

THE COMMUNICATIVE POWER OF LAUGHTER IN MODERN DANCE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Laughter is a physiological and psychological response when people perceive something as funny. In my choreographic thesis work “float away,” I explored how laughter can create intimacy between audience, performer, and dance artist. Physical humor derived from dance brings the artist, dancers, and audience together in a shared experience that is conveyed through the human body. I believe that the audiences’ experience of the emotive expressivity of the performers’ physical body has the potential to deeply connect them to one another. Through my own dance experiences, I believe that humor and the act of laughter can allow audience members to emotionally open up, creating more receptivity to choreographic themes and creative work. This thesis will consider how humor explores and can be elicited through relationships of the performers on stage, as well as the relationship between performers and audience. As a non-native speaker, jester, and dance artist, I choreographed the piece “float away,” which served as an exploration of humor in modern dance, and questioned whether or not it is an effective tool for connecting the audience to the performers on stage. “float away” was choreographed for my thesis and shown at the University of Utah 2014 Fall Graduate Concert.

This thesis is for my mom and dad.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

My choreographic aesthetic is influenced by dance, daily news, and social networking. Throughout my life, people who interact with me often think the ideas I explain to them are funny. They are amused by my words and bodily expressions, regardless of whether my actions are intentional or unintentional. I wonder— are people laughing at misinterpretations, an inability to understand my ideas, or are they laughing at my answers because they do not meet their expectations? My sense of humor in language and dance did not cease when I moved to the United States; people here react to me the same way as my Asian friends.

I was drawn to humor in choreography because I have always found dance, especially modern dance, to be more enjoyable to watch when there was an element of humor. In Chapter I, I will discuss my personal interactions with choreographed works that included elements of humor, and how these works influenced me. In Chapter II, humor and laughter from a historical and theoretical review will be discussed. I investigate possibilities of how and what makes people laugh, and the problems that can arise from conflicts, miscommunication, and individual differences. Through analyzing the physicality that creates humor, I then discuss how this can be used as a choreographic

tool. By researching the sources of humor, the choreographic tools I employed in creating the piece “float away” will be discussed and provided in Chapter III. In Chapter IV, I will look at different types of humor that arose between my dancers and the audience; I discuss how the subjectivity of an artist’s (or comedian’s) voice engages with the audience and how the theatre facilitates by driving physical comedy. Lastly, I will describe how humor serves as a form to bring deeper understanding to the audiences of modern dance.

### “Humor,” A Guide of Emotions

Each type of laugh defines a different level or quality of audience response, and each type is a catalyst that enables us to identify different levels of emotional engagement and rational understanding of the work (Wright, 2007, p. 5).

I still remember the first time I fell asleep watching a professional modern dance performance at a dance festival. Before I fell asleep, I remember seeing the dancers’ exquisite physicality, spatial relationships, and several perfect landings from highly difficult lifts. This was combined with bare, gloomy cello music and dark lighting on stage. I had watched other professional company works, and experienced the same boredom, until I saw “*Velocity*” from Horse Theater of Taiwan; it was a different experience for me because it was amusing to watch. As six male dancers folded brown papers, I felt delighted by the performance and by seeing what I perceived as the artist’s sense of humor crafted into the piece.

The dancers were using the paper to make their own toys, hats, clothes, and instruments—these props were connected to their childhood memories, personal interests, and used to pull pranks on one another. It provided me a new perspective about exploring

the physicality of the body, and its ability to communicate with an audience in a humorous way. The dancers of *Velocity* physically communicated different stories using their paper props and there was a feeling that time was suspended whenever the dancers performed lifts that seemed to defy gravity. Their amazing strength and bodily contortions were seemingly effortless.

Next, I saw a bigger-sized dancer perform six pirouette turns (which is typically very rare). I also saw a magic trick where the dancers used props to make it seem like they were a whole body and the limbs of this body could move in different spaces. They reversed the timing that (as an audience member) I experienced in reality. I was impressed by the “velocity” they embodied through their speed, which contrasted with timing on the stage. When I saw them racing on stage with their knees jumping on a yoga mat, I laughed out loud.

The Horse Theater not only brought me joy in viewing modern dance, but also unwittingly broke through my emotional boundaries by adding sadness after the hilarity. Upon watching this piece, I was reminded of the times growing up when I competed in something silly with my friends yet with seriousness and full conviction. Realizing this, I found myself in tears as I recalled those lost memories. The entire Horse Theater performance was like a journey that brought me back to my childhood, and was the first time dance authentically touched my soul with a sense of satisfaction.

I see the body as the medium of storytelling, and humor as a way of eliciting pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy. I am finally able to revisit my past intimately when seated far from the stage in a theater. In the theatrical environment that Horse Theatre created, humor lightened the space and formed intimacy with me as well as released

locked emotions with me, opening my heart. At this time, I was a newer modern dance viewer and I believed that modern dance was always done with dark lights, gloomy music, and moving bodies. These colors and images create uncomfortable feelings, which make me disinterested in viewing dance. Horse Theatre did the opposite, creating a deep interest in me for modern dance of this kind.

Rather than bringing the memory of sensations through the imagery of graphic storytelling, the Brussels-based dance theater company Peeping Tom has also struck me with a different use of humor. I find the physical excitement, recognition of time and space, and choreography in Peeping Tom comparable to the Horse Theatre, but they employ humor in an extremely different way.

Peeping Tom introduces theatre on their website by saying, “the directors create an unstable universe that defies the logic of time and space (“Peeping Tom - company,” n.d.). The merciless nature of humanity, age, sexuality, taboos against homosexuality, and abusive relationships are all surrealistically infused within the dark comedy in Peeping Tom’s works. The humor is extracted from forceful physicality and bizarre incidents within a normal environment. If humor is normally used to lighten the space and drop the audience’s guard, then Peeping Tom uses humor to expose the dark side of humanity’s hearts.

Upon viewing Peeping Tom’s piece *32 rue Vandenbranden*, I experienced an unforgettable scene. The choreographer Gabriela Carrizo and Franck Chartier introduce this work as dealing with the “psychological burdens” of seeing human vulnerabilities. In this piece, a cross-dressing man invaded the couples trailer home and assumed the woman’s identity. At first it was hilarious, but became less so as I experienced the *real*

woman's reaction as she saw the invader in the trailer home flirting with her husband. This reaction was depicted through psychotic screaming and hitting the windows, which pushed this scene into an extraordinarily terrifying conclusion. As a viewer, I felt her desperations, fears, and helplessness.

Through Peeping Tom's tragicomedy, human weakness was presented on stage, guiding the sympathy of audience members as they observe the vulnerability of being human. In this context, the use of humor forces the audience to sarcastically critique reality. For example, in *32 rue vandenbranden*, Peeping Tom amuses the audience by reproducing a humorous situation on stage such as the man dressed up like a woman, or through over exaggerating the body's response to a fake wind storm. Later in the same piece, flipping the plot kills the laughter. Peeping Tom does this by transforming the scene from humorous and lighthearted into a terrifying build of tension. Once audience members experience the playfulness of the first scenes, it drastically shifts to the dark side of the story. This creates intrigue as the laughter is killed, introducing the audience to the negative side of the situation.

As a choreographer, I appreciate when different masks of humor are applied from different personas (storyteller, reality mocker, or entertainer). By seeing how the Horse Dance Theatre and Peeping Tom manipulate time, space, and tension through physical comedy, I am further inspired and motivated to explore humor. I strive to do this by guiding the audiences' emotions through the contradiction of tragedy and comedy.

## CHAPTER II

### DEFINING LAUGHTER

Laughter is a decidedly social signal, not an egocentric expression of emotion. (Provine, 1996).

#### Laughter and Relationship

I believe that we relate to one another through our sociable nature as human beings, inclined to be in company with others and laughing together. This laughter enhances relationships. It connects and enables people to express their feelings and share information through socializing. However, on the other end of the spectrum, laughter also has the ability to shut down the energy of social interactions when it is offensive or rude. This can create an uncomfortable experience.

Laughter is all around us. As a choreographer, I seek to collect examples of laughter that I observe in public places, finding ways to bring these humorous situations to the stage in a dance performance context. I ask, what makes people laugh? Can I bring laughter into my choreography through humorous situations that I observe in daily life? In my choreography, I want to understand the mystery behind laughter and discover what makes it such a provocative and offensive human action. To begin answering these questions, I researched historical and theoretical explanations of humor.

According to John Morreall, “humor is primarily a social phenomenon, as are other forms of human enjoyment” (1983, p. 114). The paradox here is that people like to be social but are often afraid to take the first step. However, many say that humor and laughter are great antidotes for social anxiety. Some researchers have found “humor helps us to communicate ideas, attract partners, boost mood and cope in times of trauma and stress” (Vrtika, Black, & Reiss, 2013, p. 2). Social anxiety begins when one is an infant, curious yet fearful about new things, new people, and new sounds. It is that tension and strained relationship to the “new” that has confined our movement and voice when reaching out to others. In my opinion, humor is the key to socialization; it is communicative and cathartic. By expressing emotions, individual tensions within a group can be released as members socialize with one another. Humor also has a positive impact on human emotions, which plays an important role in maintaining relationships (Vrtika, Black, & Reiss, 2013, p. 1).

While applying this concept to the cast for my thesis piece, I discovered that laughter could produce the same result. The unease that exists in situations, especially for dancers who often have to work with new partners and choreographers, can be released by using the antidote of humor. The laughter that unintentionally occurred in my rehearsals allowed my dancers to drop their guard and prompted them to communicate as a group. Socializing allowed each dancer to interact and contribute more to the group and creative process, opening them up to each other and the choreography.

Relationships are established through getting to know one another during daily interactions, movements, and sharing knowledge. With my dancers, the relationship that grew from our weekly interactions with one another established a consistently growing

knowledge base. This knowledge base revealed our backgrounds, produced jokes, and enabled laughter. It also gave rise to conflict. Differing opinions and arguments often resulted from the collision of differing personalities. However, humor often became the product of this incongruity, enhancing the overall experience of my rehearsal process.

One can view society as a large puzzle of social relationships. Different thought processes, personal differences, and social behaviors collide, making it difficult for each person to find a way for individuality to fit within the greater picture. Even small, daily occurrences can reflect individuality. For example, in some cultures, it is seen as appropriate for a man to wear a kilt and in others not; in America, some states have passed the same-sex marriage bill and some still have not. Some people like to eat meat, and some like vegetables. When these differing opinions meet, it can be hard to arrive at a common agreement. I believe that humor can potentially resolve such conflicts, for example, saying something like “Did you forget your bagpipe at home today?” or “One man’s meat could be another’s poison.” In these examples, humor naturally happens in reaction to the conflict in an effort to diffuse tension. In my rehearsals, I employed this method of producing humor by detecting the conflicts that arose between my dancers and promoting a greater dialogue of their differing opinions, which will be expanded upon in Chapter 3.

When people feel close to one another, laughter occurs more easily, and in turn, their relationships reach a deeper level of unity. According to Robert R. Provine, professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Maryland, “Laughter is more about relationships than humour” (Provine, 2012, p. 57). Morreall agrees, arguing that laughter creates a “cohesive effect” between individuals. He reports that “to laugh

with another person for whatever reason, even if only at a piece of absurdity, is to get closer to that person” (Morreall, 1983, p. 115). My cast’s ability to laugh together unified them on a deeper emotional level. This coincides with a great deal of the research available on the subject of laughter in group settings. Provine observed, “most conversational laughter was not a response to jokes or humorous stories” (Provine, 2012, p. 56). In this way, mutual playfulness, in-group feeling, and positive emotional tone – not comedy – mark the social settings of most naturally occurring laughter.

Audiences can also benefit from laughing, releasing tension between “spectator” and “performer” and impacting the connection that viewers feel to the performance. Some scholars claim that performers become vulnerable when they are exposed on stage in front of an audience and that emotion helps them access wider ranges of their performance power. According to Bennett, “Vulnerability underlies every human conflict – and thus is at the core of all meaningful acting. Acting that is devoid of genuine vulnerability almost always fails” (2007, p. 3). This situation changes dramatically when the audience’s laughter is evoked; laughter can introduce great confidence in performers and strengthen their movements and voices. This situation again feeds back into the relationship between audience and performer, creating a situation where the spectators and dancers are more open to each other, both feeding into the performance. When laughter is provoked, the audience becomes a live, aural element in relation to the choreography--- they are not a silent abyss. Thus, laughter can enhance communication between audience and performer, shortening the psychological distance between the two.

Provine explains, “Laughter epidemics, big and small, are universal” (Provine, 2012, p. 39). He goes on to say, “when we hear laughter, we tend to laugh in turn,

producing a behavioral chain reaction that sweeps through a group, creating a crescendo of jocularity” (2000, p. 129). During many of my rehearsals, one of my dancers would start laughing and quickly we were all laughing, unable to stop. The humor that occurred unintentionally from the stage in my thesis work created a laughter chain between the performers and audience. In this situation, the laughter in the theatre seemed to engage audience members in psychological and physiological response, greatly drawing upon their attention, increasing the appeal of the performance.

### The Laughter Died

Just as laughter can build and strengthen relationships, it can also produce tension and distance between people. Let us reflect upon my previous comment that humor created conflict in my dance group. Any occurring conflict in my rehearsals was a result of individual misunderstandings and mistranslations between the dancers and me, as well as amongst the dancers themselves. For instance, once in trying to communicate a specific intention behind the movement, my explanation was entirely misunderstood by the dancers, leading to confusion and tension. In most circumstances, tension was diffused through laughter, but when one’s values and beliefs are challenged, this may not be easily accomplished.

I believe that sometimes humor has the potential to aggravate conflicts and degrade relationships. An individual’s values and beliefs influence their moral compass, establishing different personal limits. These personal limits create a differing of tolerance levels for how far moral boundaries can be tested. Tolerance depends on the level of the relationships between one another. “Social relationships are the key to understanding the

enigma of tickle” (Provine, 2000, p. 99). I have found that through established relationships, one more easily tolerates jokes, whereas in more casual friendships (in the same situation), one might feel immediately offended. For example, I would never accuse my friend of being cruel if they told me that I was “spoiled,” in fact I would probably think it was funny. However, if someone I was not familiar with said the same thing, it would cause great offense. On the other hand, if I am too close to a friend, we might get too comfortable– pushing the boundaries of humor, without being aware of whether or not we are being offensive. This becomes a constant navigation of the relationship and each other’s personal boundaries. Laughter dies when people feel offended and the humor is not able resolve tension. In this case, the tension becomes more severe and the relationship gets worse instead of better.

As a second language speaker, I sometimes feel offended when people make fun of my accent, even though their intention may not be to hurt me. I feel them trying to connect with me, but I cannot laugh at their jokes. Rather than being funny, I feel the effects on my confidence in speaking and it diminishes my future efforts to try to communicate. Within this social context, the jokes become more harmful, killing the laughter.

Additionally, another phenomenon I have encountered is when people laugh as a social courtesy because they are “supposed” to laugh– even if whatever happened was not actually funny. I refer this circumstance as “killed laughter” as well, because it is fake laughing, which can cause awkwardness between one another. Why do people fake their laughter? Is it self-protective, defensive laughing, or something else? Many people laugh involuntarily in tense situations. Humor theorist D.H. Monroe referred to this artificial

laughter as “defensive laughter.” He points out that “we may laugh deprecatingly when referring to our own achievements...there is nothing instinctive about it: it is a conscious attempt to take advantage of the fact that laughter is commonly associated with joy” (Monro, 1951, p. 28). Whenever laughter is used as a mask of self-defense, it can be a marker of vulnerability.

Although laughter can foster the growth of relationships, it can also hinder their development. This can distance people from one other and disconnect the emotional bonds made between them. Humor, along with sarcastic misunderstandings and mistranslations, can be exposed and even exploited through choreography.

Choreographers can reproduce humor by employing moments of when the laughter dies and the seriousness of the situation is realized. It is the choreographers’ choice to create tension, absurdity, and vulnerability for either a comedic or tragic purpose. In performance, laughter has a tendency to subside when a humorous situation becomes serious and more physically or emotionally charged. This reminds me of how close relationships can collapse when ones limits and boundaries are continuously pushed. Expanding actions, raising voices, and changing behavior on stage can shift the atmosphere and tones of acting. This paradox of humor can make the performance and stage environment serious, which also draws attention when it produces laughter. I will further discuss how tension and vulnerability, along with laughter, can reflect upon serious issues in the following section.

### Humor through Physicality

How often do you smile at people and they reciprocate? Or reflect upon when you offer someone a handshake and they respond by extending their hand; perhaps you see people yawning, and you follow after? We are connected to each other through these biological responses. In a performance context, the audience is able to physically connect to comedy through viewing and relating to the movement and gestures performed. The body acts as the medium through which one receives energy, through feeling temperature, heartbeat, and sweat. The mime artist, Richmond Shepard, once commented “He exercises the muscles of his face-not because there is any set expression for an emotion but because the more physically flexible and expressive his face is, the larger and clearer will be the projection of the emotions he is really feeling on the stage” (1971, p. 5). Audiences can feel the breath and energy of the dancers as they move through space; making eye contact with the performer(s) within a live performance. They are then able to sense the feelings and emotional states of that performer.

I believe that physicality is a uniquely effective tool for communicating humor. In this way, the power of the moving human body is used to extract humor, rather than language. This nonverbal form of communication has the ability to influence people because it creates a sense of transparency between audience and performer through the expression of the body. Although they are decades old, Charlie Chaplin’s films still make audiences laugh. We are tickled by watching him elegantly present the clumsiness of his persona, “The Tramp”. His exaggerated use of facial gestures, ungainly walking, and careful balance are the pinnacle of physical comedy. Humor is an embodied form, and as Chaplin so clearly demonstrates, its expression requires the instrument of the body.

Similarly in dance, we use the body as a means of expression. Pioneer physical theatre artist Jacques LeCoq suggests that elemental and instinctive physical connections are bonded to the meanings of gestures (Vaughan, Cioni, & Bessell, 2010). These gestures can transcend language and confusion that exists within a social context. The memory of physical actions evokes a similar response in the audience's body, and the performers respond to the audience's energy. In his book *Why is That So Funny?: A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy*, John Wright states that "Each type of laugh defines a different level or quality of audience response, and each type is a catalyst that enables us to identify different levels of emotional engagement and rational understanding of the work" (2007, p. 5). A performer is able to change the tones of the performance by using the physicality of their bodies, evoking different emotional responses.

Our embodied connections result from daily interactions. Poyatos said "Non-verbal signals like facial expression and tone of voice are often taken as signs of joy (or depression)" (1988). We are able to sense each other's feelings through nonverbal cues such as eye contact, gestures, and physical posturing. For example, a person nodding means they understand (indicating yes), whereas slumping may suggest emotional upset. In my creative process (which will be illustrated in Chapter III), I was interested in how the physicality of the body may trigger humor. How can "normal" actions, such as yawning, winking, laughing, head scratching, and dressing, when put it in the right context, create humor?

Physicality can create humor when it is exaggerated, highlighting the absurdity of that performer's posturing and movement qualities. Choreographers and comedians add humor to "normal" actions and social interactions through exaggerating gestures and

physicality. This exaggeration can also be enhanced through props and costuming choices. For example, another feature of Charlie Chaplin's films was his use of costuming: beard, suit, hat, props, and make up. In her study on clowns, Louise Peacock describes Chaplin's outfit as "[combining] trousers that are too baggy, a jacket that is too tight and a hat that is too small...it is swinging of his cane, a vital part of his costume, that indicates his insouciance and his belief that he looks like a gentleman" (2009, p. 15). Audience members may perceive situations like these as funny, as we recognize that the costuming is part of the joke of that character and his or her exaggerated behaviors. In the case of Charlie Chaplin, his costume enhances his embodiment as a ludicrous gentleman.

As a result of exaggeration through the costume and play upon social environment, performers are able to more fully embody their characters, making them appealing to the audience. In my piece, two dancers shake hands when they meet on stage, and then they shake harder, faster and stronger, building the shaking until the energy explodes through out their bodies. "Normal" behaviors are seen as humorous by exaggerating the gestures and putting them in a new context. Recontextualizing gestures like these is important for humor in that it introduces new ideas divorced from the original context, and thus makes us see the "ordinary" in new or extraordinary ways. A performer's exaggeration and the subsequent recontextualization challenge the meaning of conventions. For example, when I am at the grocery store, I would not typically pay attention to a woman picking up soap and smelling it; however, as a choreographer, when I imagine putting this circumstance on stage with a character established and with the addition of exaggeration of timing, space, etc., suddenly the "normal" act of smelling soap becomes extraordinary. A scene could challenge the ideas of automatic reactions

and habits. Wagner states “An essential purpose of humor is to call the norm into question” (2011, p. 36).

Dance, by its very nature, requires the dancers’ bodies as integral elements of the art form. As Host and Russell illustrate, “The dancer’s instrument, has more personal and limiting associations in the inner mind of his audience than color, tone, texture, shape, or even words can have” (Host, 1987, p. 17). In a dance performance, physicality is relied upon to attempt to elicit certain emotions from the audience. A sad clown could bring sadness to the audience through physical actions alone. Dance also has the potential to go beyond the reality while creating surrealistic sensations for viewers. Richmond Shepard explores how a mime can communicate through the physicality of his body in ways he would never be able to through only his voice. With his body alone, the mime can create illusions for the viewer, such as a heightened sense of danger or an altered sense of time and space.

### Tension and Laughter

Through infusing choreography with aspects of ‘dark humor,’ the dance may push boundaries and lead the viewer to experience deeper issues than simply watching a moving body in space. In “float away,” I choreographed a long scene about “tickling” between one man and a woman. In this scene, the male dancer tickled the female dancer first, and then the female dancer fought back by twisting around and hanging up on another male dancer as if she were a sticker on a wall. The male dancer struggled when he realized he could not get rid of her. As this scene came to an end, the female dancer pushed the male dancer’s head down to the floor where he was unable to escape from the

force from the female dancer. With this sequence of choreography I attempted to lead the audience from humor to a more serious – even tragic – sensibility by building a surprising tension between the dancers. When I watched the work in performance, this particular section elicited the largest response of laughter from the audience. It appeared to me that the section took the dancers from a comedic sense of play to a more tragic sense of oppression.

When someone is being tickled, the laughter response can be physiologically uncontrollable. When this tickling turns oppressive and violent, tension increases, and when it appears as though someone is defending oneself, the laughter can die completely. However, when people perceive that someone else is being tickled, they feel happier than the person who is being tickled. According to Provine “Most tickle scenarios take the tickler’s perspective, an orientation consistent with my questionnaire’s finding that it’s usually more fun to tickle than to be tickled. (In the language of the sadomasochists, there is more interest in being a ‘top’ than a ‘bottom’.)” (2000, p. 106). Provine’s research was based upon individuals watching a “tickle story” video, so the audience was once removed from the actual experience the ‘ticklers’ were having. I was curious to see if this same reaction would occur if the action was performed live onstage in front of a live audience. A dance performance exists in something of a gray zone, as it invites the audience member to bring his or her own individual life experience to the performance. The distance and lack of personal engagement through watching a video is removed when the dancers and audience are in the moment together live

Laughter is also frequently unattainable when the actions are involved with violence or extreme body contortions. Wright states that “Both the minimum and the

maximum states of tension are levels of intensity where action is impossible” (2007, p. 103). Pina Bausch’s choreography demonstrates this clearly; in the piece *Kontakthof*, a lady begins by standing in the middle of a few young men dressed in semiformal attire who try teasing her. Initially, I found it funny to see them make fun of the woman. The age differences between the older lady and the young ‘gentlemen’ as well as the lady’s stubborn stiffness in her posture built up laughter. Later, more men join in, representing different age ranges and nationalities, and they do not just tease the lady, they start touching her, grabbing her, lifting her, and slapping her. The incredible tension that this section created through abusiveness shocked my former assumptions about the scene. False laughter can lead to violent responses, as we see in children’s arguments that later lead to blows. Tension and conflicts such as these can be transformed into dance by re-crafting this experience in a physical context. The illusions that replicate this tension and physical violence can be created through comedic choreography. This issues that Bausch revealed on stage are powerful and provocative. When the lady’s body contorted, I was focused more on the manipulators, their frivolous gaze and harsh molestation made the atmosphere intense and strained. As the lady did not respond to their teasing, they kept pushing their behavior and becoming even more violent. I grew anxious about what was forthcoming, I felt unable to speak, but I could not change what will inevitably happen on stage. People often feel complicit in what they watch.

Through physical comedy, an audience’s emotion can be managed through kinesthetic awareness. As that awareness connects to the audience, the space is able to deliver various energies, create different atmospheres, and encourage creativity.

## CHAPTER III

### CREATIVE PROCESS IN “FLOAT AWAY”

The overall inspiration for “float away” came from bizarre folklore stories such as the story of the milkman as the proof of a wife’s adultery; the man who was afraid of chicken because he believed that he was a grain; the idea that “gravity” actually does not exist; a woman time-travelling at a supermarket; and an airplane diverted over a hot water-incident, among many others. These ideas and examples came from interactions and stories from my friends, watching the news, and the book, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. As a choreographer, I see these inspirations as philosophical, dialectical, and sarcastically reflecting our reality. I continue asking myself how these stories are present in our lives, what truths they reveal, and what can I do with this information as a choreographer.

For my thesis work, I collaborated with six dancers who I thought were particularly communicative. In the studio, we played with manipulating human behavior, language mistranslations, nonverbal communication, and physical storytelling. In doing so, we investigated how they led to comical misunderstandings with each individual. The laughter that arose with each embarrassment was brought from rehearsal into the piece.

For example, at one point in rehearsals, I asked one of the dancers to call out “Milk Man!” and directed the remaining cast to respond to the call with a provocative gesture (which was to be directed toward the audience). In this rehearsal, the dancers awkwardly followed my directions although they were embarrassed by my request. Because they were embarrassed they all began laughing hysterically, therefore transforming their sense of embarrassment into a humorous situation. Later, in the final choreographic piece, they were able to perform their provocative “Milk Man” gestures with conviction as the audience laughed.

### The Source of Humor

The source of humor in choreographing my thesis work “float away” came from exploring and crafting the relationships between the dancers, which resulted in humorous scenarios. Rather than delivering laughter through slapstick, character exaggeration, or deadpan humor, my creative process focused on using the dancers’ personalities as an opportunity to reveal humor in a performance context. This creative research also yielded intriguing comedic physicality amongst the dancers. In the rehearsal process, I accomplished all of this by creating scenario-based movement games, using improvisational scores, and through casual conversation. By relying on my own instincts about the relationships between my dancers, I created “float away.”

Every time we walked into the studio to start rehearsal, the dancers and I had conversations about various topics including school, work, and mundane aspects of life. These mundane topics included, but were not limited to, food, movies, hobbies, and individual quirks or habits. Sharing personal histories and accounts between my dancers

facilitated communal connections, bringing the group together with a sense of mutual understanding. Through these casual discussions (which happened spontaneously at the beginning of every rehearsal), each of the dancers' personalities, moods, and behaviors were genuinely revealed, all serving as a catalyst of the humor I sought to provoke from each member of my cast.

All of the dancers influenced one another through their individually specific identities and habits; this includes the dancer who drank hot water as informed by his Chinese traditions, the musician who was always counting rhythm for the group, and the drama major who was notably 'theatrical.' In the development of "float away," the dancers' ability to laugh together made group communication more efficient and effective. I believe my cast felt more open, both physically and mentally, and they were more respectful and receptive while rehearsing and performing with each other. This openness and sense of comradeship also brought about many opportunities for my cast to engage in laughter (through word play, pranking, and jokes) with one another, further bonding the group, and giving me the inspiration to craft the scenarios that ultimately ended up in my final choreographic work.

### Creating Scenarios

In choreographing "float away," my observations about the relationships between my dancers informed my choreography, allowing me to craft scenarios that both created and killed laughter. In some cases, I incorporated elements or themes that are not traditionally part of dance performance: for example, a supermarket scene, a gift-packaging scene, and a scene with the group "smoking." These were all enhanced by my

own imagination and observations from the environment with which I am surrounded every day. Through this exploration, I found that the absurdity and bizarre nature of life emerges by isolating the “normal” and calling it into focus.

Story and character are established within scenarios. One dancer who always seemed like she was lost deep in thought, her eyes off into the distance, inspired one such instance. She made me think of a time traveler, and without informing the other dancers, I crafted this character into the piece. When the other dancers tried approaching her, they asked me: “why is there a woman pondering in the middle of the performance space, and how are we supposed to react to her?” The woman asked too, “Should I do anything else besides hang around?” When I revealed to them that she was a time traveler, the other dancers laughed out loud in a way I did not expect. I told them that while this performer was traveling, she would not be aware of what was happening or what the others did to her. In this scenario, I realized that I had set up a new social dynamic. Instead of dancer and dancers, they became time traveler and passersby.

This new relationship triggered the dancers to laugh at the absurdity of their transformation into characters. This scene ultimately evolved into a fictitious scenario involving a supermarket I had envisioned. One dancer recreated an intercom onstage, using a microphone to project text through this part of the dance and introducing the others into their social roles within this market environment. In this way, we modified their relationships to the time traveler. The time traveler continued hanging around the middle of the stage, and during her “travels,” the other dancers passed by, teasing or lifting her while she was “senseless.” My dancers laughed at their performance identities while the audience laughed at the scenario and absurdity of the relationships, too. Even I

was laughing during the performance at what resulted from crafting and re-crafting this part of the dance.

Memory can inform choreography. I grew up in an environment where everyone smoked except my parents. However, for most of my childhood, I was living with my grandparents, and they smoked all the time, day and night. I vividly recall mornings at my grandparents' home. As I arose from bed, I could see smoke hovering in the living room where my grandmother sat in her chair, staring out the window. She looked as though there was something weighing on her mind, and it was as if the smoke symbolically lifted the heaviness from her thoughts, transporting her to another time and space. Although my lungs were constricted, I never wanted her to stop smoking because (for her) time was suspended and she seemed at ease in her smoking chair. Watching her smoke always fascinated me, as she was lost in thought, and letting her mind wander.

Whenever I see people smoking, I am reminded of my grandmother. I am a non-smoker; however, I was curious about why people enjoyed smoking together, and their gaze, gestures, and tones of speaking voice. I developed a scene for my dancers that asked them to imagine that they were holding a cigarette and staring far into the distance, just as my grandmother did. During rehearsals, everyone was laughing because it seemed absurd to do this on stage. Then, as they started exploring this as a group, they pretended to be serious and mysterious, which was interesting because I did not instruct them to. I began to realize that everyone has their own ideas and memories of smokers, which caused more stories and characters to arise for me. It was as if they unlocked the creative floodgates of my mind, giving me the insight to extract humor from this situation.

Sensations were also reproduced through crafting scenarios in my creative process. The deliberate construction of illusory senses is what underlies physical comedy in dance. Miriam Chirico describes the dramatic pattern of physical comedy in three steps: “the anticipation, release, and payoff of the action, and actors depict this process by manipulating the tension, rhythm, and timing” (2007). One such scene that utilized this pattern of comedy was the “gift-wrapping scene.”

The actions of folding while wrapping a gift require a great deal of skill and when done successfully, make the “wrapper” appear incredibly skilled. From this notion, the dancers used a technique we created called “gift packaging,” where two dancers used their bodies to fold up the body of a third dancer, as though she was a neatly packaged gift. The “package” dancer acted passively, as the other two folded her limbs in and out. This was reminiscent of the Horse Dance Theatre piece described earlier, except instead of folding paper, the dancers were folding their bodies. They constructed new patterns of movement by anticipating how the “package” dancer would respond. I had the dancers repeat this several times, carefully remembering the sequence of their particular folding and unfolding patterns in order to perform them again. Once perfected, I felt a sense of exhilaration and satisfaction when watching my dancers perform their “package wrapping” sequences. The sense of timing created humor for me in this scenario because it altered my perception of “real time,” creating a sense of excitement as my imagination was transported to another time and place.

As a result of my creative explorations, my sense of humor, memories, and sensations were ultimately presented to the audience through my creative work. This helped me attempt to create a physical and psychological connection with the audience as

a choreographer. Additionally, these scenarios may have brought a better understanding for the audience who might, in turn, have connected more deeply to the dancers and choreography on stage. Once the physical space of the stage was clarified by the choreography, the performance of the dance was more effectively performed. A psychological space was opened, creating more possibilities for the dances to improvise and communicate their own feelings in the performance context by bringing authenticity to their characters. In this world, crafted through my scenarios, the dancers energized the stage and brought the performance to life in my eyes in a way that I could not have done on my own.

### Characters

I believe that choreographing exaggerated characters were one of the strengths of my piece. However, the idea of exaggeration is the thing I consciously tried to avoid. When I try harder to craft laughter, it becomes more and more difficult to achieve. Much like humor, exaggeration, in my opinion, should not be choreographed, but instead be a natural product of personality and a character's most intense expressions. Instead of asking my dancers to exaggerate their character in situations, I told them to dance "seriously" without even thinking about the role in the piece. Jacques Lecoq wisely said "that character cannot be separated from situation" (2009, p. 64). Rather than assign characters to dancers, I give them situations and observe them finding their own characters. Extracting movement material from improvisations and allowing physicality to communicate humor and character are priorities for me in choreographing this piece.

Dancers in this piece do have strong characters that are very recognizable by their physicality. The dancers have their own characters and their own unique ways of expressing, talking, and moving while they dance with each other. My role in the creative process is to facilitate my dancers to distinguish their physical characteristics from one another, and then allow their physicality to intertwine and communicate with each other. Since dance is a form of nonverbal communication, it became inevitable that characters were exaggerated, especially when dancers' different personalities stood out and spoke on behalf of their unique physicality.

Why does an exaggerated character bring laughter? How do we see 'character' when it is embodied without speaking? We usually explain character through one's gestures, body size, voice, accent, volume, and facial expressions. I explored these aspects rather than making things bigger, louder, or exaggerated. Contrasting with one another I found to be the key to distinguishing character and producing laughter. Characters are not established in a void, but by contrast with one another. As the dancers move together, their individual characters are enhanced by their subsequent differences, ultimately giving one another meaning. Through this opposition, the individual characters are further brought to life.

Once in rehearsal, I told my dancers to jump up high one at a time and that the others would catch them. Initially, I wanted them to jump in the same way to create a repetitive feel for the audience. However, after a couple of practices, none of them were able to reproduce my movements. I laughed, though, because I observed every time that they put more effort into mimicking my movements than doing it themselves. The result was a parody of my initial choreography. I helped them realize their character by

discussing each one's quality of jumping. Soon, they were able to find their special gestures and play within the context, and looked incredibly different from each other even while they were performing the same move.

Physicality in turn assists dancers in establishing characters in a piece. In the previous example, one man had to catch all of the jumping dancers. I encouraged the jumpers to jump more frequently and intensely, so that the catching dancer eventually felt exhausted from lifting everyone. This scene required the others to jump with full energy and throw their body with 100% force. As a result, the characters were expressed through expanding their unique jumping style. If the physical movement is bigger, the character became more pronounced.

I even had created a 'character' for myself as the choreographer. I kept telling my dancers that this was a serious piece where we were working on defining their bodies and personal voices. As the dancers mimicked my timing, gestures, and movement, their own characters became richer and more real as their individual voices began to emerge through their exaggeration and performance of my directives. When I said, "this is not funny, don't try to be funny," they counteracted my idea by pretending it was "unfunny" and making me laugh. Their attitude of being (and sometimes pretending to be) "serious" initiated laughter in me because I interpreted it as them mocking themselves rather than me as the choreographer. The relationship between myself, the choreographer, and the dancers produced much of the humor in the piece.

Audience and theatrical settings can also help define dancers' characters. Dancers have the desire to express themselves while dancing on stage. Having a live audience, as a part of that theatricality, plays an important role to boost the dancers' desire to portray

their characters to the fullest. The setting helps form the characters as well; the shape, light, and environment pushes the performer's body to be more active and recognizable.

Many dancers have a difficult time defining the traits they possess because their performance is made mostly of unconscious behaviors and actions. Normally, character emerges from the creative process: but in "float away," we discussed the character roles while practicing the movement. Dancing with each other in various improvised and choreographed situations helped individuals demonstrate expressivity. Crafting scenarios helped each of the dancers explore the characters of the group and individual character qualities as well. The characters that were created and realized through rehearsals enhanced the dancers' performance quality and evoked laughter from the audience.

### Improvisations

Improvisation was necessary to explore characters and crafting scenarios for the group, improvisation was necessary and played as a significant part in creating materials and composing movements. Chaplin said, "In a dance improvisation, the movers may achieve the exhilaration that comes from challenging physical limits, but because they are pursuing something beyond the physical, they have the added gratification of spontaneously creating unique movement and form" (1988, p, 4). Improvisation was also the source of much of the humor in the piece. I always began my rehearsal with improvisation. To set it up, I described an image and story to my dancers, talked about the qualities I was looking for, and set up music for them to stimulate different feelings, thoughts, and rhythms. Through improvisation, I was able to observe each of their dancing qualities and find connections between them. During the improvisation process,

laughter often occurred when the improvised dance featured an accident, or when unexpected movement popped up while dancing with partners. Through sharing laughter, dancers were more open and intimate with each other, which helped them develop their ways of communicating through laughter and physical interaction. In the following section, I list some humorous relationships and instances of laughter that we developed as I crafted this piece using improvisations, with regard to the music, text, scenarios, and games.

Music helped create atmosphere and increased the dancers' sensibility, and sometimes set up a humorous tone for dancers. A duet between two male dancers was created through improvisation with romantic music. One of them was taller, more masculine and another one was more exquisite and smaller. First of all, they improvised in silence; I saw a strong energy between the two, and this energy was purely extracted from their bodies and physicality. It was very intense to watch, especially when strength and power difference were hard to fuse together with two such different bodies. Music helped me alter this intensity and open a new dialogue between the dancers. When I set up a slow, tender love song for the duet, the environment and atmosphere were transformed to be totally different than before. However, the dance material did not change, just the physicality and atmosphere. Although their bodies were still at odds with each other, the contrast with the music made the scenario hilarious. Their gender and dancing quality became more relevant as the music changed, both to the audience and the dancers themselves. It grew to be more intimate and seemed to be about love and hate. The dance was even more provocative when they utilized this music as their improvisation. Instead of seeing two male bodies, the audience now saw a relationship.

I asked one of them about the difference between improvising with and without music, to which one of my dancers replied that without the music, the experience of performing would have been “charged” with masculinity; however, when the music was added, the physicality suddenly shifted to something more “flirtatious” with “sexual undertones.”

The music set up the imaginary space for improvisation. Due to the free pattern of improvisation, music spurred on creativity and brought a different sensitivity for the improviser. With a different type of music, dancers were able to engage more with the dance and improvisation. The music brought more kinesthetic awareness, which helped the dancers listen to their performance voice rather than be distracted by the material and motivation.

Vocalizing in a group can align performers who are dancing on stage, which enforces each other’s performances. The voice is referred to as a nonmusical sound, and the language legitimately transcends meaning. I use this voice and language as an improvisational tool in breaking through the physical boundaries and vulnerability of performers. Improvising with speaking texts in rehearsal enhanced the characters and benefited everyone who was performing together. Performers can feel the inspiration and prompts from the speaker in-group, which made the performers feel connected and emotionally secure.

It is difficult to generate ideas about defining text and speaking material in the rehearsal process. For dancers, verbalizing instead of using a physical expression is often terrifying. As I said earlier in this thesis, dance as a physical form can express feelings that language cannot describe. Every time we verbally try to express these feelings, it can

create hilarity instead of genuine communication. The desire to self-protect gives rise to misunderstandings and accidental humor. Improvisation helped prompt self-consciousness and elicited arguments, especially when direction was not provided. However, when I set up the topic first, this created a boundary to work within, creating more chemistry while dancers played with their language and physical movements. In this way of working with improvisation, I saw more results and productivity in my dancers ability to generate material and work effectively.

In working with the two dancers as they improvised, this ‘chemistry’ and imagined realities were brought to life. One dancer’s unique gestures were very expressive and pronounced, and the movement quality changed moment to moment during his improvising. It created new meanings for me that I cannot entirely describe, but the energy and changing dynamics were fascinating. Then I found another dancer who had a really good sense of rhythm and strong verbal articulations. I asked them to improvise together, one verbally and another physically. Everyone was laughing while they watched this nonsense duet about gesture and meaning. They conveyed the meanings to each other and formed interrelationships unintentionally. When one of them said “shower,” then another was made movements mimicking how he might act in a shower. Improvisation provided more coincidental moments, as well as incongruities and self-consciousness, all of which produced humor. Later, we created a game between the two of them, where the first dancer produced a series of words beginning with “F,” and the second dancer improvised comical responses.

The laughter created through improvisation, both on and off stage, continues to fascinate me and drives me to research its unpredictability. In one night’s show, one of

my dancers was laughed out on stage as another one improvising on stage, which she did not expect. This episode of laughing that is stimulated from an unpredicted behavior and movement is more reliable and more authentic. Another time in rehearsal, I asked one male dancer to tickle another woman lying on the floor; the woman was very sensitive about people touching her, so then every time he was close to her, she would start slapping him away. I did not expect this. It was funny and intense because every time when the man tried to touch the woman, she moved into a protective stance. This authentic reaction that passed through the performance physically connected audience and dancers. The audience has been tickled in the past, so evoking that sense makes them respond to that movement.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have described different types of laughter and discussed humor that comes through physicality and relationships. I studied how relationships between dancers on stage can produce laughter and how humor can help dancers realize a fuller spectrum of performance skills. I have also described how physical comedy can bring visual satisfaction and sensory memory to the audience. I believe that humor can be a most powerful tool in bringing audience members in touch with their emotions. For example, stress can be released through laughter, thereby allowing an observer to be calmer and more present in that moment. In my opinion, as one's muscles relax, so does their heart, opening one to one's emotions.

As a society, I believe we have become distant from one another partly through overwhelmingly negative images and news in the media, which depict violent scenes of war, cases of sexual harassment, and spam advertising. In my opinion, this has contributed to individuals closing off their hearts, blocking creativity, and limiting sensations and passions toward what may appear to be the mundaneness of daily life. I believe that humor is a way to open our senses to the present moment, and to open up the deepest parts of our hearts, whether as a dancer, choreographer, or viewer of dance.

When comedy and humor are experienced, it can create a powerful sense of transparency that helps reveal one's true feelings, bringing one into a deeper connection with reality. Laughter helps us expose our emotions for the world to see. For example, I have many friends who have talked about laughing so hard that they began to cry, almost as though emotions became unlocked, opening them up to the deepest parts of themselves. Laughter can be a catalyst for opening one's emotions and allowing for more honesty with oneself; we can become more sensitive to laughing and living.

Comedic voice in modern dance can act as an impetus to access locked feelings and emotions. This is something I have been doing long before I became consciously aware of the power of humor in dance. In my first year of graduate school, I choreographed a solo as a study in my workshop class. This was shortly after I had moved to the United States and was struggling with the language barrier and cultural differences. These barriers made me tremendously homesick and to offset those feelings, I intuitively became interested in how lightheartedness in my choreography could bring more balance to how I was feeling everyday.

Every time I felt depressed, laughter was what helped me resolve the tension and low energy I felt in my body. In my workshop solo, I mocked my personal attributes as a "featherbrained" (disorganized/forgetful) student, who is careless and clumsy while trying to accomplish daily activities such as looking for my house key. As the audience sat freely around the classroom, I set up the space with my backpack, a chair, and a path outlined by some shoes. This is where I pretended to call my mom in China and express my despair to her in a very honest conversation. Interestingly enough, in "real life" I would never call my mom for fear of making her worry about me. After a series of

traveling phrases that moved me around the pathway of shoes to an upbeat piece of pop music, I clumsily crawled up to the chair where the piece concluded.

As the piece had progressed, my classmates were laughing hysterically, but then something happened. By the end, most of them had transitioned from laughter to tears even though there was joyful music playing and I was not necessarily doing anything to evoke crying in my audience. This solo allowed me to work through and express my own deeper emotions, and also sparked an emotional release from my classmates. Humor and dancing connected me to my peers in a way that my words alone could not.

I believe there is a difference in seeing a live performance versus television, movies, newspaper, or radio. Performing arts, such as dance, communicate using the body “in-the-moment,” presenting to the audience a ‘real-time’ nonverbal monologue or persona. The dancers moving bodies, which physically connect to each other, can transmit energy and emotions to the audience. In contrast, social media of today’s society cannot provide the same personal and intimate experiences, which are implicit in live performance. Through this notion, I believe the use of humor in modern dance allows us to open up and have a better life experience.

When I was in China, there was a popular misconception amongst my friends about modern dance. They claimed that it is too obscure to understand. As a dancer and choreographer, I believe that humor invites the audience into an understanding of modern dance. The threshold to understanding humorous modern dance is arguably lower, because humor is a natural occurrence that everyone experiences to some capacity. However, this is a complex issue because sometimes humor is culturally specific, which requires the audience to have background knowledge and a strong understanding of tone.

I continue to be intrigued by the use of humor in choreography. I want my dancers to share with audiences through the use of laughter and sorrow, thus providing an opportunity to open people's hearts and thoughts while simultaneously allowing the dancers the same experience. Often when we interact with others, laughter is there because it is a natural human behavior and response. I believe that relationships can grow stronger and may become closer and more personal when laughter is involved. Even when there is tension in a relationship, it can often be eased through the use of laughter. I have found that for me in my research, the use of laughter has been an invaluable tool to both create a sense of joy and frivolity as well as inner reflection as a response to sadness. Humor can help us embrace a life experience on stage and in turn present the incongruity, disagreement, and arguments that social behavior necessarily create.

More importantly, studying humor engages me with performance and helps my artistic vision grow. The power of emotion-oriented humor can create room for viewers to focus their consciousness, sense of judgment, and put them in touch with their personal feelings on a different level. I encouraged my dancers to be more expressive and communicative using laughter, physicality, timing, and character roles as tools to create scenarios, empathize the tone of situations, and transform the stage into a visual story through the use of their bodies. Although dance is ephemeral, the memory and feelings it can evoke have the potential to be eternal, and that is what I seek to explore in my creative endeavors.

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