities inherent in the human form. Even the slightest shift of shape can create something monstrous, something out of the ordinary, and something that is beautifully unique. It is the aesthetic image of

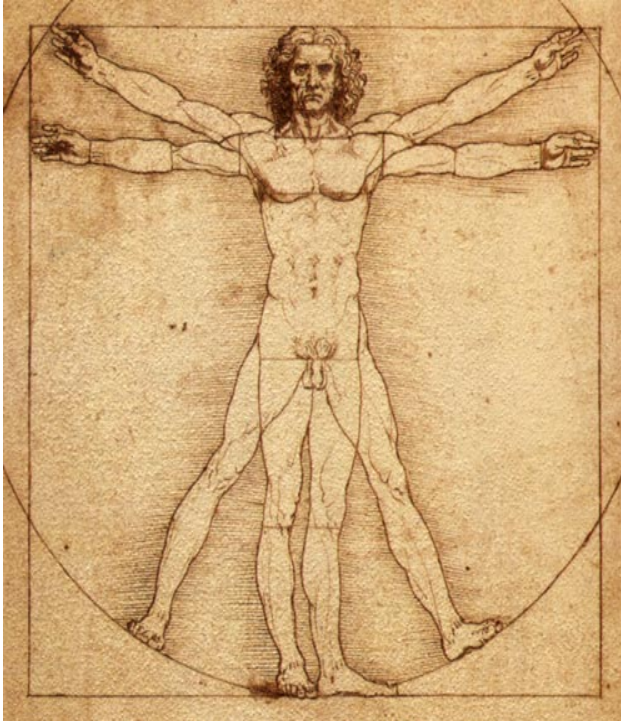


Figure 5: *Vitruvian Man*, by Leonardo Da Vinci, 1490. Available: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian\\_Man](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian_Man)

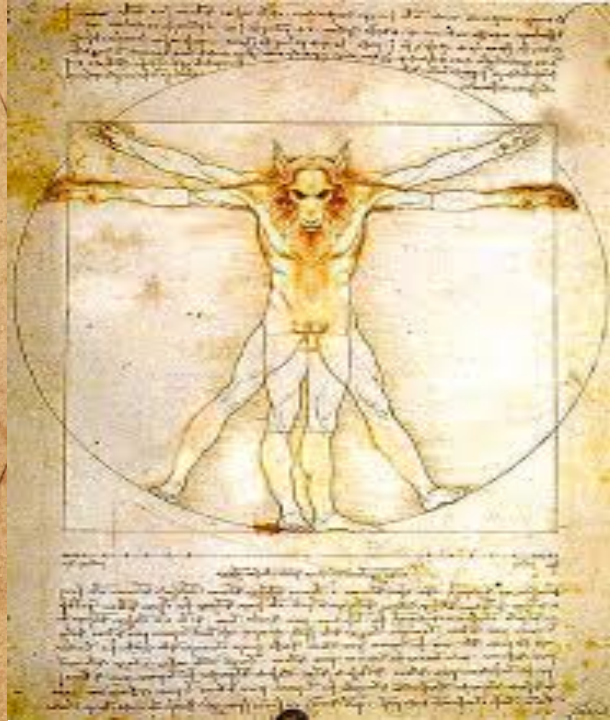


Figure 6: *Vitruvian Werewolf*, from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (film), 2004. (Screen shot from my personal DVD).

monstrosity that I am interested in, and the way it can deconstruct our neoclassical views of the body. The destruction of symmetry and classical beauty can bring with it a new kind of beauty, it can even bring the body out of abstraction, subverting the hierarchy of lines and shapes that has for so long been a cornerstone to the creation of modern dance. There is the potential of deeply embodied superhumanity in these monsters, which can lend us great power in overcoming our individual challenges, and in the creation of dance beyond traditional boundaries.

But where does this subversion end? I have talked a lot about how my monster became my hero, how it helped me challenge the playground princess, how it helped me break free from the limits of my traditional dance training, and helped me construct my

choreographic process in a new and nontraditional way; however, I did not really investigate the extremes of this philosophy on stage. Indeed, there are dance artists who take this idea to the extreme, with actual self-mutilation, real brutality, and explorations of excessive human monstrosity on stage. For me, these expressions of the human monster are valid representations of an artist's vision, but in many ways are too repelling to be seen on stage. They immediately portray the most disgusting and deplorable aspects of our inner monsters, and in a way reaffirm the classic dichotomy between the heroically "beautiful" and the monstrously "ugly." This was not my goal, but rather, to find a place where the monstrous can become the heroic, where the ugly can become the beautiful.

For me, the definition of a "monster" is very subjective and personal: another person's monster will likely not look anything like mine. I have seen my monster in the fierce chimpanzee that fought against the playground princess, in the furtive curiosity that compelled me to watch forbidden modern dance videos, and in the quirky and unknowable shadows of "I See You Through Covered Eyes." This has been the discovery of my monster, and I believe each of us must find and understand this internal force for ourselves, defining it based on our own personal relationship with it. As dance artists, we must accept that each performer and choreographer will present this latent creature in a different way, perhaps with different artistic and sociopolitical goals in mind, reflecting the individuality and unique strength within each of us.

Ultimately, it is about the awareness of this monstrous inner force that is present in our folklore, social fabric, and embedded deep within each of us. In the dance world, our darker halves are largely dismissed: the abnormal, the brutal (an aspect of our inner monsters that I did not fully investigate), and the weird are often seen as "not fit" to be

staged or performed. But like the graceful and the symmetrical, are not these misshapen, mutated, and darkly powerful aspects of humanity just as valid for exploration? Perhaps through the subversion and freedom of monsters we can heighten our sense of individuality and creative potential in a world of conformity, strict rules, traditions, and the ever-present suppression of our unique selves.

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