

SALAD DAYS: WORK, COVENANT, AND THE CHILD

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis has become an intermingling conversation between two threads. On one hand, I write in-depth reflections concerning my creative work, *Salad Days*, completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Fine Arts in Modern Dance. At the same, this is a personal manifesto. I simply ask myself why I made the choices I did, bringing me from micro-decisions to macro-concepts.

I begin with what actually happened, how I approached the presentation of people working through physical and spatial challenges. I give context to my choices of sound, offering the work a specific mood. I am brought to simplicity in the creator's initiative, and how the artist can work towards the possibility of connection, rather than expecting it. This commitment takes me into a discussion on the culture of covenant.

Here, I discern what I mean when I use the term covenant, where this was realized in the dancing, and the implications of such commitment. I make a distinction that, because covenant is unconditional, it calls us to live in the space between question and answer, the tension of having ability to learn, but inability to know all.

Finally, I will make connections to my past while taking into account Dr. Maria Montessori's theories on education and Dr. Stuart Brown's expertise in play. I take a brief look into the Hebrew Scriptures to reveal this ancient culture's impressions of humanity. This culmination recognizes the essence of work and the culture of covenant to be foundational elements of our nature, the nature of the child, and that this is the call of *Salad Days*.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT BRINGS ME HERE

My name is Nick Blaylock and I am a third-year graduate student of the Modern Program in the University of Utah's School of Dance. I was born of the Midwest United States in St. Louis, Missouri and raised just across the Mississippi River in a quaint suburb named Waterloo, Illinois. My mother was a gemologist and singer and my father an administrator in a hospital and musician. They gave birth to my older brother, a writer and I, an amalgamation of things. My brother knew he wanted to be a writer since he was one, as in one day old. He has been drawing, illustrating, or imagining stories and alternate realities since he was born. My journey has been quite the opposite. At my ripe age of twenty-six, I have had semiproductive careers in BMX,¹ Death Metal music, Church music, Dog Training, and finally, dance. My life has been a hodgepodge of trying on hats. So, I am either versatile with an aptitude for learning, or indecisive with a fear of not knowing, as if these are mutually exclusive. Probably more accurate, I am both/and. All I really know is that if I am doing nothing, I feel lost.

I was enrolled in public school at age five. I would not say this ruined me, but it definitely confused me and caused insecurities to fester, as any standardizing institution of mass populace might. To say the least, I was unfulfilled by the daily regime, leaving me to squeeze every drop out of 3:00pm to 9:00pm. The moment I arrived home from

¹ Bicycle motocross, sport of low rise, 19"-22" bicycles for competition or recreation

school, I would throw my backpack inside and rush back outside to climb trees, dig in dirt, play pretend, run for no reason at all, or swim in a lake.

My perpetual boredom, or love of activity, either exhausted my parents or inspired them. I often drove my mother crazy until she and my father came to the conclusion, “He just needs something to do”. For instance, when I was five, I wanted to help my father finish building our basement. Seeing that I wanted to work but lacked experience or understanding, he handed me a large scrap-block of wood, a hammer, and a bucket of nails. Thirty minutes and about thirty nails later, I had a cactus... or something. It did not really have a name, but I definitely made something.

Likewise, somewhere between the ages of five and seven, I once spent an hour taking apart our family answering machine. Upon finding me with the answering machine now in at least twenty pieces, my mother asked why I did it. To this I answered, “I wanted to see how it worked”. These scenarios were a foreshadowing of my life to come. I would desire to make, with a focus on how it gets done. *Side note: This situation is not exclusive to me. I believe we all have this capacity for work, creation, and wondering, even though our journeys or expressions of it might, and should be, entirely different.*

Accompanying my knack for doing, I also seemed to learn by movement, understand by touch. This was true for each physical activity in which I took part growing up. Soccer asked of one’s agility and awareness, using the whole body to find nuanced ways of moving through space. BMX is an art riddled with manipulation of space, time, and energy. Drumming required my whole body to perform different tasks, all interrelated while also in conversation with other musicians. I did not know that I was

being taught to manipulate space, time, weight, and energy through these activities. I was being gifted an awareness of my self in relation to the world around me. The institution dispensed information while the movement with nature allowed knowing to unfold from within.

By the time I graduated high school, my ventures of physicality were not promising any kind of financial stability. This never really mattered to me, but it did to the Midwest culture. So, I felt pressure to change course and go to university even though I had zero desire to continue public school-styled education. It was not long before I would again engage with a physical activity that lacked in financial stability.

The first class I took as a college student was DANC 111 – Fundamentals of Movement. After an introductory conversation, the teacher, a sixty-year-old fellow who would later become a mentor, started rolling in and out of the floor, skipping and cartwheeling, while asking us to try the same. With just that, I was hooked. By the end of that semester, I had changed my major. Thus began my relationship with dance, a union that would continue my education through physicality, but also call me into deeper conversation with the unknown, revealing more truths than I could have imagined.

Like any new relationship, the beginning felt like a whirlwind of information, excitement, and innocent passion. For the first three years, I did not stop moving. I danced in everything for everyone, students, faculty, and guests, unashamedly including the musical *FAME*. It was also here that I found a disposition in choreography. *Side note: By this, I mean I found something that made sense to me – not in a way that I cognitively understood it without study, but when I invested in the work of choreography, personal and communal truths unfolded for me, even more so than past physical endeavors.*

By the end of these years, I thought I was gaining momentum to realize a career in dance. I had performed for many reputable names and even won a few awards for my choreography. In my final semester, I was working as an apprentice for a company having two of their completed works already learned and helping in the creation of a third. As well, I learned a work from a guest artist and had a personal audition for his company, which went favorably by all standards. These two companies and three other artists stated on at least one occasion each that they would love to work with me when I graduated. So upon finishing, I contacted each. After many tough conversations about financial inabilities and changing of interests, I was left with no jobs or potentials for work. All of my options for dance ran dry.

At first, I was uneasy about my sudden need to reassess practically everything, but what was more disorienting was now having unlimited possibilities and no direction, besides keeping a roof over my head. So, I applied for any employment, tried on a few more hats, and ended the next year as one of four trainers at a dog daycare, boarding, and training facility. Throughout that year, I choreographed twice, once for a side project and another in residency at a university. For the majority of the year, though, I did not dance, with the exception of a few classes and a few rehearsals that did not lead to performances. I even came to a point of acceptance that dance, along with all other hats, was just something I took seriously for a while but was not able realize as a career.

Honestly, I had distaste for the idea of going to graduate school mostly because of my aforementioned association with mass standardizing educational systems. It was not until the end of the university residency during my year “away” from dance that I realized how much I enjoyed working with the undergraduate age group. I had a

conversation with my partner about my enjoyable experience and she mentioned that maybe I go to graduate school in hopes of someday teaching at that level regularly. Going into the application process, I knew I would not attend graduate school unless it was fully paid for. I already incurred a heaping amount of student loans for my bachelor's degree. And in reality, a dance career would not financially suffice the loans of a graduate degree. I only completed the application for one school and received one scholarship. With that, I was on my way to Salt Lake City.

So, here I am at the end of my third year as a graduate student in Modern Dance. I am left with more unanswered questions than I had after my first run through of university, with less opportunities for work. It is a very real possibility that I will be, yet again, left with no options. Even so, I feel more conviction, resolve, and peace about life. This brings up a few questions for me, which I will be addressing in the rest of this document: Why commit to something (dance) that might hold no future? To live a fulfilled life, is simply working enough? *Side note: For reference, I see "fullness of life" or a "fulfilled life" as a life lived in deep connection with the world around, including all forms of life.*

To be clear, I will not be trying to tackle these questions through much scientific reasoning. As these questions are of the metaphysical and qualitative nature, I will consider the common denominators within my latest work *Salads Days* and within my experiences here at the University of Utah, all in hopes of unfolding truths as to why I am still here, working. *Salad Days* fulfilled half of an evening length dance production entitled *WOW*, presented at the Marriott Center for Dance's Hayes Christensen Theater. This evening was choreographed, produced, and directed by a colleague and myself.

CHAPTER 1

WORK

The movement

Since its premiere, I have had many people ask me what *Salad Days* was about. This question challenged me. Each time, I would have to think back to what was running through my head when imagining the piece. So, when I reflect on what *Salad Days* became, one word continues to ring true: work. At least at first, and to the best of my understanding, there was no emotive purpose or specific agenda, just movement and people working the movement out. So, my first inclination is to talk about what it was the dancers and I were working on.

Within my choreography, a certain kind of physicality is usually present and important to me. To my knowledge, this movement quality stems from my past and origin in dance. That sixty-year-old instructor/mentor once told me that dance is just the playground for adults. This is what hooked me in the first place. Like my relation to the trees, the hills, the bikes, and the drums, dance offered me the experience of an adventure within my body. The possibilities of questioning, exploring, and understanding can fill a lifetime. Choreography simply became my effort to share adventures with others. When offering movement for dancers to absorb, I often step back and laugh at what I come up with. Honestly, I feel as though I look like a child dancing in their backyard, and in some ways, that is precisely what is happening.

I began the first rehearsals like I had many others, by improvising, finding physical challenges that most pique the dancers' curiosity and mine. An example of personal challenge would be finding unorthodox ways of doing something that may be orthodox. For example, when driving or walking, I often like to take different routes to regular destinations, whether it is an entirely different route, or just one wrong turn. In choreography, it could be as simple as walking: left, right, left, left. Already, the mind is at work, figuring out how to deal with the disruption of normal. This is how I might have thought while offering movement: left, right, shoulder step instead of foot, step with knee on head, step with lower back to corner of ceiling, stop stepping.

In this mode of creating, the challenge is by nuance, rather than technique. Even though technique is always present, as it is the means by which we experience the adventure within reasonable boundaries, it is not the movement's place of inception. Like the differing routes to regular destinations, the technique would be that I am still getting to the destination in a relatively safe manner. But, if I only considered safety, I would find the best way and never change it. There is nothing wrong with this. I just personally find it boring. In my work, technique is prerequisite, not the focus. I try to keep my movement playing on the line of unknown and understanding. If I stay too long in understanding, we might lose interest or engagement, and apathy in movement can be very dangerous. Prolonged efforts in the unknown can be just as dangerous, as I do not want the dancers to brutalize their flexibility and strength, rather take advantage and be mindful of what they have.

The constant tow between unknown and understanding can leave the dancers feeling uncomfortable or unconfident. I make sure that they do not feel anatomically in

jeopardy, and then move on. Because in dance, our bodies are our medium, anatomically, I do everything I can to keep things more in the understood than the unknown.

Psychologically though, I error on the side of the unknown. I wish all dance could be done with total comfortability and confidence, but as in life, it is just not so. The final product of the generated movement could be described as wild, unorthodox, haphazard, or unpredictable.

The space

Part of the impetus for these improvisational challenges comes from my consideration of the space we will be utilizing. At the beginning of the process for *Salad Days*, the only thing I knew was that I would be choreographing something between thirty and forty-five minutes to be shared on the main stage of our building, the Hayes Christensen Theater, a proscenium within a 340-seat auditorium. Part of my job in the Modern Program has been to work in the theater, so up to this point, I had seen plenty of work on this stage from every angle. It was regular for me to daydream about how I would use the space if given the chance, or better yet, how I would move the space.

“Moving the space” is common language for me in processes. It is one of my main ways to express how I see movement as a bodily adventure. Moving the space means that a body or bodies are moving in such a way as to take the space with them, that they are not moving inside the space, the space is being moved from that which is inside. I try encouraging dancers to treat the space as one larger body that they and all others have an active role and responsibility in giving life to. Imagery and metaphor, peppered with practicality, helps to achieve this goal. For instance, I may ask the dancers to dig into the ground with their pelvis, or paint the room with the extremities, but only if they

are moving because the ground or pelvis asks them to. I speak of the room as not an empty space, but malleable content, able to churn, shake, fall, or fly by the work taking place in it. And if I see the space as a large body, or macro-being, I want the space to churn like our minds churn in complicated scenarios, or shake like our lives are shaken after a trauma, or fly like we feel when with someone we love. Call me a helpless romantic, but yes, I believe movement by itself can do all of this.

This creates a charge or buzz in the room, an aura of event. I imagine a group of students surrounding a dry erase board, each taking their turn approaching the board while looking back and listening to the exclamations and suggestions of their cohort. They may never figure out the answers to all questions, but the closer they get to answering even a single question, the more fervor is present in the space. This is one of the aspects about work that intrigued me when creating *Salad Days*, one of the reasons I am drawn to make movement the way I do. I am drawn to the buzz that work creates. I always want the dancers to be toiling with something in the movement itself or in the compositional elements, which is why I use metaphor and imagery. The mystery of it intrigues me. Others might not be sure of exactly what questions we are trying to answer or physical challenges we are dealing with, but something is definitely happening in the space and those involved are committed.

With this, I believe the aura of event is an extension of my hope to invite the viewer's engagement with the work, positively or negatively. Just as I wanted to share adventures with other dancers, I also want to share them with viewers in hopes of encouraging advocacy for the art form. I do not believe it to be a formula with promised results, rather a step of aspiration. This mystery of purpose within the work may offer

viewers a chance to lean into the happening by investing their imaginations, allowing any meaning to unfold.

The sound

With both my parents' lives heavily influenced by music, I grew up with diversity of sounds. It has always been a way for me to think through the noise of life. So, while considering the Hayes Christensen Theater, I was constantly listening to new music that might inform the bodily adventure I imaged happening there. Often, I will find music that just gets me thinking. Sometimes, though, I will find music that will open my mind to that which I have been distracted from. In the case of *Salad Days*, I found the album "Gamble" by Nonkeen. This album played a significant role in the mood and trajectory of the work. Every song, in some way, spoke to how I imagined the space being moved.

To me, it did not feel as though the music added something from the outside, but rather helped a truth of mine unfold from within. I already wanted to move, I just felt that I found the sound score that was birthed with this particular movement. And like the movement, the music did not necessarily suggest emotive direction, but it did help set a mood, the mood of work and commitment to that work. In fact, this mood is exactly what birthed certain sections of *Salad Days*, specifically the first and final sections.

My processes are typically not linear, but the origin of the process did end up being the first section, which also happened to be accompanied by the first song I heard from "Gamble", "Chasing God Through Palmyra". To reiterate, my singular motive at the time was the desire to see people simply move and work through that movement. So, with the impetuses aforementioned, we started making. It was for this reason that I chose this section to be the genesis; it was the lens through which everything preceding needed

to be viewed. I did not know exactly where to place everything else, but I knew I wanted to keep that original impetus at the forefront of our (mine, the dancers) minds.

Come to think of it, this is also why the final section became the conclusion of the work. I took the same approach in each, just make a lot of movement that would be an adventure for the body. This section of the work was set in one rehearsal, only two rehearsals before we would be on stage. I had spent the majority of rehearsal time on the compositional, spatial, and timing elements while considering any potential emotional or dramatic implications these choices might bring forth. Even though I did not necessarily set myself up with ample rehearsal time, I felt fine because I knew that in this final section, I would not be as concerned with possible implications. I wanted to circle back and round off the work by that which conceived it: movement, physical challenges, and tasks for people to work out in real time, accompanied by the mood/sound of that work.

The sound was crucial throughout the process, but specifically for the conception of ideas. Namely, with these two sections, I would repeat the song to be used for the entirety of a rehearsal. This was the case for probably two-thirds of the process. Practically, this helped to keep me focused. Conceptually though, I always wanted the movement to be informed by the mood offered by the sound. My goal was for a deep relationship and necessity to be cultivated between the two.

The simple

Considering how I often stress the term “simply”, I realize now that when I started, the piece was not really *about* anything. I see dance as a communicative art form, but I did not start with meaning. So, could this piece with seemingly no meaning allow me to connect with anyone? Could simply the movement, the music, and the props allow

us to communicate anything? I would not say that the work we were making was simple, but the foundation of it was, in that it was not tied to anything specific. Can meaning or connection be found in the simple? My convicted, immediate response to this is, yes.

I would argue complexity is found in the simple. There is a reason for the popular adage, “Less is more”. There is power in few, yet purposeful, actions. Ernest Hemmingway is given credit for being the inventor of the six-word story, with his most popular being, “For sale: baby shoes, never worn” (Genius). When offered just enough to work with, the reader is given agency to participate in the story by filling in the gaps via their imagination, like the aforementioned aura of event.

Do we need to know all the information for a story to be complex? Does a play need a plot to be intriguing? Take the question, “what was it about”, when regarding a piece of artwork. This question can be simple in terms of annoyance because it assumes the viewer thinks the subjective work can be adequately described in an objective way, nailed down by a few words. Even still, if embraced via self-reflection, this simple question is the very thing that brings deeper personal understanding and engagement with the subject at hand. When feeling insecure about my work having meaning or not, I run into another adage, “Keep it simple, stupid”.

Specifically, the simple can be a great way to start a project. World renown choreographer, Crystal Pite, recognizes this as her own method stating, “I start every piece that I make with just raw choreography, and I don’t really spend a lot of time trying to imbue it with meaning or any particular content other than interesting configurations that are challenging for us... just purely physical [ideas], like collecting my paint colors on a pallet” (Youtube). Not only does this take pressure off the creator to make

something meaningful right away, or even at all, it also clears any expectations between the maker and the viewer. Just as technical proficiency does not have to be the place of origin when creating movement, particular agendas or concepts do not have to be the origin when creating a composition. Assuming a human being makes the work, I believe it possible for the meaning, agenda, or concept to unfold from within. This may be bold to claim, but we all have values; they will show their face in our work somehow, no matter if we make efforts to be a blank slate.

So, in the form of dance, I believe simply moving can be enough. More so, I believe specifically starting from a place of simplicity can allow that which is within to surface, opening us to a deeper understanding of our selves and a truer offering of our selves to the world around us. This idea relinquishes some control over the end product, but it indefinitely extricates any ability we thought we might have had over the viewer's experience. Indeed, we move for the viewer, but not for the viewer's outcome, their discoveries or truths. This brings me to something deeper than, and yet reflected by, simply movement, pertaining to how we relate on a macro scale in life itself.

CHAPTER 2

COVENANT

Contract vs. covenant

Unfortunately, I often recognize a culture of contracts in the world immediately around me. Our connections are riddled with “if” and “should”, assuming to deserve certain outcomes. It only makes sense that this culture has bled into the relationships held between choreographer and audience or choreographer and dancer. A contract relationship is one that says, “I will do this, *if* you do this”. It is my belief that all should adopt a culture of covenant within their relationships and in relation to their art. Covenant relationship says, “I will do this, *regardless* if you do this or not, unconditionally”. The former assumes the right to correctness, eliminating autonomy of another. The latter assumes the position of humility, allowing agency in choice and consequence. The former confines while the latter frees.

Regarding the viewer’s experience, or the other’s outcome, I hear often from artists, at least in my immediate surroundings, the want to “create an experience”. This saying sits odd for me. What a lofty expectation for one’s self. That, to me, is like saying “I just want everyone to be happy”. This is conditional. In a sense, the one making the statement is saying they wish the world would comply with their wants and needs. To be clear, I think it is a beautiful thing to want everyone happy and would offer the benefit of the doubt to say this is what most people want. The point is an experience is *had*, not

created. I do believe we should move with *hopes* and intentions to ensure the possibility that participants could have an experience, but not *expectations* of that outcome. We work hard, creating a primed space, or a “buzz” in the room. The rest is up to the others and chance. This is a covenant; each brings their whole self to the table, including their values, and that should be the only expectation of one’s self.

Furthermore, I do not try to bring the audience to an exact destination. This can only be up to the receiver of information, because it is their right to let whatever information become truth or reality for them. One way I approached this in *Salad Days* was to occasionally remind the dancers to forget about their faces. By this I mean to forget about what the viewer *should* be reading. By the same token, I never told them to make it impossible for the viewer to read anything. I do not want the dancers to feel like robots and assume they would not appreciate that either. If the physical challenge of the movement brought a response to the face, then by all means, I would want them to let it out. I simply reminded them to do the work, move. That is our focus. Work from the inside out first. This way, any additives are secondary, only added because of necessity for clarity, not central as agenda.

This is why I feel uncomfortable in productions that are very forward or definite in nature. I feel as though they are making the decision of destination for me, rather than allowing me to make my choice of the matter. On the flip side, I am also uncomfortable when a production does not seem to have direction, or is entirely open-ended. I feel as though the visionary did not care enough to offer me any differing insights, understandings, or findings. This might happen for a few reasons. One, they could not make any clear choices for fear of incurring assumptions and being offensive. Two, they

did not care to connect with others outside of those who already agree with them, speaking in a language only a few can understand, exclusively. Three, they feel little actually needs to be sought after; we just need to feel and sense with no regard for truths, absolutes, or answers. This stems from the belief that, if you have direction, it must mean you intend on making absolute, one-sided statements.

Side note: I find it interesting when people make statements such as “There are no absolutes (universals)”. That, in its self, is an absolute statement. By saying this, they simply promoted themselves to ultimate authority. To me, this is eerily reminiscent of the term “arrogance”, perpetuating the very frustrating, one-sided, exclusive nature that brought them to make the claim in the first place. Then, what is the answer? Rhetorically, who knows, who cares. The better question is how do we relate with others when we do not know or have vastly differing opinions?

The previously mentioned sides of the pendulum set expectations for those with which they engage. To be clear, I believe in every relationship, boundaries and expectations can and should be set on how the other treats you after listening to your values, but not on the outcome. A culture of covenant shares personal truth in hopes of connection, regardless of agreement from the other.

I believe it can be a beautiful reality, but can also be the most exhausting, because when we care deeply about something, we want to share that feeling with others. We continue offering ourselves regardless whether we find connection or our most vulnerable selves are exploited. In dance, we move with hopes of connection or new understandings, regardless whether this hope is realized or we fall flat on our face, literally and metaphorically. In covenant, we do our best to do our best, always bumping into the

antagonizing reality that our efforts only go so deep and, at some point, vanish into the black of unknown.

The space between

This is precisely why I believe all life is suspended between question and answer. The one side of the pendulum, the definite art makers, work from the notion that answers are the answers to our problems – that if we just find *the* truths, we can all get along, understand one another, and grow. On the contrary, the non-directional art makers believe we can only experience life if we leave everything up for interpretation, leave everything as just a question. We will learn if we simply experience the wonder of it all.

Things become complex here because both are true and as well mutually inclusive. By themselves, questions and answers require no action at all. Both are, essentially, lifeless. Simply, a question on its own leaves you wondering with no explanation for the past, reason for the present, or energy for the future. The same is true for answers in that, because all is found, they cut you off from a future, discolor your present, and make futile your past. The only part of the question and answer equation that requires action is the space between – the action birthed from curiosity, with intentions of finding understanding. The space between is what requires you to be alive.

Take the game of pong for example, a game in which a singular orb travels in space bouncing from moveable bars on left and right with the point being to not let the orb pass either bar. It could be that questions are one bar and answers the other, leaving us as the orb in the space between. We move from a question in hopes of finding an answer. The moment we find one, or are satisfied enough to move on, either more questions arise from the answer or we choose to investigate elsewhere from new

curiosities. This is the dynamic of a covenant relationship. Inside the “worm” section of *Salad Days* were three specific realizations of the space between.

Worms

Being that a majority of *Salad Days* was busy with full-bodied movement and heavy musical tones, I knew I needed a time to calm the space. By this I mean a time in which less vigorous action was happening, giving the audience’s eye a chance to rest and process. I also sectioned the space via lighting design to give the audience three choices of what to pay attention to, each conveying a simple idea, rather than individual stories or arcs. On a more practical level, I wanted to give the dancers a mental and physical shift, allowing some potential for slower breathing. “Worms” served precisely these needs and became one of my most clear realizations of the research as well.

This section was deemed “worms” because of a physical and spatial image with which the dancers and I were working. I imagined a clump of bodies traveling very slowly from upstage-right to upstage-left, all the while moving their individual limbs rather swiftly. Basically, I wanted consistent action but not a lot of progress in space being traveled. The best metaphor we could come up with was a bucket of worms.

The more we used this term, the more I realized how fitting the metaphor was. I considered the image of a bucket of worms in relation to the theme of work. Because of various fishing trips I took as a child, I know that worms inside of a bucket will continue to move and look for dirt until they die. It can be fairly grotesque to watch, and yet mesmerizing. Each worm, in an effort to find something, continues to work through the mess of other worms, never ceasing, headstrong.

This is what working in the space between can look like. Specifically, when moving from a place of covenant relationship, work can feel mundane, pointless, or even dirty, all like a bucket of worms. But, to steal a verse from the great modern aquatic philosopher, Dori, we “just keep swimming, just keep swimming”.² Like the worms, we are not perpetual beings, but we move perpetually. We toil through the dirt and grime discovering beauty and sorrow, life and death. We never know what we might find, but we move forward anyway. Even *Forrest Gump*’s adage assumes we continue to pick up chocolates.³

Work, or moving in the space between, also brings a sort of momentum to life. As alluded to before, because commitment to work often opens you to the potential meaning in everything, it also offers plenty of opportunities for reflection and perspective. When working, there are times you can almost step outside your self, or as some might say “step back”, to get a wider view of your work as a whole. At times, you might even find a glimpse of your work’s current interrelatedness with the surrounding world. In a sense, you can step back and feel yourself moving forward. You can feel the momentum of life (decisions, pain, joy, stories, laughter, betrayal) rushing by you. It is as if you are on a ride of life, and with moving forward comes a breeze in the hair. This realization was birthed from a simple idea. While the worm task was happening upstage, at downstage-left was someone enjoying the breeze in their hair (industrial fan from off-stage) while lounging out the backseat window of a two-dimensional wooden car.

Constant movement between question and answer can also be the most dizzying of experiences. The final part of the worm section was a solo throughout downstage-

² Film *Finding Nemo*, 2003

³ Film *Forrest Gump*, 1994, “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get.”

right. While the worms became the realization of constant movement, and the car became the sensation of forward momentum from that movement, this solo became the occasional disorientation inherent. Parts of the movement were set material to keep a relation to the rest of the work, while others were improvisational scores. The set material, as well as the score, focused on continuous activity by constantly looking for new sensations in the body. The idea was to never settle on movements by using the mind to trick the body, creating dizziness in the body and mind. I did, however, want settlement on the idea that they were to be unsettled, embracing the disorientation.

Trust

The peculiar thing is, these ideas did not come because of everything I just wrote. Everything I just wrote was found in these ideas. This is why I say these truths were realized via the movement, truths from within the work. I had the ideas far before anyone ever asked me what *Salad Days* was about. Back then, I knew I had a job to do, so I just started going with my imagination and making decisions. *Side note: I am also under no impression that the ideas just came out of thin air. I am not one to believe something is made from nothing... rather everything comes from something. As science is proving, there is a cause and effect to everything. Even the big bang theory, to our knowledge the largest effect ever, I believe had a cause (McManus). A pinprick of light from the unknown darkness (Hawking) ... Could this be a universal realization from within the space between?*

To recall from the previous chapter, I cannot claim that there is meaning in everything, but I would say meaning can be made from anything. I believe I was making intuitive decisions based off the idea of work that was bubbling inside of me. Who knows

exactly what made this idea bubble. *Again, rhetorically, who knows, who cares.* All I know is that I just started working from what I had, and quite literally, the meaning seemed to unfold from within. Sure, that might sound nice and poetic after the fact, but in the midst of the work came a deep conversation with the unknown. And like within a covenant relationship, this unknown left me with two options, quit or trust.

To this point, the disorientated solo from “worms” is a direct meaning made from precisely this conversation with the unknown. Throughout the process of *Salad Days*, I kept thinking I would eventually get to a place where I understood what was becoming. Now, I did experience this feeling, but it never stayed for long. The more I worked, the more I realized I was seeing this process as linear, that if I just kept working, I would pass from unknown into understanding. Considering my conviction that movement, processes, and life are adventures to be had, I should have expected that this would be anything but linear. To my point of question and answer, I was finding that understanding is a fluid reality, coming and going from time to time, rather than being a destination of maturity.

With that, I am led to believe there is hardly a singular definitive moment of macro decision or understanding in a process. For me, it seems to be micro-decisions, trust in those decisions, and being open to what unfolds. I believe it is here we find a more fulfilling and holistic path to art making because it seems to be true in life. I will use two examples, one being the *Mona Lisa*.

Probably one of the most reputable pieces of artwork, the *Mona Lisa*⁴ is renowned for many reasons. From my knowledge, though, I do not remember one being Da Vinci

⁴ for more information, visit monalisa.org

taking a large brush, and with a single dip of paint and a single swipe, creating a work with such complexity and depth that it would be remembered for centuries. This work was done by tiny, intentional brush strokes, acting together to create a bigger picture. A small paint stroke by itself might not hold as much significance in that moment, but when immersed with others of different hues and yet similar intention, communal truths begin to unfold.

Another example I use is that of rock climbing. One does not take on a summit by a single bound. There is a general understanding that between point A and point B are numerous notches, ridges, or holds, and that the only way upward is taking small, intentional steps, each making enough sense for that particular moment. One cannot fully deliberate what might be needed twelve steps ahead. Sure, you may be able to consider the next few, but the task of utmost importance is where you are positioning yourself in the moment.

To take it a step further (pun intended), a path upward may not always be straight. These pathways can include any amount of varying directions, including downward. This is why, during my thesis proposal process, I never spent much time considering the connection between my creative and my written work. I figured that I had to trust the work – that if I was acting and making decisions from a place of conviction, then the through-line, or better yet, the communal truths would inevitably unfold. I thought it fair enough to consider the connection, but most often I would become frustrated when being asked to explain it. I was busy as it was and simply could not expend energy or time considering the greater scope when the position I was in, the micro-decisions that needed to be made at that moment, were more pertinent. It is not that I do not think about the

macro, but I *work* on the micro, *revealing* the macro. How I *realize* the macro is by *engaging* the micro.

This is precisely why covenant requires trust. These micro-decisions are so miniscule that it can be hard to tell if they are going to be worth your time or play any significant part in the product. Amidst the unknown, you have to trust that you are moving and making decisions from a place of integrity to your self and your character, from your values and convictions, and then simply move on to the next micro-decision.

I think one of the most important things that I've learned over the last twenty years of creating is to trust in hard work; trust that if I keep working at something that inspiration and imagination will happen. It makes me feel like I can keep going forward even though I don't necessarily always know where I'm going. (Youtube)

Echoing Crystal Pite's statement and regarding the journey of *Salad Days*, I had to recommit every rehearsal to an unconditional relationship with the work being done. Even so, this tangle with the unknown has brought fulfillment by the unfolding of communal truths and connections. This fulfillment was untainted by reward or remuneration. It was an uninformed, or better yet, ignorant bliss.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHILD

Nature: birthed from within

Just as much as work and covenant, I continued returning to the idea of the child throughout the process of *Salad Days*. Honestly, I am still finding why this is so. To the best of my understanding, though, all that I have said thus far, I see so purely in the nature of the child. In fact, to reflect earlier language, with the child, I do not see work or covenant as something taken on from the outside, rather something birthed from within.

It is clear to me that my work is heavily influenced by my life partner who works at the elementary level in an inclusive Montessori⁵ school. She and I spend most of our relationship talking about the nature of children or holistic approaches to personal and communal growth. Our conversations often center on the autonomy and independence of the child, and specifically, how these are cultivated through the theories of Maria Montessori. To briefly sum up the Montessori method, it is an educational approach of individualized guidance aimed at fostering the child's innate propensity for educating themselves to interact with the world around them. It is here where I have seen the child's unconditional relationship to work. The child works without seeing it as a job, but more the way to life itself.

⁵ for more information, visit mariamontessori.com

I am reminded of an instance in rehearsal when I tried to explain this concept to the dancers of *Salad Days* as potential reasoning for why I kept returning to the idea of the child. I explained to them how, after endless conversations with my partner about her students, I was amazed to know the amount of effort the children were putting into their work, and from no compulsion or reward. These children are not graded, take no tests, and yet most of these ten-year-olds understand and can utilize the Pythagorean theorem. Almost all of the students are working far past the average standards of their age group.

In hearing this, one of the dancers responded with a story about children they had recently cared for. They explained how they took the children to swimming lessons on a rather cold day. While waiting in line to practice dives, the children would shiver vigorously between attempts. Even so, the children were determined to get more water time. Something about the fulfillment of swimming gave them unwavering commitment, regardless of discomfort. To note, this fulfillment did not offer a bright and dynamic future or any other tantalizations. All it offered was fulfillment for the moment, a challenge for their minds and bodies, education through the adventure of swimming. This brought me back to the idea; children simply work, not necessarily with or without purpose, but for greater, more realized interaction and relation to the world around them.

Take learning a language for example. I presume that for most, this is a daunting task. Even so, the average child is talking at the age of two (Trubo). No one teaches them to do this. No one puts them in a lecture hall and explains the principles of language. They just do. They are born with a disposition for commitment to connecting to the world around them, and work is the way to reach this goal.

... the child, at birth, bears with him constructive possibilities, which must unfold by activity in his environment... besides the vital impulse to create

themselves, there must be yet another purpose, a duty to fulfill in harmony, something they have to do in the service of a united whole. (Montessori 52)

Nature: play

For me, work, as birthed from within the child, is synonymous with play. In fact, I would wager that for every time I use the word “work” in this document, I could exchange it with the word “play” and it still make sense. Notably, the work for more realized interaction and relation to the world around the child is done through play. This is the connection between my childhood, movement, and Montessori.

When I “worked” in the trees and dirt as a child, I was playing, but because I wanted to have a greater understanding of the world. To recall from what brought me here, my schooling dispensed information, leaving a void of application. It felt as if the information was only taking up space in my mind. Movement in play rather allowed me to participate with the infusion of knowledge. The Montessorian method holds this same truth, that movement, touch, and sensation are the key to fullness of understanding (Montessori 126-127).

To have a vision of the cosmic plan, in which every form of life depends on directed movements, which have effects beyond their conscious aim, is to understand the child’s work and be able to guide it better. (Montessori 135)

For me, play/work was my guide. Movement and exploration are what taught me about myself in relation to the world around. In my case, I may have not been learning arithmetic or biology, but I learned other, arguably more invaluable, characteristics such as interpersonal skills, empathy, and trust. Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of The National Institute for Play, states:

When you see animals and humans that are deprived of play, they are fixed and ridged in their responses to complex stimuli. They don't have a repertoire of choices that are as broad as their intelligence should allow them to have, and they don't seek out novelty and newness, which is part of an essential aspect of life. ("Play, Spirit, and Character")

In an interview between Brown and Bob Fagan, a scientist studying the play of bears, Fagan shared, "In a world continuously presenting unique challenges and ambiguity, play prepares [us] for an evolving planet. That's what kids do when they're playing. They are exploring something absolutely that's new to them, that opens possibilities through their own imagination" ("Play is More"). As I have said, play/work is that which brings forth communal truths and more realized connections between us and all other beings.

Conversely, just as life is a balance of question and answer, play is a balance of purpose and whimsy. As much as I believe the child plays with a purpose of understanding, I also believe that newness of understanding can be found as much with random choices for adventure. Brown defines play as "anything that is spontaneously done for its own sake... it can appear purposeless, produce pleasure and joy, or lead one to the next stage of mastery" ("Play, Spirit, Character"). Related to simplicity as a place of inception, this is how a large majority of *Salad Days* was made. Considering even the improvisational impetus for movement, unorthodox solutions for ordinary tasks, I never thought about deep meaning being found in precarious bodily patterns. I just wanted the dancers to be bouncing between question and answer with hopes of them enjoying an adventure.

If there are universals, I believe this to be one; life is a coin, with play on one side and work on the other, mutually inclusive and sometimes interchangeable. In countless

situations of my life, I have made the claim that I am just a child, usually referring to my haphazard choices, irrational trust, or my propensity to make anything play. This is not specific to me. I have heard so many others in my life from different backgrounds, career lines, or experiences say something that echoes this very idea, the idea that in some way, we all are simply children, born to play/work for ultimate concern.

“People never grow up, they [are just told] how to act in public” (White 1).

Nature: inheritance

Metaphysically, this nature for covenant is no new thing. Specifically here, I will take a brief look at the Hebrew Scriptures, unequivocally speaking to the nature of the child. Regardless of one’s spiritual beliefs, this ancient library of poems, letters, and stories tells of a culture toiling with the same concepts brought forth in my research; if we do not have the power of all understanding but ability to act, how do we move closer to the fulfillment of all, including the earth and all living beings?

Speaking to the nature of the child, the scriptures start with a poem that expresses humans as being created in the image and likeness of God (*New Living Translation Bible*, Gen. 1.26). Now, I am addressing the name God as ground of being, that from which everything else arises, and that which is found in the act of love itself, rather than a super-being, or bigger version of us, the highest form of idolatry. With this in mind, what could this passage mean? There are many definitions of God in the scriptures, but arguably the most popular would be that God is love (1 John 4.8). Considering the aforementioned lenses, this must mean that our nature is love: the unconditional work for ultimate concern with hopes of bringing into harmony everything that has been created. John Phillip Newel describes this as our “of-Godness” (*Rebirthing* x).

Now, this is not to deny our “capacity for the most horrendous faithlessness and falseness towards one another”, but to say that what is deeper is our of-Godness (Newel, *Echo of the Soul*). In the scriptures, Jesus claimed, “unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (*Complete Jewish Bible*, Matt. 18.3.). *Side note: to the time and people Jesus was speaking to, the Kingdom of Heaven was regarded as a good place, a place to realize the purest sense of love, life, and communal fulfillment.*

With this, if Jesus did not mean for us to travel back in time or forget everything we have learned until now, then by saying “become like the child”, he must have been asking for us to return to a nature we were born with, to step back into an inheritance. When we live inside our nature, our inheritance of covenant, we *all* experience life of communal fulfillment.

Nature: in the work

In *Salad Days*, the micro to this macro of the child’s nature was the chalkboard section. The final product of this section was a conjoining of two separate ideas, the first being “schemers”. This idea included a group of four dancers simply going through a series of movements built from specific prompts. The original prompt was to come up with five gestures of a bother or bully, not like a high school bully, but one from elementary that might tease people by pulling their hair or giving a pinch. This eventually began to reflect the child’s capacity for mischief, hence the coining of “schemers”. From there, I asked the dancers to abstract these gestures by allowing them to be a full-bodied experience. After, we randomly chose a few of each dancer’s favorites to create a sequential phrase. We then manipulated this sequence in three different ways; the first

was just doing the thing, simply dance what we created. The second was to mold all of the edges between each individual movement idea. For example, if the phrase was a sound bar, I asked the dancers to make it all the same tempo and volume, just a slew of information. The third was the most augmented version of the thing; dance as if the movement asks your pelvis to paint the entirety of the room. Do it big. Make the most of every nuance and transition.

So, again, the purpose of this movement was to simply show the work of dancers in relation to tasks. However, for me, it became to hold the idea of the child working through relationships. I do not think this was a clear reality for those viewing, rather an observation made by the dancers themselves. As with language, the child observes and absorbs. They simply use what they learn to engage others. Bullying is simply the obscured relation to another, influenced by the individual's working out of other frustrated or unhealthy relationships. The same was true with the dancers; they observed and absorbed, worked with what they were given, and came into relationship by the commitment to shared concern. Each must practice patience, collaboration, and compromise to reach a general consensus of the whole. Even if in play, this is hard work!

With the schemers occupying upstage-left, the second facet to this section was an actual large, mobile chalkboard placed downstage-right. This idea was specifically influenced by the situation referenced earlier of a group of students working with a dry-erase board. I chose a chalkboard because for me, it harkened to my childhood, the days before dry erase boards. As well, the chalkboard offered a true sense of grit. The only way to write something on a chalkboard is by pressure, the sanding of two kinds of stone,

natural elements. You cannot use chalk without it leaving its mark on you. Your hands get dusty, reminding you of the work done.

As far as what was actually being drawn on the board, I simply asked the dancer to work in a similar vein as the dizzy solo in “worms”, but not the same. What was similar was that I wanted the dancer to consistently draw abstract images of thought by continuously playing with new ideas or spaces on the board. The difference, the dancer was not dizzied by the work, rather more intrigued by it. I also did not want it frantic, but purposeful and playful. This comes from a personal place. It is a practice, or hobby... or funny thing I do, drawing abstract images in a journal. They are usually reflections of what is going on in my mind or how I think. These images include seemingly random bits of lines, curves, shapes, or words eventually relating or not to one another, forming a whole. It is the grappling of my mind with information bouncing inside it. Like the child learning the language, I am trying to make sense of all the noise. This person at the chalkboard was in the same work.

It took two ideas to form this section, but a third element to tie them together. Along the same lines as the chalkboard and the group of study students, I shared with my partner that I wanted to have an audio recording of her students at work. I wanted to capture the buzz sound that I referred to earlier. So, my partner recorded about an hour’s worth of audio content from her classroom. I edited together bits of general classroom noise as well as a unique conversation between three or four students.

This conversation, possibly more a rambling, was taking place while the students were working on art projects in the outdoors. I wanted to include this idea because it carried an innocent quality, (tongue twister) a guiltless purposelessness. The conversation

ranged from their weight at birth to their proficiency in drawing. It was free interaction via work and play. What my partner captured was seemingly useless conversation that brought communal interaction, (yet again) potentially purposefully purposeless.

CONCLUSION

FEELINGS AND FINDINGS

I wish to conclude by writing about the title, *Salad Days*. When considering the title, I knew I wanted something that reflected the essence of the work we were doing and the truths that were unfolding through the rehearsals. I knew it had to do with the nature of the child. So, after some research around words like “harkening,” “conception,” and “innocence,” I was brought across this term “salad days”. William Shakespeare coined the term in his tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*, referencing one’s past when they were immature, inexperienced, unripe, or “green”. And, rather than foolish, the term speaks more to this time as being one’s youth “when they were full of vim and vigor”. It can be used as the counterpart of the term “golden years” (Mikkelson).

This is the manifestation of one of my deepest desires, to live as the child lives, for all to live from that with which they were born. And as a reminder, in no way am I alone in this. Just as I have heard people make statements claiming their child-ness, I have had the pleasure of many conversations regarding desires to come into greater depth of relationship with the earth, humans, and other living beings. I am finding it more and more true, that in order to step into this reality, we need to live from our child-ness, the covenantal work for ultimate concern. This must be the same in dance if it is any expression of the self, as most commonly defined (Richardson). Indeed, if one’s hope is for dance to be communicative and, in turn, reach the greatest possibility of connecting

with those viewing, we must simply commit to work or play, trusting through the unknown, not for the confusion of, or dispensing of information to, the audience. But also, we must not work with neglect for the audience, but for the hopes of greater understanding, regardless of whether it will ever be found or not. We must allow the adventure between understanding and unknown to potentially expose our bare, simplistic selves while trusting in the nature of work to reveal truth.

Even this writing is proof. At the start, I had no idea what to write about. So, when I did not think I could write a thesis, due to lack of specific inspiration, I just began working. I started writing stream of conscious thoughts, jargon, and feelings. It has been a roller coaster and adventure. I have hated this document just as much as I have found love for it. Through work, conversations with my partner, mentors, and thesis committee, I have something. I have no proof if this something is worth anything, but I have found fulfillment in the work.

This is the call of *Salad Days*, to step back into our inheritance of commitment to covenant work for the symbiotic fulfillment of all. So, what does this mean for *Salad Days*, the dance? Well, like all other work I have done, it has offered me a deepened perspective of myself in relation to the world around me. I have gained understanding about my work practically and conceptually. I have gained understanding about myself including core values and passions. I have gained understanding about the world around me because it is now my conviction that all are on this same adventure of life. Though I still find myself toiling with the unknown on a daily basis, for this brief moment, through the covenant, I am in a different place, enjoying a fleeting breeze of understanding.

Above all, I believe I have gained a greater understanding, and reverence for, the nature of humanity. As it was when I was young, movement has taught me, not by adding something from the outside, but by the unfolding of truth from within me, the child. To my most profound question, I believe simply working can be enough. If all I am left with at the end of my life is depth of connection with the world around me because of my commitment to seemingly arbitrary work, then I believe I would have lived an abundant life.

“My salad days, when I was green in judgment: cold in blood, to say as I said then!”

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