

**ARE YOU MY BOYFRIEND? EXPLORING A
CHOREOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE**

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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For my mother.

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the choreographing of the dance “Are You My Boyfriend?” This work was performed on November 14 through 17 of 2001 at the Hayes/Christensen theatre in the Marriott Center for Dance on the University of Utah campus. This written component investigates my choreographic process in the development of this dance with particular focus on striving to satisfy my perceived imperative: to facilitate the creation of meaning for the audience. In the first chapter I explicate my perception of narrative as a point of tangency in human experience and my belief that a balance between familiarity and surprise is a key to enjoyment. Further, I discuss my opinions about the desirability of a return to narrative in the art form of Modern dance. In the second chapter I elaborate why I believe deliberate establishment of meaning for movement symbols by supplying contextual clues in and around the choreography is a goal to be pursued. I discuss the role of context as the primary site in which meaning is encoded for non-literal movement. In the third chapter I describe the aesthetic specifics and the choreographing of “Are You My Boyfriend?” In the fourth chapter I draw conclusions about the process and the dance. Throughout this thesis, I examine my motivation for choreographing this specific work and presenting it as a dance that is a thesis on the subjects of this paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	vi
WHY THESE MOUNTAINS? AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEED FOR NARRATIVE STRUCTURE.....	1
WHY THIS SKY? AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEED FOR CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS.....	15
THIS LONG ROAD? AN EXAMINATION OF CHOREOGRAPHIC CHOICES AND PROCESS.....	23
THIS EMPTY ROOM? AN EXAMINATION OF WHY TIME WAS MY FRIEND....	35
EPILOGUE.....	38
REFERENCES.....	40

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INTRODUCTION

At the outset, my goals for my thesis choreography, “Are You My Boyfriend?”, were fairly simple. I sought to investigate my supposition that utilizing narrative and contextual establishment of meaning would allow me to make a dance that might appeal to a broader audience than just dancers. I sought to use these elements deliberately with the goal of tapping prior understandings of audience members in order to encourage identification with and empathy for the performers. In this discussion of my investigation, I speak much more about the need for utilizing familiarity than creating surprise, although I believe both are important. It is my belief that we often create works that are difficult for audiences to understand because the goal of the work is to intrigue and surprise our peers, not to develop an audience for our art form. I suspect that simply seeing dancers perform is surprise enough for many potential audience members. Thus, I will discuss whether the exploitation of existing familiarities of potential audience members, particularly through the use of broadly understood structures, is not an aspect of choreography that our art form ignores to its eventual peril.

Many times my mother has admonished me as a writer to “decide who your audience is, and write to them.” Because I sought to have my thesis dance communicate with the audience, I decided to take her advice and apply it to this choreographic endeavor. I decided that I wanted my intended audience to include anyone who could feel *compassion* for someone who finds their soul’s completion in another of the same

sex. In addition I wanted my dance to welcome audience members with varying degrees of comfort with the conventions of modern dance. Because I wanted to be so widely inclusive in the familiarity levels of my audience, I knew I needed to find elements with which a wide array of audience members would be familiar.

WHY THESE MOUNTAINS? AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEED FOR NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

In my years as a dancer, both student and professional, I have come to believe that the art form I love cannot survive without deliberate cultivation of an audience. The first section of this thesis examines why I believe that narrative may provide connective tissue essential to audience investment.

Several years have passed since I choreographed “Are You My Boyfriend?”. I have often questioned why it is so hard for me to write about this dance when I loved creating it so much. In the end I think I was worried that if I really examined the dance, I would discover it wasn’t as good as I thought. To my surprise, I believe it is better.

What is the beginning? If I acknowledge that my consciousness is constantly reorienting itself to focus on an ever shifting now, how can any starting point be more than a convenient spot to start the story? Chronologically, my thesis choreography “Are You My Boyfriend?” must have begun somewhere. I suspect, however, that any “beginning” I assign it now says more about organization after the fact than about the first, generative impulse. Nonetheless a beginning must be chosen in order to give meaning to all that follows.

To find the beginning, let’s just aim at a point somewhere before the present and dive in. Perhaps we’ll get lucky.

“בְּרֵאשִׁית, בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ. 1. In the beginning...” Woops!
Too far. Let’s try again.

My first love was music. In fact, you might even say that Beethoven is responsible for the first creative steps that led to my eventual metamorphosis from child into artist. By the time I was five I was picking “*Für Elise*” out on the piano. The ironic thing about trying to play “*Für Elise*” is that my father hated the piece – a cosmic irony because Dad had a huge classical, baroque, and romantic music collection. He loved Bach, Beethoven and Vivaldi. I grew up in a house where we were much more likely to listen to Handel than to the Beach Boys or Air Supply. Dad, however, hated “*Für Elise*” and didn’t have a recording of it. I had heard it on some television show, and since we had no recording of it for me to listen to, I figured out how to play it myself. I’m sure he was thrilled. Because of my interest, my parents paid for me to take piano lessons. Unfortunately, although I had a good “ear” for music and a phenomenal physical memory for the piano, I never really mastered reading more than one line of music at a time. I frustrated my teachers by being completely unable to play a piece of music until they played it through. Once the song was in my head, I could make those ridiculous little black dots make sense, but until then, it was just a bunch of nonsense. Even at fourteen I knew there wasn’t much future for a concert pianist who can’t read music, thus my first lover and I broke up.

Through junior high and high school I had intense affairs with biology, genetics, chemistry and astronomy. I loved knowing things. I loved being the know-it-all smart kid in class. Sometime during my senior year, however, I had an epiphany. Scientists spend a lot of time in labs wearing white coats. Scientists aren’t particularly social or

popular (at least stereotypically.) Ergo, I made my next life decision based on the need to be liked. I became a theatre major.

I wasn't a good actor. My mom has commented a time or two that it was like watching a bunch of sticks on stage; I was so wooden. To my credit, however, I had a knack for directing particularly for as young and poorly trained as I was. I believe that those early directing experiences are integral to my choreographic style. I am certain that my love of performed text stems from the Reader's Theatre class I took at Ricks College. Probably the greatest favor that being a Theatre major did for me, however, was to introduce me to modern dance.

At that time, the Kirkham building at Ricks College housed the Black Box theatre, the acting studios, the pottery studio, the Kirkham Main Stage, and the modern dance studio. The Kirkham Lobby was a remarkably friendly public space where, generally, theatre and dance students hung out between classes. I made friends with several dancers, and eventually went to one of their shows.

Looking back, the work in the show probably wasn't that good. Today, my trained (read calloused and jaded) critical eye would almost certainly despise the concert. At the time, though, I loved it. It was an amazing breath of fresh, creative air. I thought that it might help my acting if I were a trained mover, so I signed up for a modern dance class. Ten years passed in which I believed, many times, that I was finally a dancer.

A great many other things happened in my life that led to my eventual enrollment at the University of Utah as a master's candidate in the field of modern dance choreography.

From this information I would like you to glean two things. First, the desire to create art is, for me, almost preconscious. I remember the feeling of making those keys make sense on the piano, the feeling of making the piano say things I had heard but could not say with my voice. Second, I am an artist because art makes me feel.

I choreograph in order to express myself in a physical medium. I enjoy choreographing because it gives me a rush. There is nothing like watching a work I have had a hand in creating develop into something powerful, mystical, and true. What do I mean by “true?” As concisely as I can approximate it I mean something that resonates with me when I see or hear it and causes me to feel that it is “real; genuine; authentic.”
(True)

I have developed a poetic attachment to the idea that relationships can be best understood as the physical, mental, and metaphysical space between people. How better to represent mental and metaphysical spaces than with physical space? The *space* of relationships is where I find the greatest possibility for discovering truths that can be revealed physically. My use of space is discussed further in the description of the choreography. As I have developed as a choreographer, I have noticed that I tend to feel most successful with works that focus on relationships or are narrative in structure or combine these elements.

As both a choreographer and an audience member, I find that narrative structures are the most easily accessible for me. The reason for this can be easily seen. A narrative is “a story or account of events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious.”

(Narrative) During my junior year of undergraduate study, I met and was privileged to work for Della Davidson, an artist whose work fundamentally changed my ideas about

what can be beautiful to watch. Della is a choreographer who has been strongly influenced by narrative. In an e-mail to me Della commented, “My interest in narrative is that it forms a base structure from which I can “riff.” [Stories allow me to] focus on heightened emotional states through bold images and personal movement themes that demand that the story be excavated – by the viewer – from a highly textured, sensual stage picture. (Davidson)

The performance of “Night Stories” at Theater Artaud in San Francisco was the culmination of months of intense work with the choreographer, the other dancers and actors, and three stories by Isabel Allende in the pursuit of the essential moments that made up the stories. In working with Della I rediscovered my love for narrative and began to formulate why stories might be vital to preventing modern dance from ending up in the graveyard of dead art. Although in my working with her we usually did have a spoken narrative text, “The narrative in the three Allende stories Davidson uses -- “Wicked Girl,” “Tosca,” and “Revenge” -- is neatly linear,” (Ross) I noticed that she would sometimes carry the story forward using movement only to portray the events. I believe the spoken text was necessary because of the complexity of the stories she sought to communicate. For “Are You My Boyfriend?”, however, I wanted to instead utilize a simpler narrative that could be communicated without words.

Sherrri Savick comments in *Silent Grooves of Change and Circus, Saints and Sinners Club: A Study of Narrative and Character Development in Dance* that:

Narrative, which is also used in ballet, is [a] theatrical element that is accessible to the audience. People love being told a story, because there is something satisfying in being led into a journey of fantasy and escapism that reaches beyond the everyday. Narrative is, of course, an inherent part of the theatre. We go to the theatre expecting to be told a story with a beginning, middle, and end. (8)

This suggests that her experience is similar to mine and that she believes, as I do, that recognition of story is universal.

After narrative, the next most easily accessed choreographic structures for me are musical. I believe this is partly due to extensive musical training. However, I suspect even audience members without musical training have the advantage of subconscious familiarity with the forms of music due to almost constant exposure through electronic media. Of course music is often bound up with narrative, which can create barriers for choreographers because the story of the song is seen as too strong to allow juxtaposition with a dance.

Non-narrative dance works hold intellectual interest for me but I am rarely moved by them unless they are powerfully musical or of remarkable brilliance. My choreography is an attempt to be understood, not to obfuscate meaning, nor to reveal lack of meaning. Utilizing structures with which the audience is familiar from other art forms strikes me intuitively as the surest way to understanding. Narrative is, for me, the key form that any audience will likely understand. In my works, I believe that if the audience didn't understand what I was saying then I have not been successful.

In my first years of studying dance, I remember many times hearing audience members ask, "But what does it mean?" With an air that I'm sure came across as self-important I would turn around in my seat and interrupt strangers to state, "It doesn't have to mean anything. Isn't it great! You can find your own meaning," or "Whatever you take from it is what it means for you, it's totally open to interpretation." You see, I was in love with this mysterious art form and willing to see most anything as beautiful even if I didn't "get it." Only after many years of studying and living did I realize that those

whom I had believed lacking in imagination were cutting right to the heart of why modern dance is an art form only appreciated by a very few. I realized that if the audience doesn't understand, the majority likely feel alienated, not inspired. They don't open their minds and create meaning; they close them and find discomfort. They most likely never, by choice, attend another modern dance performance.

Of those whom I interrupted to comment on the joys of not needing meaning, some responded to my enthusiasm with a tepid, "Oh wow, that's... so cool..." and some simply ignored my rudeness. I propose that how they should have responded was, "Hogwash, rubbish, or hooie!"

I know that all kinds of philosophical debates have revolved around the question "What is Dance?" and far more around the question, "What is Art?" Let's set all that to the side and break the back of the "it doesn't have to mean anything" snake right now. If it didn't mean anything, it wouldn't be on the stage. Its meaning may be secret or personal or even poorly defined, but it still means something. "I felt like making a dance with lots of high kicks to the sound of five narcoleptics snoring," may actually mean, "I don't care what the audience thinks or whether I ever get hired to choreograph again," or it may mean "I think I'm a genius and if people actually like to watch this dance it will affirm my self esteem." Regardless, there is meaning there because it was made by a person for some reason.

Of course, it is possible to ascribe meanings different than the choreographer intended to a dance. The Constitution of the United States and the Bible are similarly open to interpretation. That in no way diminishes the meanings that those who penned those documents intended – it simply points out a common failing of humanity and one

of our greatest assets. We are individuals with individual life experiences and thus our responses to stimulus will always be individual. The flexibility of meaning is to be recognized, even cherished. It fosters misunderstanding, it's true, but it also allows for the existence of nuance – precious to the hearts of poets and dancers alike. However, the flexibility of meaning does not need to be raised on a pedestal as an artistic goal because it is inherent. If we idolize the aspiration to misunderstanding, how can we blame the audience who understands only that what they just saw bored them to tears and never returns?

I have spent years examining the matter. I have talked about it with friends. I have discussed it, several times, at length, with relative strangers having varying degrees of experience with the art form. The upshot of this consideration was several fairly simple realizations.

First, the people who most truly love modern dance, as a whole, are first year modern dance students. Something they saw or experienced opened their minds to tremendous “what ifs” and they dove into what seemed a wide ocean of artistic possibilities.

Second, dancers with more training are relatively apathetic about the art form when compared to the neophytes.

Third, audience members are often tacitly hostile to modern dance. Even while they sit in the theatre, many are unhappy to be there.

Fourth, highly trained dancers are extremely critical audience members. Often they are at least as unhappy to be in the audience as the first time watcher. An example of this can be found in Savick's thesis when she says, “At times, I wonder why nothing

appeals to me, as the moments when theatre or dance are inspiring become few and far between. Either I am becoming too jaded and impatient or the quality of the performing arts has diminished.” (7)

“How could this be?” I wondered, and I went out dancing with my friends and got drunk. It was while I was enjoying an alcoholic haze that I had another epiphany. I’m sure many others have realized this truth, but I found it in several stiff shots of vodka mixed with Red Bull. I call the result of that epiphany the curve of experience. I recognized it by examining my feelings about dance, music, video games, books, people, and life itself. Here’s how it goes.

When something is completely unfamiliar, I am completely uninterested in it. Imagine a dog that has only ever eaten rodents and birds. One day it finds a plate of dog food in a sealed plastic bag. It does not look like food. It does not smell like food. Ergo, it is not food. At best, it is a curiosity, perhaps a toy. I refer to this state as being “completely surprised.”

It is only after I recognize aspects of an experience that are familiar that it becomes interesting. If the plastic were punctured somehow, and the smell of food were to escape, the dog would be much more interested in the food – and in everything else that looked and smelled similar to this new food source.

However, if I have completely experienced something before, it is less interesting. The same dog, fed an ample, regular diet of that food will likely leave some of it uneaten, particularly if there are other food options available.

Apuleius, a Roman Philosopher born in 124 AD, is attributed with commenting on this phenomenon with, “Familiarity breeds contempt, while rarity wins admiration.”

(Apuleius) (Although he may have been quoting Aesop who is credited in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* with a more abbreviated “Familiarity breeds contempt” (Bartlett 60) some six hundred years prior.) Once I have had an experience enough that it is not only known, but repetitive, it is avoided. I refer to this state as being “completely familiar.” Having a choice, the dog may well become a finicky eater, unwilling to touch a food it once relished. Perhaps the analogy breaks down here, but then life is not dog food—most of the time.

Putting aside my silly analogy to dog food I think the curve of experience keys into our innate capacity for and thirst for learning. We love to learn, and we love it the most when we don't realize that learning is what we're doing. In her book *Peripheral Visions*, Mary Catherine Bateson discusses her premise that learning is a fundamental human process; one that we innately enjoy outside of situations where we have been taught not to like it. She comments:

...Learning can be coming home, for the process of learning turns a strange context into a familiar one, and finally into a habitation of mind and heart. The world we live in is the one we are able to perceive; it becomes gradually more intelligible and more accessible with the building up of coherent mental models. Learning to know a community or a landscape is a homecoming. Creating a vision of that community or landscape is homemaking. (213)

Considered in this light, it is easy to see that the first year dance student is likely so ardent because they are just familiar enough with their art form to be joyfully intrigued by almost everything relating to it. Their minds are reassured by what they know and voraciously curious about that which they do not.

“What,” you may be asking yourself, “does any of this have to do with narrative?”

Let me digress just a bit longer and perhaps it will be clear.

Dance is in a difficult position as an art form. It cannot be adequately captured by any media to approximate the experience of seeing it in the theatre. Proponents of the art of “Dance for the Camera” recognize that they are not duplicating the live experience; they are creating a unique experience utilizing some of the techniques of dance amalgamated with the techniques of film on a usually digital film-like medium. Documentary filming of dance can be interesting and relatively comprehensive, but always feels distinctly removed from the experience of live dance.

From what I can see, no other art form suffers this lack. Paintings can be photographed. Music can be recorded with great fidelity. Poems can be written down and either read silently or aloud. Plays, arguably almost as difficult to capture as dances, have nonetheless been so successfully transferred to reproducible media that they have spawned the most lucrative art forms of our time: cinema, film, television.

Why does dance suffer uniquely from this lack? I know that you expect me to say “Narrative,” and tie myself back to the source of this digression. I believe the truth strikes deeper. “Familiarity,” is my answer. If we could help our potential audience members to be more familiar with movement as an art form, perhaps their first experience with concert dance won’t be their last because perhaps they will have gotten more from it than an uncomfortable feeling about seeing the bulges in those guys’ tights.

According to Bateson:

What we call the familiar is built up in layers to a structure known so deeply that it is taken for granted and virtually impossible to observe without the help of contrast. Encountering familiar issues in a strange setting is like returning on a second circuit of a Möbius strip and coming to the experience from the opposite side. Seen from a contrasting point of view or seen suddenly through the eyes of an outsider, one’s own familiar patterns can become accessible to choice and criticism. With yet another

return, what seemed radically different is revealed as part of a common space. (31)

It seems, then, that we need to encourage audiences to encounter “dance” enough times for the layers of their experience to build up to a familiarity or to encounter “dance” that relates to patterns that are already understood.

But how can we help our audience to take those first bites – to experience dance so that it has a chance to build up in their system? By wrapping our dances in things they want to eat. Narrative is perhaps the most universally familiar structure for art because it mimics that with which we are all most familiar – life.

To be fair, there are concert dances that have quite successfully made the leap to the screen. Well, I admit that I can only think of one – *The Nutcracker* – and I honestly think that exception exemplifies the rule. *The Nutcracker* is a story, a narrative that has been translated into physical movements and then captured, many times, to film. Still there are those who will tell you that even the Bolshoi on tape is nowhere near as exciting as seeing a regional company performing it live—and isn’t it funny that I haven’t felt even the slightest desire to see *The Nutcracker* for many years because I have seen it so many times in the past? Hmm. I guess I do have an old videotape of George Balanchine’s “Serenade” and one of the Nederlands Dans Theatre performing Jiří Kylián’s “Symphony in D” and “Sinfonietta” that were all clearly documentary of stage performances yet struck me profoundly. Tellingly, whenever I have shown them to friends who aren’t dancers their interest level is next to nil, yet I believe that were those same friends to see live performances of these works they would be entranced.

I honestly think our familiarity with narrative as a structure is part of why so many contemporary choreographers have intentionally moved away from it. They have

seen it so many times that they're bored and wish to explore new structures around which to organize their dances.

Unfortunately, because our art form cannot be adequately replicated in an easily accessed medium, most of our potential audience has no experience with which it relates, and thus the unfamiliar structures are like sealed plastic bags. The dance that is inside is inaccessible, unfamiliar and uninteresting.

In discussion I have often likened experience with most of the arts to a pyramid. The apex represents the audience's experience with the art that is before them, right now. The body of the pyramid represents all of the experiences the audience has had with that art form as a whole. So perhaps the viewer likes one painting better than another, that is personal taste, but most viewers will find some painting they enjoy because they have a broad experience of paintings from which to draw familiarity.

I liken the experience of dance to a needle instead of a pyramid. The dance in front of the audience right now is the tip of the needle, and that which they have to relate it to is an unstable, often minimal set of experiences. Thus, many audience members do not have adequate familiarity with the dance to find it interesting.

"Then why," you may ask, "would those who are most familiar with dance as an art form tend to view it with boredom?"

"Ah," I reply, "the question answers itself!" There must be aspects of each experience that are unfamiliar to distinguish it from the other experiences that it is like. I believe that is why students who are just beginning their exploration of dance are the most ardent of its admirers. There are some things familiar in each dance they see, but a great deal that is also unfamiliar, and so their investment in the known provides the key

to the unknown. Conversely, the highly trained dancer in the audience can be utterly familiar with what is happening on the stage. Perhaps a lift is new, perhaps the dancers approached or left the floor in a novel fashion, but on the whole the response to the dance is a bored “been there, done that.” For these highly critical audience members the only thrills left are found in truly masterful works, brilliantly performed. (Isn’t that always at least a little bit of a surprise?)

I advance the narrative structure as panacea for these ills. When a story is either implicitly or explicitly integrated into the dance, the very familiarity of its structure gives the uninitiated a handle to grasp as the dance unfolds. This same story provides interest to the jaded viewer by offering a new context for the same old movements seen a thousand times before. I do not believe a new emphasis on narrative would in any way betray the art form of Modern dance.

In 1941 George Beiswanger, assistant editor of *Theatre Arts Monthly*, was published in *Martha Graham*, a book of photographs by Barbara Morgan as saying:

At last one could speak without quibbling of “the theatre” of Martha Graham.

In this theatre there is story—the parable of everywoman when she happens to be a Madame Bovary; the pilgrim’s progress of sinning, aspiring man; the legend of Emily Dickinson—poet. There is speech—dance evoked—that does for dance what sound has done for the film. Above all there is tragedy and comedy, co-mingled as they are in life, resolved and reconciled in a soul which has won its battle and knows whereon it stands. (146)

I am in no way saying that the narrative structure will magically make poorly constructed, poorly rehearsed dances into masterworks, but since I don’t see how it can make brilliantly constructed and performed dances suddenly boring, what do we have to lose?

**WHY THIS SKY? AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEED
FOR CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS**

Considering that there is no constraint on poetry to utilize narrative forms, is it hypocritical for me, a poet and lover of poetry to turn to narrative for the salvation of Modern dance? Perhaps, but perhaps not...

I choreograph in order to communicate in a physical medium, much as I write poetry or fiction to express myself in a written medium. Meghan Cooley's thoughts about this influence my own. "Engaging in dance choreography and performance, like the process of writing, requires a commitment to the moment, an ability to be entirely present, indeed a fine attunement of sensory experience." (13) I believe all of my creative outlets are expressions of a deeply ingrained communicative impulse. At its most basic level, I suppose that communicative impulse might be described as a supremely egotistical belief that what I have to say is important. Because I believe that my desire to write and my desire to choreograph stem from the same root, and although they are different modes of expression, I believe that my choreography benefits when I apply evaluative techniques acquired from poetic composition to the choreographic process.

In writing a poem, I have been taught that one strips away extraneous words until an essential communication takes place. One limits one's options in order to free the creative mind to work. Those limitations often take the form of meter or rhyming

pattern but need not do so. In dance I have always set limitations because without them there is simply too much material with which to work. Plato is quoted in English as having said, “Necessity... the mother of invention” (Plato) although *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* instead cites this simply as the Latin saying – *mater artium necessitas*, (Bartlett 124) I often think that similarly limitations are the impetus for creativity. (I commented on the saying *mater artium necessitas* to my sister Antonia who reads both Greek and Latin. She replied with something like, “Yup, that’s exactly what it says... necessity... mother of art. I mean invention.” It was a tremendous “Ah hah!” moment to realize that this ancient “saying” could as easily be a comment on the artistic process as on human ingenuity.)

Poetry is about communicating. All of the words are chosen to work together in creating the imagery, emotions and music contained in the poem. An apt analogy would be to compare the images and ideas inside a poem to the collimated electromagnetic waves in a laser. Not only are all photons emitted by a laser of the same frequency, but the individual wave-fronts are aligned – minimizing interference. This means that every photon contributes its maximum power to the laser. The most powerful poems are so carefully crafted that every word is examined to see if it is contributing to the communication of the poet’s intention.

All discussions of student poems (both in class and in conference) focus on the relationship between the poet’s intentions and the poem he or she has written and not on the poem itself, and a poem is judged to be finished or unfinished insofar as its effects (as articulated by the poet, the class, and the instructor) conform to the effects the poet had intended. Even if, for example, the class is unanimous in its judgment that the poem is successful in very specific ways, unless these ways are consistent with the poet’s intentions the poem is not considered a successful (or finished) one. (Olson 4)

When choreographing a dance with the expressed desire for communication, I believe that one should strive for the same clarity and unity of purpose. A choreographer, however, must contend with an innate difference between dance and poetry.

Although words are symbols with variable values, the users of a specific word set generally have a similar range of values for individual symbols. “If we take the word “dog” in English...what is engendered for the hearer is not the “real” dog but a mental concept of “dogness”: canine, quadruped, barks, has sharp teeth, waggly tail, buries bones, eats biscuits, howls, fetches sticks, growls, urinates on lamp posts. The “real” dog might be a Great Dane, West Highland terrier...etc. rather than a general dog.” (Cobley and Jansz 11)

I find that since our general definitions of word/symbols as a culture are relatively similar, when context is added to verbal or written language even a word whose meaning is unknown is limited to a range of values which allows communication. Quite simply, the information for decoding the unknown symbol is encoded in our understanding of the symbols surrounding it.

The same is not true of the movements comprising the “vocabulary” of codified dance techniques. I contest that the actions widely promulgated as *dance* – aside from specific, literal gestures taken from life in the culture of the audience, contain no meaning in and of themselves.

As an example, consider a pirouette. Although there are many variations in the specifics of a pirouette, they don’t materially alter the basic movement – the dancer spins on one foot. What does it mean? Arguably nothing. The pirouette is simply movement. We can admire or despise the precision of it. We may be awed or disappointed by how

many rotations are achieved. A pirouette can be (and has been) used as a measure of virtuosity, but the movement of itself does not convey meaning.

If we consider it to be given that dances can communicate, how then does this communication take place? Where is the information for understanding the symbols of the dance encoded? In much the same way as when you are reading and don't recognize a specific word but understand the sense of the sentence anyway, I believe that the majority of the meaning deliberately encoded into a dance work is conveyed contextually. Who is doing the movement? How are they doing the movement? What other movement is taking place around it? Where are the dancers in the space? Is there music, and if so, what is it saying – both literally and figuratively? Exactly how are the dancers and the space lit? What do the costumes say about what is happening? Do the performers have a specific energy quality or set of facial expressions? Every one of these factors is a site for the encoding of information about a dance.

There is nothing inherently wrong with dances that don't mean anything. Because I don't believe it is possible for a deliberate artistic creation to be without meaning I should more specifically say there is nothing inherently wrong with dances that designedly do not communicate any specific meaning. There are many choreographers whose work I respect and sometimes love even when it is not intended to convey anything particular to the audience – the non narrative works of Lar Lubovitch and Jiří Kylián spring to mind. Some non-meaning-specific choreographers seem pleased with any value that the audience may find in their work and others act almost offended when an interpretation of their work is offered to them. Deliberate lack of meaning, however, appeals less to me as time goes on, both as a choreographer and an audience

member. I discovered my distaste for it at the American Dance Festival in Durham North Carolina. While there I was exposed to a great deal of extremely well-thought-of dance, but the two concerts that stand out are the Merce Cunningham Company concert – through half of which I slept, and the Erick Hawkins Company concert – through all of which I suffered. Oh, I tried to stay awake for the Cunningham concert; his dancers were so technically incredible and the opportunity to see them perform so anticipated that I could not believe I was falling asleep. I suspect that earlier in my training I would have been riveted. At that point, however, I was a jaded dance student who was working long hours backstage for the shows while dancing a great deal in classes and I had already been surfeited by many performances of more accessible choreographers in the earlier weeks. Mercifully I don't remember many details from the Hawkins concert aside from the pianist, Lucia Dlugoszewski, banging her hands on the keyboard and a sense of resentment that somehow the choreographer was insulting me from beyond the grave by making me endure his dated and pointless work.

Because of my experiences with being an irritated viewer, I gave myself the task of trying to ensure that meaning could be made by the audience of “Are You My Boyfriend?” To that end, I sought to deliberately encode the means for decoding my intended meaning within the gestural movements and the context surrounding the dance movements. Even as I was doing so I acknowledged that previous experiences and knowledge the audience brought with them to the show would be as significant in the process of making meaning as what I put on the stage. In this I believe that I may have seen eye to eye with Merce Cunningham. Dance reviewer Giannandrea Poesio commented that:

I could review Cunningham's *Ocean* by talking of something else, such as Belfast's buzzy nightlife, the fun I had attending a matinee of *Tap Dogs* or, on a more serious note, the richness of the Belfast Festival at Queen's, the tantalising architectural beauty of the Waterfront Hall and the hypnotising effect of Bill Viola's 'The Messenger', exhibited at the Ormeau Baths Gallery. After all, to discuss any of those things would be to remain true to Cunningham's philosophy because each single event affected, in the end, the way I approached the performance and, most of all, reflected my own perception of it. (Poesio)

A great example of how prior knowledge may impact an audience member is related by Brent Schneider in "Occurring Evolution." He had choreographed a work that utilized sign language as a part of its movement vocabulary and relates:

[A] student sought me out to tell me he was an interpreter for the deaf and that the piece greatly moved him. "You sure do know how to get to a signer," was his parting comment. I found his spontaneous review interesting because I had not thought about the dance being viewed by those who understood sign language. (Schneider 12)

I believe that our prior understandings are essential to meaning making because they are quite simply... essential. What we can understand is predicated upon what we currently understand. (As a side note, I absolutely love the word "understand." I have a mental image of physically holding knowledge up. The nuance of the word suggests to me that to *understand* is more than to *know*, it is to *stand under*, to figuratively support the knowing and the knowledge itself. Somehow it seems much more interactive and relative to *understand* than to simply *know*.)

As my mother said, "decide who your audience is." So who was my audience; anyone who could feel compassion for someone who finds their soul's completion in another of the same sex. In addition, I wanted my dance to welcome audience members with varying degrees of comfort with the conventions of modern dance. This work could easily have been staged with heterosexual principals, and may have also been effective.

However, this would not have revealed a new aspect of the archetypal story to the majority of any audience. The impact of preconceptions against empathy would have been diminished and with it the uniqueness of the work. Please note that I say “feel compassion;” I was not trying to change anyone’s sexuality with this work, only to reveal similarity in difference.

I wonder if we choreographers couldn’t learn a thing or two from viruses. Viruses reproduce by hijacking the constructive and/or reproductive aspects of a host cell. Think of “reproduce” as a metaphor for “transmit meaning” and you’ll see why I think this is significant. If we consider the mind of the audience member to be represented by the “host cell,” then for the virus (dance) to be successful it must co-opt the reproductive centers (pre-existing understandings) of the host cell (audience member’s mind) in order to reproduce (transmit meaning).

By designing context into the dance itself using costumes, music, relationships of dancers, energy qualities, facial expressions, lighting, physical symbols with relatively broadly understood connotations, and (of course) a narrative structure, I sought to tap into pre-existing understandings of the audience members in order to encourage the dance to decode itself in their minds. Here is an analogy that I find useful. Many dances are like flower buds. They are pretty enough as they are and there is no need to “understand” anything to appreciate that they are pretty. Many choreographers, however, want their flowers to have weight, to mean something to their audience. I find that I am often required, as an audience member, to deconstruct a dance in order to approach the motivation for the work’s existence. I enjoy teasing meaning out of a dance in much the same way that I enjoy finding the meaning in a poem or a scientific essay. I recognized,

however, that a great deal of my intended audience has neither the prior experiences with which to associate concert dance nor the desire to develop these “prior experiences.” I wanted, as much as possible, for the flower to open itself to the audience’s understanding in order to provide a meaningful and enjoyable experience even for the novice.

THIS LONG ROAD? AN EXAMINATION OF CHOREOGRAPHIC CHOICES AND PROCESS

In creating my thesis choreography, there were specifics that I predetermined would factor into my choreographic process for the finished work. It was given that I would work with a very large cast. It was given that it would be a love story. It was given that I would work with modern music, by which I mean music by contemporary artists, preferably with lyrics. In addition to these “givens” in so far as I was able, it was my desire to create a work that could be accessible for an audience with a broad spectrum of experience of modern dance – from neophyte to aficionado. At the end of it all, and more important than any other factor, I wanted to make a work that I would love.

In order to create work that could be understood and appreciated by a broad audience base, I felt that I needed to create work that tapped into other art forms and other understandings that the audience members would be bringing to the show with them. The most important of these “other understandings” in my process was, as previously stated, narrative. Among other “other understandings” incorporated were simple things like costume coloration and the use of children’s games in the work.

An overarching, almost sculptural structure that I designed into my choreography was to pare down the story until the audience was being shown the story of two people out of thirty. I wanted to go from big to small, from community to individuals. To this

end I ordered the sections of the dance so that the first section began with everyone onstage. I whittled down the numbers of people being given attention progressively with each section. I say “being given attention,” because of the five sections, the third and not the last was the one in which the least of the cast had stage time, however lighting helped me focus the eye of the audience while still allowing all of my cast to be involved with the story from beginning to end. In analysis, I realize that this paring down was also a journey from metaphorical to literal. My thirty-one dancers were not the entire world, but they served just fine as it in metaphor. Conversely, my two male leads actually were a couple and thus I felt comfortable asking them to explore an honest intimacy that may have been difficult to achieve otherwise.

Other choreographic structures were also utilized, many of them at the subconscious level as the demands of limited rehearsal time often enforced “gut level” decisions that later analysis has affirmed aesthetically. For example, when I was reacquainting myself with “Are You My Boyfriend?” in preparation for completing this thesis, I watched the first section and realized the opening motif and development are essentially a fugue and that the restatement of this motif in the last section ties the dance together like a concerto. I am relatively certain that while structuring this movement, I was not thinking of it in terms of musical forms; however my aesthetic training as a choreographer allowed me to utilize this structure at an instinctive or pre-conscious level. Even with goals as specific as mine were for this project, I knew that we, my dancers and I, were going to have to discover a path to the final performance. “It is essential to remember that the creative end is never in full sight at the beginning and that it is brought wholly into view only when the process of creation is completed.” (Ghiselin 11)

In the rehearsal process, the first challenge we had to overcome was the very size of the cast. With thirty-one dancers to coordinate, I could only rarely schedule more than one rehearsal for the entire cast per week. Even then, I don't believe there were more than five rehearsals before the show went into technical rehearsals for which the entire cast was present. To work around this, I made sure that the people whose schedules prevented them from attending all of the rehearsals were always involved in group work. Thus I was able to utilize other dancers to help teach those who had been absent the material they had missed.

My next challenge came quite early in the process when I let the group know what the dance was going to be about. After rehearsal one of the dancers came to me to tell me that because of the subject matter and because there were so many other dancers in the work, she would need to excuse herself. I let her know that I understood, but I was nervous to consider that a number of the other freshmen girls might have similar reservations. Thank heaven for Corinne Penka. She had not been cast by me at the audition – I don't remember for sure if it was because she was unable to attend or she was selected by another choreographer and had asked only to be cast once – but when she heard from another of the dancers, Andrea Bernard, what had happened, Corinne sought me out and asked to join the cast. My spirits, a little crushed, were immediately lifted. I suspect there may have been some coaxing and guilt tripping behind the scenes that I was not privy to, what I do know is that I only lost the one cast member and I really felt my dancers pull together and give their all for this work.

When the curtain opened for the first section, (subtitled *se chercher* – to seek oneself), all thirty-one of my dancers were standing throughout the stage, looking out at

the audience. The vibratory synthesizer music clues the audience that this moment is important, and as the heavy bass drum joins in the entire stage full of dancers begins to do a slow plié in parallel which ends with them leaning forward in unison to rest their forearms on their knees as they look out at the audience. A bit of a heavy handed beginning; I felt the whole spectacle of so many dancers performing these simple actions was like they had all spoken as one and said, "Watch." Although there were frequent entrances and exits throughout the first section this sense of a mass of people was maintained as the section progressed. Five dancers, a group that I referred to during rehearsals as 'The Friends,' were set apart in this section by the simple technique of dressing them in bright colors, (pumpkin orange, royal blue and celery green) where everyone else was dressed in grey. 'The Friends'' roles were danced by Nicholas Cendese, Lucie Madonna, Casey Rathunde, Nathan Shaw, and Chia-Chi Chaing who injured herself after opening night and was replaced by Erin Rice-Estrada. In addition to having "The Friends" dressed differently, they were also choreographed to often interact in various configurations including as a huddle playing rochambeau or rock-paper-scissors. I utilized rochambeau as a symbol in order to place the relationship of "The Friends" as one of long standing and innocent origins. (As a side note, although having a thirty-one person cast allowed me to really fill the space with dancers, the visual impact was only the third most important reason for why I had such a large cast. The most important reason was that in doing so I was able to cast every single dancer who showed up for the audition and was not selected by another choreographer. Not so altruistic when one acknowledges that most of the dancers were University of Utah trained; even less altruistic when I admit that the second most important reason for my huge cast was to

bring in a larger audience. More dancers equal more friends and family buying tickets and filling seats.)

Although the second section (subtitled *amour?* – love?) isolated duets and trios in hard edged spotlights, I designed the section to be busy enough that it always struck me that more people, more stories were being dealt with than in the third section. To that end, ‘The Friends’ from the first section were shown in duets and trios with other dancers who, for this section, added a colored piece to their costumes. In addition, the spotlighted interactions were kept short and were progressively more layered with other interactions occurring at the same time. Nick emerged as a pivotal character during this section, mostly due to his being set apart as an observer – as if his personal life was so uncomfortable or unfulfilling that he had to live vicariously through his friend’s relationships. Pointedly, “The Friends” did not interact on a romantic level during this section as it was intended to highlight the difficulties of romantic relationships and I wanted the air of ease and trust between them in the next section to show their friendship as a haven from life’s turmoil. Nick observed his friends, and once Nathan *introduced* Nick to a romantic prospect, but those were the only interactions between “The Friends” during this section. More so than any other section, the movement material used in *amour?* required contextual awareness. Without careful construction of what was around the duets and trios in terms of music, other dancers, and stark white spotlights in a black void, the impact of each attempt at a romantic connection could have been blunted and the dance only pointless motion. In addition, the music helped to “set the tone” of the interactions as one of somewhat romantic regret which helped me, as a viewer, to infer that happiness would not be found in this section. “Touch” emerged as a semiotic icon in

this second section, and persisted throughout the rest of the work. Attention was given to how a touch was initiated and what it meant. Because the specifics of how the touches were initiated were choreographed, the dancers invested attention into both how and why they touched one another. Touch became iconic of *touch* as much as the act itself. As such I found it provided a lingering key for meaning making - intrinsic to the choreography.

The third section (subtitled *mes amis* - my friends) was a strict quintet. The five dancers, “The Friends” remained onstage throughout the section. Occasionally some of them would watch what others were doing, but they were designed to always be active presences on the stage. The complexity of support systems that a dynamic group of friends can provide was a major theme in this section for me. This third section was, in fact, the inspiration for the entire work. During the previous spring, I choreographed *mes amis* as a pilot study. In it I wanted to explore interdependence and non-romantic love on a level where those involved wouldn’t necessarily know how wonderful it was they had someone to depend on, no matter what. I explored it quite literally using the idea that when any of them put out a hand for help, there was always someone to catch it, that when they fell there was always someone to stop or control the descent. In this section we established the giving and taking of weight as a metaphor for “trust.”

For me, the saving grace of this section was the unconscious nature of the interdependence. The dancers weren’t “precious” in their portrayal of these relationships; they did not overly dramatize trust and friendship; they were utterly matter of fact. It was important to me that it be so, because I believe that this is what life is about at its most

basic level, yet if they had been overly aware of the value of their friendships, they would have seemed less authentic.

I always referred to the fourth section (subtitled *avec moi* – with me) as Nick's solo in my head. Technically it wasn't a solo as the rest of the cast was stop-motion walking past him in a single-file line upstage throughout. They were in darkness in front of a blue scrim and thus they were faceless and anonymous. Occasionally Nick would pull one of the others out of the line, into the light, for an interaction, but the focus was very definitely on him as the main character of the section because he was involved in each of these short interactions. As previously stated, I was trying to make the story of the dance go from community to individuals. The entire community of the dance was passing by upstage while Nick was struggling to find a relationship with any of them that satisfied him. Also in this section I attempted to establish the significance of two specific gestures. The first gesture was the careful placing of both hands on the floor in front of one while kneeling. The forefingers and thumbs were touching, leaving a diamond shaped space between the hands. Then the forehead was placed on the floor in the space left by the fingers. By repetition of this gesture right before Nick pulled one of the other dancers into the light I was trying to establish that this series of movements represented *searching*. I believe that the meaning of this gesture came into clearest focus when Nick had just performed it twice in a row and was staring at his hands when another of the dancers, Mike O'Connor, left the line unbidden to approach and watch him. They both looked at his hands and then at each other. Mike held out his hand to Nick, and after hesitating a moment, Nick took it and allowed Mike to help him to standing.

The second gesture was to have the gaze of the eyes drift up while the face lifts and the head rocks back on the neck. This gesture was performed with an attitude of surrender to the inevitable, often while sinking to one's knees and was designed to convey *surrender* or *giving up*.

Throughout the fourth section, Nick repeatedly attempted romantic connection, and was each time met with failure. I utilized repetition, variation, and energy qualities of his movements in order to decode the contextual information that the other dancer's presences on the stage provided about what was happening. Two very interesting interactions occurred toward the end of *avec moi* that I believe may have been key to meaning making. In the first, Nick pulled Jed Brubaker from the line and set himself up for Jed to "be there for him" (to catch his weight). Jed failed to provide support and when watching it I found it surprising, almost shocking – and I had choreographed it! A major theme of the movement to that point was the giving and taking of weight as a symbol of trust. Nick gave Jed a second chance and though his stance and expression said very clearly, "Perhaps you weren't ready. It may have been my mistake." They were also saying, "Wow that sucked! Can I trust you to catch me?" The second attempt ended like the first and when Nick wouldn't accept Jed's hand, Jed exiled himself back to the line. Next Andrea Bernard broke away from the line to help Nick up, but half way up she pushed him back down again. Why do I think those interactions were key? They very clearly were antithetical in meaning to previously established symbols. By being so they showed "touch" and "giving weight" as symbols that could be misused as easily as used and in so doing connected them to a wider world of meanings by reference. At the

end of *avec moi* Nick had been defeated by repeated romantic failures and was supine with arms and legs outstretched.

The fifth and most personal section (subtitled *conquérir le coeur d'un homme* – to conquer the heart of a man) began with Nathan finding Nick alone onstage as he ended *avec moi*. At this point, I wanted Nathan's presence to indicate the love and support of one friend for another. Thus his first actions were to try to get Nick to look at him, to take comfort from the presence of a friend. Failing that he used Nick's back as a pillow and joined him supine, looking up. The delicacy and complexity of the story I wished to tell in *conquérir le coeur d'un homme* still astonishes me, particularly as I do believe that we were successful. I did not want the audience to believe that this was necessarily where this friendship was always heading. I did not want the audience to believe that either Nick's or Nathan's character was forcing anything upon the other, or that there was anything perverse about two male friends falling romantically in love. The section progressed from giving comfort to light romance that became progressively more serious as they slowly convinced each other that this was okay. Although the fifth section – and the dance – ended with the entire cast onstage, they were all looking at Nick and Nathan. The rest of the dancers had joined themselves to the audience and served to reinforce that the end of the story was about individuals in the community.

In the movement vocabulary of the dance, there were some pitfalls and challenges. One I remember very well. Although I am not the strongest male dancer in the world, I am a male, and I am a dancer who really enjoys using the floor, and thus I have developed some facility with it. In my explorations of movement for the work, I discovered a maneuver that I very much enjoyed, a kind of roll that ended with a

suspension on one hand as both legs kick out and the right kicks around to flip the dancer over. For me it was easy and utterly clear. I never successfully passed the feeling of the movement to my dancers. In the end I just had to acknowledge that it was a combination of coordination and upper body strength that we did not have time to achieve. I released my need for that moment to be what it was on my body and embraced what it could be on theirs.

The music for the first section was another challenge. I choreographed and worked over this section with the dancers to several pieces of music, but nothing seemed right. The closest was a version of Björk's "Joga" that had some very strange counting for a musical break in the middle. In the end, although I liked the movement with that song, it felt wrong too. When we tried the section with the Vitro song there was a definite sense of "at last!" from the dancers. Because of the music used, that section is the only one in the work that was strictly "counted." Each of the other sections is performed with a more lyrical sense of timing. In performance I was very happy with all of the musical choices made for the final work. Although many of them were choices at which other choreographers may have balked at due to the fact that four of the songs had lyrics albeit two had French lyrics, I felt that the juxtaposition of different, even dissonant messages between lyrics and choreography heightened my enjoyment of the dance.

During the choreographic process I discovered that many of the choices I had made were serendipitous. Having established rochambeau as a symbol of friendship and innocence between "The Friends," other horseplay and games slid seamlessly into the structure of the narrative. Because these kinds of physical games often led my dancers to

laugh and enjoy themselves during the dance, “Are You My Boyfriend” remained a bit more light hearted than its romantic plot might have otherwise tended to be.

I also found that having choreographed *mes amis* the previous spring gave me a great deal of comfort and confidence because the heart of the dance was beating and beautiful long before the rest of it was more than a dream.

I found that there were elements of the choreography that practically begged to be restated between the sections, thus providing the entire work with concrete points of unity that served at least two purposes that I can see. First, theme and variation is as recognizable a form musically as narrative is textually. Even if I as an audience member don’t break down a musical form and say, “Hey! That is a variation on the theme established in the last section!” I find that I am subconsciously satisfied by the familiar structure. Thus this form provided me with another hole in the plastic bag that encouraged the audience to believe the dance was edible. Second, it provided a sense that the dance was much shorter than it was. I found subjectively that it was almost as though all of the sections were taking place simultaneously but we were allowed to zoom between them with our attention.

From beginning to end you may have noticed that a particular concept reoccurs in my description – the idea of the dancers watching. I have always enjoyed this technique for encouraging the performers to invest in a work. I find it helps to overcome a reserve that many dancers hide behind while on stage. After analysis, however, I believe its role is much more pivotal. I believe that by having some dancers who were actively observing what the others were doing, the audience had a presence on the stage. I believe that as a result the audience was encouraged to place themselves onstage by proxy, and

that some of them may have felt an enhanced connection to the work as a result. Mary Bateson comments “...participation precedes learning,” (41) and this comment seems consistent when I consider that participation need not be a physical activity. Given that I consider interest to be predicated upon learning processes, encouraging the audience to vicariously participate is a serendipitous benefit.

An examination of the choreographic process of this work would not be complete unless I acknowledge that integral to this work were phrases of movement created by the dancers. The second section, in particular, utilized a great deal of material developed by the dancers and then restructured into a cohesive whole. I wish I could take credit for all of the brilliantly subtle movement and gesture work in *amour?* I inspired the dancers to develop it using exercises and phrases of text; I helped clear out the rubbish and organized and layered it into a powerful section; but I could no more have created all of those movement inventions in the time available than I could have recited the encyclopedia.

I gave myself the goal of creating a work that the audience would be able to understand. One that could, perhaps, act as a first layer of experience to encourage nascent viewers to acquire more layers until they find themselves familiar with the art form and able to enjoy other dances as well. Was I successful? I’ll never know. Did I feel successful? That is another question entirely, and one to which the answer is an unequivocal “yes.”

**THIS EMPTY ROOM? AN EXAMINATION OF
WHY TIME WAS MY FRIEND**

As I have been writing this thesis, some lines of text from a Laurie Anderson song have been haunting me. The song is “Gravity’s Angel,” and the lines of text follow:

Why these mountains?
Why this sky?
This long road?
This empty room?

I believe they have been haunting me because they are a metaphor for this thesis process. I created a dance, years ago, out of love and a commitment to communicating that love to an audience. I believed that if I could create a dance that spoke, not only to my friends in the dance department, but to audiences indifferent to dance as an art form, then I would truly have created a master work. So I set about trying to figure out what would make the dance interesting to the broadest audience possible. I discovered my mountains: narrative structure, love story, investigation of relationships. I placed my movements in a sky where awareness of the necessity for context was understood as key for the making of meaning. It was a long road not only from conception to production, but also from the production to the understanding of what exactly had been produced.

So what is “This empty room?” When I came back to this dance to write about it, I had very few preconceptions remaining. I wasn’t even sure I was going to like it. All kinds of baggage and angst had finally been flushed from my system and I was finally

able to see my own work with eyes that were almost objective. I think this was important because it helped me to feel real conviction that I knew from experience that a balance of familiarity and surprise is essential to enjoyment. I discovered that I did enjoy watching “Are You My Boyfriend?” very much; in spite of the barrier that videotaping creates. I watched it many more times and discovered that I could remember motivations and creative processes that hadn’t occurred to me in years. Having remembered them I watched again and felt again the thrill of knowing that I had made something beautiful.

Much of the process of creating this dance makes more sense at this end of the process than it did at the other. There are movement phrases that I utilized in order to be referential to my own works in an effort to supply some of the familiarity I sought. I suspect very few if any members of the audience caught them quite simply because we in the audience are not they on the stage. We do not live in the movement, we watch it. Many of us may subconsciously connect on a kinesthetic level to what we see, but it is not the same as rehearsing it for two hours a day, three days a week for eleven weeks. Even if they had seen my previous works, there was no guarantee the visual imagery was retained for conscious access later. Thus, I believe that being self-referential was, with regards to the audience and in the context of this performance, neither productive nor unproductive.

My use of a simple narrative, on the other hand, seems to have been very successful, although it was not without its pitfalls. The loss of one dancer early in the process was the first problem that arose from the narrative that was my subject matter. I was also surprised to learn the week before performance that the faculty was considering an adult content warning for the audience because of my work. It caused me to consider

whether or not what I was presenting was actually objectionable and I was just too close to the dance to see it. Thankfully, other faculty members argued that there had been kissing on the stage before with no “warning” and the two kisses in the last section remained. As a result of this incident I reexamined whether the narrative itself was too challenging for the audience – whether the narrative would alienate the audience I was seeking to involve. Eventually I concluded that it was too late for worry, and considering the cheering during the curtain call I believe that the simple narrative achieved at least some of the connection to the audience that I was seeking to engender.

Likewise I believe the iconic touch, the games, and other elements such as costumes, music, and lights were successful in contributing to the story I wanted to tell.

At the end I watch the videos of this dance and realize that I succeeded in my goal. In the dance I investigated the hypothesis that utilizing narrative and contextual establishment of meaning we could create a dance that spoke to a broader audience than just dancers. In the writing I have reexamined my motivations and discovered that I believe the hypothesis withstands the rigor of scrutiny particularly when informed by what others have written about interest, familiarity and their relationship to learning processes. My dancers and I made a work about relationships that explored the spaces between people in ways I have never seen before or since. We created something “powerful, mystical and true.” Above all, we made a dance that I love.

EPILOGUE

The Oral Defense of my thesis took place on May 6, 2010 in the Marriott Center for Dance at the University of Utah. In content this defense was largely a conversation between me and my thesis committee – Brent Schneider, Ellen Bromberg and Abby Fiat – regarding the choreography of “Are You My Boyfriend?” and this written thesis.

Metaphor emerged as a point of interest in this discussion. My committee noted that one of the areas that could be seen as choreographically weak was that the early sections of the dance seemed nonliteral and metaphoric whereas the last section seemed specific and literal. Because of this, they observed that a state of being curious and asking questions fostered in the beginning of the dance was somewhat let down at the end.

My committee commented that the crafting of much of the work relied heavily upon metaphor and that I scarcely mentioned it in the written thesis. I had to agree that I had not considered using the crafting of the metaphoric level of the work as one of the talking points of my thesis. In consideration I have to acknowledge that this oversight was likely due to mentally emphasizing “narrative” and thus deemphasizing that conveyance of narrative without using words necessitates careful crafting of metaphoric images. In addition, I suspect that I was subconsciously lumping literary tools such as allegory, metaphor, foreshadowing, and climax together and assuming that discussion of “narrative” involved discussion of such tools by implication.

Considerable discussion revolved around *conquérir le coeur d'un homme* – the final section of the work. I was encouraged to look at it choreographically and reassess it from a purely visual standpoint. After doing so I must agree that the very simplicity I was aiming for was undermined by being less visually stimulating than the preceding sections. My committee commented that the first sections of the dance left interpretation open and as an audience they were led to “sense, believe, and inquire” about the dance, but that the fifth section felt like they were “told.” I found this insight to be very interesting. In the creation of the work, I always felt like I was “telling” a story. From beginning to end, literal gestures were interwoven with context in an effort to codify meaning into movement and stillness. I utilized stillness liberally throughout the work; however, it wasn’t until the last section that I had large periods of stillness that were not counterpointed by something else occurring onstage. I wonder if the change in how my committee viewed the dance between the first four sections and the last one may have partly been due to this very simple difference in combination with successful encoding. Much of the establishment of the romance between Nick and Nathan was portrayed in stillness. I have to wonder if the perceived directness of meaning in the last section wasn’t largely a function of the audience having extended time with static visual ideas in which to decode and assign meanings to them. I will keep this in mind in my next choreographic endeavors.

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