

THE ACCEPTANCE OF ERROR: ALLOWING IMPERFECTIONS  
TO TRANSFORM THE COLLECTIVE

by

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## STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis follows the inspiration and creation of the dance work “How Dare We (Ever Be) All” from conception and creation through performance in the University of Utah’s Graduate Thesis Concert in December of 2016. In this thesis, I investigate how the human capacity for failure can infiltrate and transform the choreographic process. The inability to live up to “ideal” expectations is illuminated through the choreographer’s and dancers’ responses to *imperfections* and *disruptions*. Responses from the cast and choreographer in rehearsals are then sorted into two categories: either *avoidance* or *adaptation*. Avoidance reactions are reconciled through methods of adaptation and are developed within the creation of the work to help imperfections and disruptions serve as an influence with which to create.

This thesis is dedicated to an ever-transforming perspective on grace and love. Beautiful things come from moments of weakness, failure, and dust. To my husband Scott, you adapt to life with a grace and understanding that continues to motivate me forward. This story and love will ever be on my lips.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Two years ago, I was sitting on the sofa in my living room looking at a variety of holiday cards decorating my mantel. I found the majority of cards to be idyllic with families standing in front of their beautiful homes with kids and pets posed calmly by their sides. There were tropical backgrounds representing vacations I could not afford, and individuals who had taken selfies of their recent adventures. These photographs of perfection and ease unveiled a paradox to the complexities of the life I had experienced. This realization made me question whether those close to me were portraying only a side of themselves they wanted me to see and if they were living an act. Were the people in these photos mere projections of people that I did not even really know? In my mind, this mantel community represented an ideal. Their representation of idyllic happiness was uncomplicated, heightened, inviting, and I found it to be exclusive.

The consumerist world in which we live constantly reminds me of what I do not have. Social media engenders unrealistic expectations of what being a successful American requires: a stable job, the fulfillment of all personal desires, and capitalizing on every opportunity to move toward success and happiness. I felt the pressure to live up to my imagined future. Top of the societal list of expectations: my first home. There should be an extra bedroom for guests, a large backyard with a beautifully manicured garden,

and one happy Golden-doodle. After that, children, vacations, the best organic groceries, and homemade dinners with time for a glass of wine after. All of it, of course, with no cell phones distracting me from conversations and quality time with friends and family.

Social media can easily become a replacement for human connection. Updating profiles in order to carefully control a projection of what is seen by others felt like putting my best foot forward until the act of projecting became dominant over an authentic connection. It is easy to confuse social media “likes” and superficial gratification with a connection, mistaking transparency for vulnerability and the ability to honestly communicate within a relationship (Brown, 2012). Projecting a perfected version of myself might have gotten me the praise I wanted, but I realized that taking a risk on being myself was the only path toward finding acceptance within myself (Miller, 2015, p. 152).

Looking back at the mantel, I contemplated what image would represent my life and relationships compared to these idealized photographs. Would it be a photograph of my husband and me smiling and holding hands while standing in front of a series of beautiful trees that had turned different hues of red, orange, and yellow? Or was my photo on the mantel messier? In actuality, would my photo best be depicted as a clock that had been left for broken, not functioning properly, with no capability of pointing its hands to the correct time?

The holiday cards on the mantel began to fuel my desire for an unrealistic expectation of “keeping up with the Joneses.” I had been fooled by ideal photos of seemingly sorted-out lives that I could not relate to—an ideal I was all too familiar with hoping to find. Each photo masked individual complexities that were left unrepresented. Several of my acquaintances, friends, and families shared what was going on in their

lives during the time I received these cards. I knew marriages were failing. I had friends who were complaining and stuck in a cycle of constant uncertainty.

A polished photograph does not encapsulate how complex I am as a human nor how complicated it is to live with others. Of course, I see the absurdity of taking a snapshot midargument and sending it to a relative. My point is not to abstain from or condemn others for sending beautifully taken photos of their adventures or holidays. Instead, I desire a deeper insight into the lives portrayed in the cards.

In 2016, the University of Iowa hosted an International Writing Program symposium called Creative Matters, where Sarah Lewis, author of *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*, presented ideas on beauty and error. In this speech, Lewis said “it is the artist who knows what images need to be seen to effect change and alter history, to shine a spotlight in ways that will hold sustained attention” (personal communication, April 12, 2016). While in my living room, I began to see Frederick Douglass’ idea of “the whole soul of man as a picture gallery,” as a dance (Douglass, 1861, p. 9). In Douglass’ speech “Lecture on Pictures,” he spoke often about the power that images of people and their lives hold to “convey humanity as it is and through the imagination to ignite an inner vision of life as it could be” (Douglass, 1861, p. 10).

My choreographic aspirations led me to pursue physicality that shows “the whole soul of man.” How could I awaken a world within my choreographic process and performance that expresses various facets of people and their relationships candidly? This was the “inner vision of life as it could be” of which Douglass spoke. Incorporating these ideas about images, dancing, new choreographic methods, and the human soul became a

difficult task for me to take on as a choreographer, which led me to face the realization of my capacity to fail. My inexperience with “the whole soul of man” as a choreographer, and also my consideration of what a complicated and nuanced concept humanity is to research, was a constant issue confronting me as I began my thesis research.

We seem to impulsively show a curated version of our lives to the outside viewer and cover up the reality of the less-than-ideal mess. Douglass said “The key to the great mystery of life and progress was the ability of men and women to fashion a mental picture in his or her mind and let his or her world sentiments and vision of every other living thing be affected by it” (Douglass, 1861, p. 14). The ability to fashion my own mental pictures while observing the photos on the mantel led me to believe that this network of friends, myself included, and perhaps everyone, are inclined to share what is comfortable and what we are proud of. If everyone’s lives are messy, perhaps there is a better way to share the whole story of what people encounter daily? It is easy to shame ourselves for our shortcomings and failed attempts in life, but what if we risked finding comfort in sharing our less-than-proud moments and experiences? Would our fears of being less than perfect diminish or hold less power over us?

Joining the University of Utah’s Master of Fine Arts in Modern Dance program, my limited experience as a choreographer seemed a constant weakness reminding me of my high capacity for failure. With a habit of comparing myself to friends and colleagues who spoke confidently about their opinions and ideas regarding choreography, as well as their abilities to quickly make quality work (esteemed by many), my low level of confidence slowly skewed my perspective of my abilities. I placed myself in a limited mold of choreographic abilities. The expectation to make work became a daunting task. I

thought that my reputation as an artist would be safer if I did not keep up with “the Joneses” of my cohort, and that I would be safer by remaining silent. It was safer to not make work.

Confronting the fact that the MFA concludes with a choreographic thesis production was not a factor I wanted to consider until it was unavoidable towards the latter half of my time in the Modern Dance program. German philosopher, Theodor Adorno’s believed that the medium of misunderstandings is where the noncommunicable could be communicated (Adorno, 1970). Perhaps I had little-to-no experience, and perhaps I was not going to be great at what I tried to accomplish in making my thesis, but this idea where my misunderstandings and failures to understand something “correctly” could become a strength in my pursuit of choreographically actualizing various facets of people and their relationships candidly. In hindsight, I believe that my own capacity to fail is perhaps my greatest contribution to my choreography and thesis process. The story of humanity and what it looks like to embrace the unpracticed—allowing freedom for both failure and perfected moments—was a story that began with myself.

At times, this world is an unforgiving place. But I can choose to view failures—in my own life and in interpersonal relationships—as opportunities for positive transformation. I can reject and disengage from the idea of a “mistake” or perceived “failure” and instead choose to adapt and move forward. Douglass believed that “the human capacity for artful imaginative thought is what permits us” to see “the picture of life contrasted with the fact of life, the ideal contrasted with the real” (Douglass, 1861, p. 9). The imaginative world of human photographs and false projections are in contrast with the moments that I believe are worth cherishing and serve to propel me forward.

### 1.1 Researching Failure as the Gateway for Transformation

This thesis is an exploration of the clean, the messy, the assured, and the doubtful. It develops in tandem with unpredictable aspects of life. It follows the creation of my work “How Dare We (Ever Be) All” through its conceptions, creation, and performance in the University of Utah’s Graduate Thesis Concert in December of 2016. In this thesis, I examine how my dancers and I navigated *disruption*, the unexpected, and *imperfection*. Throughout the choreographic process, I investigated how dancers’ reactions in rehearsal contributed to human stories regarding the self, relationships, and concerns about not living up to “ideal” expectations defined by oneself or others. I allowed the knowledge of my experiences with “the ideal and real” in life to collide and infiltrate the choreography.

Methodologies used to inform and transform the work include my personal observations, reflections, and experiences inside and outside of the creative process. Relevant concepts were unearthed by utilizing these methodologies. Recurring themes include 1) the dancers’ responses towards *imperfection* and *disruption*; 2) the movement reaction of *adaptation* in response to disruption or imperfection; and 3) *impulsive choice-making*, made without reflection or regard for personal preferences or the opinions of others. By investigating imperfection and disruption, I aimed to facilitate an environment that allows both dancer and choreographer the grace to negotiate the ever-shifting, multifaceted physical and mental complexities of the self, and the dynamics within our interactions and relationships with others.

In Chapter 2, I share how my personal journeys of examining Alonzo King’s LINES Ballet and working with choreographer Alex Ketley brought me to the question of how I can encourage dancers to truly be themselves during rehearsal and while in

performance. Throughout Chapter 3, I look back on a personal experience in which I tried to negotiate conflict within a relationship. The conclusion of that experience led me to question how “failures” are handled by a choreographer in regards to their expectations with dancers. Chapter 4 reflects on my faith and my perception of “The Disappearing Act.” In Chapter 5, I apply how my mantel experiences led me through the choreographic journey of “How Dare We (Ever Be) All,” implementing previous chapter findings alongside my central thesis questions: How can I encourage dancers to be transparent and vulnerable throughout the development of my work? And how do I negotiate the multifaceted complexities of the self and relationships when confronted with imperfection and disruption during a creative process?

The final chapter concludes the findings of the research process and product. This choreographic process cultivates an imperfect narrative through transforming my perspective of imperfection and disruption in the hopes of creating innovative choreography.

## CHAPTER 2

### SUMMER

In the Summer of 2015, I traveled to San Francisco to observe Alonzo King's LINES ballet company in rehearsals. I chose to observe this contemporary ballet company because of its mission to foster individual artistic growth and exploration of humanity within a dancer's physical and technical pursuits in the art form of ballet. I was curious to witness how Alonzo King and other ballet-masters communicated with the company, and in turn, how the company dancers interpreted and responded to their feedback.

I found certain qualities of how the dancers were moving through King's choreography inspiring, not as a result of the choreography, but as a result of an embodied aesthetic that seemed ingrained in how the company members executed their steps. I was inspired as I watched the dancers move with a captivating strength and undeniable understanding of their abilities. It appeared as if there was something monumental being communicated through each company member's effort, a seeming assuredness in the dancer to share and express, utilizing the whole body while efficiently executing the choreography.

After interviewing each dancer, I was shocked to find that the dancers had unique, diverse movement backgrounds and dance training, yet there was an underlying shared

quality of urgency as they danced. King affirmed the company's aesthetic in an interview published in *The San Francisco Appeal*: “In terms of looking for dancers ... the character is the bottom line because what you’re looking at onstage is who people are. People dance their consciousness, and so who’s brave, who’s generous, who’s loving, whose conscious, who’s risk-taking” (Klarin, 2009, October 21)? The dancers, for me, were fearless, more focused on the dance and dancing than on what an audience might think of them and their abilities and limitations.

After spending time with LINES, I attended Salt Dance Fest, a 2-week dance festival at the University of Utah. There, Alex Ketley, an artist from the San Francisco area, held a workshop for eight dancers. What struck me about working with this artist was his ability to push me past my limits physically and emotionally. Unable to anticipate his prompts, I was pushed beyond my perceived improvisational limits. My dancing was disrupted, forcing me to explore a new territory and relationship to dancing. I was not able to dance comfortably, in a way I had come to expect and a way that reinforced what I hoped others would see in me. I had to evolve past my own notion of projecting myself as a dancer. Ketley’s tactics created an immediacy in which the dancer must act quickly, dance, respond and make a choice in the moment without fear of failing.

As a dancer, I had invested over 23 years learning the art form of classical ballet, attempting to master “the right way,” the ideal placement in the body and execution of steps. Additionally, I grew up with a father who was in the military, so my upbringing was ingrained with the notion of a perfect way to do chores, act, dress, speak, and respond. As a dancer who spent time in classical ballet and only recently began studying contemporary dance, I doubted my choices while I improvised or engaged in the creative

process. I perceived that ballet vocabulary was wrong if I did not have an additional “twist” beyond an *arabesque* or a *tendu* to make it unique. Ketley encouraged me to bring all of my energy and hold nothing back. This workshop kept me shifting anxiously, and Ketley’s prompts emboldened my body and voice to experience ridiculous speech and explore fully embodied and foreign movement to my entire capacity. I tried to attack these ideas with all my will and effort.

There was a moment when I kept returning to a pattern of the same ballet steps. I tried to pass the mental block of dancing the familiar, the known repetition, but I had hit a roadblock and stopped dancing. I froze. Alex stopped the music and asked me why I had stopped moving. I assumed that plainly exploring *arabesques* and *tendus* while dancing was not within his ideal goals of creativity. I explained my concern about repeating old habits without anything new attached to them. Ketley asked me why having something new to say was important, and then encouraged me to allow my movement habits within ballet vocabulary to initiate my improvisation.

Ketley said, “What if you danced as if no choice you made would make me lose my love for you?” I had never encountered a choreographer expressing a statement in this manner. The word “love” shook me. The intention in the statement unhinged all of my expectations. I was in the workshop trying to accomplish growth, innovation, and artistry. How could that be gained by dancing a habit, living within my comfort? How could I remain sure that this choice would continue to be okay with Ketley for the rest of the workshop? Did he really mean that no matter what I danced, it would be accepted and I would remain “loved”?

This question was an epiphany. It encouraged me to respect my abilities and

choices as a dancer, freeing myself from self-imposed expectations. I began to accept and allow my movement impulses, free from the pressure of judging myself. Unconditional love and acceptance ran counter to my previous dance training and the culture I experienced growing up. I was finally able to dance who I was, as I was. No longer trying to bolster my image on social media or be put-together enough to take a photo worthy of the mantel, I danced as myself, realizing that my perceived limitations or imperfections were strong places from which to grow.

What I had previously felt ashamed of was the key to developing a new way of moving that was unique. Taking the time to speak directly to my personal insecurity, by asking me to run full force into my habits and explore exactly what came out of my body, Ketley made me feel that my dancing and I were accepted. I was enough.

## CHAPTER 3

### NEGOTIATING DISRUPTION

After my experience dancing with Alex Ketley at Salt Dance Fest, I had the opportunity to work with a friend who was creating an evening-length dance work. While at home one evening, I received a text message from the choreographer releasing me from the project and stating their desire not to speak further about the matter. Confused about why I was unceremoniously released, I felt anger and betrayal at not having the opportunity to ask why. I was saddened by the lack of consideration, and I was left to speculate about what the issue might have been. Had a significant miscommunication occurred? Feeling that the choreographer had placed me in a position that gave me no voice in the matter, I pushed back. After a long phone call that night, I realized that no amount of effort on my part towards reconciling the situation would change the choreographer's mind. What was causing this inability to reconcile the situation?

Our perspectives were separated by two different philosophies of communication. The choreographer's impulse was to remove me from the work. My impulse was to try to mend the relationship. I wondered what the result would have been had we surrendered our perspectives and pride for the value of our friendship. Would the outcome have been different? Reconciliation would have resulted in my establishing a way to continue the relationship. Forgiveness and rebuilding trust might have redeemed the painful situation

for the better. There was a moment during our conversation on the phone in which my friend said that choreographers have the right to fire dancers without explanation. I found this rationale vague and ultimately most of the conversation felt frustrating and confusing.

Only a few short weeks earlier, Alex Ketley demonstrated a wholly different approach to valuing a dancer's questions and struggles. Ketley chose to take the time to speak with me about a mental block that was limiting my movement exploration, and thus demonstrated a level of care toward me as a dancer that enabled me to move beyond that which I thought was possible. This was in stark contrast to how I was treated in the later process by a choreographer who did not value or demonstrate care toward their dancers while communicating. I did not feel accepted or loved regardless of my choices. I had "failed" in one choreographer's opinion. Through this experience, I was motivated to encourage questions from dancers and accept their self-perceived "failures" within my own work. This experience, along with my time observing LINES Ballet and working with Alex Ketley, became the catalyst for my creative philosophy of choosing *adaptation* and claiming moments of imperfection as an impetus for creativity and transformation.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE DISAPPEARING ACT

As a Christian, I am aware that Western Christian culture has reinforced the idea that growth, strength, goodness, and righteousness are qualities that Christians “should” embody. My experience of Western Christian culture was deviating from concepts of “humility” and “truth-in-weakness” by its attempts to appear perfect. The desire to appear “Christ-like” recreated what author Donald Miller calls “the disappearing act”—the invisible act of not showing the true self to anybody, but rather learning how to project nonmessy qualities while making human shame, struggle, and insecurity invisible (Miller, 2015, p. 29). This projection of a false persona, such as my pictures on the mantel, is founded in a fear that others may see and judge our failures or see us as less-than. From my own personal experiences, I was all too familiar with this “disappearing act” but found more freedom in the belief that God’s love was beyond my imperfections.

My experience with Alex Ketley expanded my perspective by showing me that an acceptance of imperfection was possible within the field of dance because imperfection is ultimately unavoidable. During my ballet training, I aimed to develop technique and artistry by striving for perfection, smooth transitions, and flawless execution. But at what cost? I have known and heard many stories of dancers who have lost the ability to view their own dancing without constantly shaming their mistakes, developing obsessive

habits that alter their mental and physical well-being. Yes, there are times in which dancers need to perform a sequence of steps precisely to meet a choreographer's standards. This is the current reality found in today's dance world. However, if this is the only true and "right" way, how can dancers, choreographers, and people, for that matter, progress through their dance careers and life without the acknowledgement of their inescapable inclination toward error?

Anthropologist Ernest Becker, who writes about the early stages of human development, asserts that human choices are determined as a coping mechanism for avoiding anxiety.

Self-esteem becomes the child's feeling of self-warmth that all's right in his action world. It is an inner self-righteousness that arms the individual against anxiety. We must understand it, then, as a natural systemic continuation of the early ego efforts to handle anxiety; it is the durational extension of an effective anxiety-buffer. (Becker, 1962, pp. 66-67)

Anxiety is the body's response to uncertain situations. It is an emotional reaction to flee nervousness, worry, and unease. The complexities of my own personal experience of reactionary impulses, such as fleeing from anxiety, have led me to an expectation of comfort. Aware of how others have perceived me in my past, I have tried countless times to control the outward projection of myself, rather than living boldly in authenticity. In perusing the photos on the mantel, I began to wonder if perhaps the "disappearing act" had become a coping mechanism that I used often in my own life? If the choice to avoid anxiety and seek comfort within my reactions and responses leaves me feeling trapped, what is the other option? Should I actively allow myself to enter a state of anxiety by practicing transparency?

I have felt resistance from others while attempting to live a life of greater

transparency. While opening up about my life in conversation with others, I have often wondered if allowing myself to be vulnerable is socially acceptable. Can we really trust people to love us just as we are? This was the question that motivated most of my past personal choices as I hoped to show a side of myself that reflected perfection and ease. As Donald Miller writes: “Nobody steps onto a stage and gets a standing ovation for being human. You have to sing or dance first” (Miller, 2015, p. xvi). There is a desire to appear composed or to impress. Admitting to feeling helpless, lost, and encountering deep moments of failure are not things that we typically celebrate in the daily experience of Western culture. But what if being transparent, less self-censored and vulnerable, were the norms for how we interpreted each other’s personalities? How might that affect how we live, dance, and create?

I began to recognize that the patterns of discord and disconnection I experienced during this thesis research mirrored personal social patterns regarding connection. While I thought that I desired authentic relationships that fostered vulnerability, I was actually falling into the habit of “acting.” I found myself looking at a mantel full of holiday cards displaying individuals from whom I felt a great emotional distance. I realized that the only way for me to have more authentic relationships and experiences was to make myself vulnerable. I needed to choose vulnerability daily. I found this choice worthwhile since the “acting” was only leading to surface-level confidence and shallow conversations that never deepened. Donald Miller spoke to the importance of vulnerable moments in his book, *Scary Close*, stating that moments of vulnerability are where we risk the most, where our truth is seen, and that these moments are worth more than our sense of self-flattery and insecurity. Miller writes, “All that will be remembered is the

truth we exchanged. The vulnerable moments. The terrifying risk of love and the care we took to cultivate it. All the rest, the distracting noises of insecurity and the flattery and the flash bulbs will flicker out like a turned-off television” (Miller, 2015, p. 7).

If I am an imperfect person, why try to act refined and perfect in my role as a choreographer? If I am interested in seeing vulnerability within dancing, then why would I expect my dancers or myself to play it safe in the process? I want to know and understand how my choices and impulses function in conversation with my dancers. What if I abolished the idea of perfection? Does redefining what is ideal transform the individual’s potential for connection? Would creating an environment that included disruption be embraced, or would my dancers resist? Brené Brown, a researcher on vulnerability and human connection, wrote “The wholehearted journey is not a path of least resistance. It’s a path of consciousness and choice” (Brown, 2010, p. 32). What if, in my choreographic process, I invited the path of resistance, thus making disruption a foundation for understanding interactions within my journey?

In my role as choreographer, I wanted to avoid acts of projection and “perfection.” I desired to allow myself, my dancers, and my choreography to encompass all facets of the process, including the messiness within creating. Appearing as if I knew what to do, how to lead, be productive, create, and problem-solve was no longer the focus. After all, if my expectation as a choreographer is perfection, I am not understanding and embracing the reality of the medium with which I am working: humans. The result and product will be different daily, just as those executing the movement differ and will be (im)perfectly human. Catholic Priest Robert Spitzer states in his book, *Finding True Happiness: Satisfying Our Restless Hearts*, that our lack of

stability in life is determined by how we define our own expectations for future situations we encounter; our expectations within life create our sense of stability or lack of stability (Spitzer, 2015).

If I could allow my expectations to align with the individuals I work with, then my work might continue to grow toward a new stability. I might possibly find myself better equipped to negotiate my previous feelings of a “lack of stability” if I adopt an attitude that encourages a creative process with others, and in turn, maintains stability by expecting imperfection and accepting the fact that disruption is guaranteed. American author and preacher Arthur Katz claims that “Conducting our lives on a daily basis in close proximity to others guarantees that there will be tension, disruption, disconnection, individual subjectivities, and misunderstandings” (Katz, 2016, pp. 102-103). Our expectations are our standards for success or failure, and adjusting my expectations to account for a variable medium that is different from day to day—humans—allows me to respond to disruption and imperfection in a way that validates and encourages dancers in rehearsal. Therefore, creating “material” that “cherishes” the opportunities for imperfection within my own life became a necessity for my process. The fuel for the piece was personal. My process was enmeshed with individuals who were imperfect working with an imperfect choreographer.

## CHAPTER 5

### BECOMING HUMAN

Author Donald Miller writes, “How else will we connect with people unless we let them know us” (Miller, 2015, p. 139)? In the development of the theme for my work, I knew that I wanted to tell a story about people. I hoped to make a work that was vulnerable, allowing for individuals to understand a perspective within relationships that is not always seen by others. Telling this story would not follow the typical design of establishing characters and place. I wanted my piece to be, for lack of a better word, “human.”

I question what “being human” means, since there are endless individual and collective experiences of being human, and no two experiences are the same. There are things which divide--race, gender, geography, beliefs, and social status--and yet there is something to be said about our shared experiences across humanity. Pain, love, loss, and happiness bring a quality to all lives that can be shared, but the specificity and details of these instances rely on our specific and personal experiences. This vague desire to define what “being human” meant was important to my research process and I was always reminding myself that each dancer, as all humans do throughout life, has their own way of communicating and relaying their movement. I hoped to encapsulate and represent a characteristic of each dancer on stage that allowed their humanity to be seen, rather than

simply a dancer's body that danced perfectly or precisely executed phrase-work.

Novelist George Orwell believed that the essence of humanity is to embrace our inability to obtain perfection (Orwell, 1949). Looking for less projection and censorship within movement became a theme, the “narrative” of the work. I was convinced that this quality of movement would be recognizable as appearing “human” to me when I discovered it, but I was still unclear about what its characteristics were. Perhaps it would become clear when I saw a dancer moving in a manner that displayed vulnerability more than clarity and perfection—a movement quality that would remind me of humanity.

As a result of reflecting on my own experiences with LINES and Ketley over the summer, I was compelled to work specifically in the, for me unfamiliar, territory of solos and duets. I thought perhaps this method would emphasize how individuals negotiate imperfections and moments of disruption alone and in relationships with others. These were concepts I found important to my life experience. Reflecting on the conflict with my friend led me to ask: how could two individuals cause and survive conflict together? Our friendship's only chance for survival would have been to adjust our expectations during the disagreement, to listen throughout the conflict, and adapt together. Neither of us had allowed space for disruption, and we certainly did not know how to join our opinions and work together as a team. Instead, we were on opposing sides: one unable to forgive, while one thought they were stronger without the other. One individual felt justified by pride, while the other refused to apologize. Both of us were unwilling to admit our error, and we both embraced our ability to ignore and isolate the other within a close community.

Entering my own rehearsals, it was imperative that I restore my perspective, clearing space in my mind and connecting to a belief that love and forgiveness were

important qualities to demonstrate for my cast. Demonstrating love and forgiveness was equally important for people with whom I experienced disruptions. This was a way to survive disruption. The question, “What if I loved you no matter what?” motivated my coaching.

Another way to view individuals as they are, rather than as I wish them to be, was by embracing their moments of imperfection as a reality that is unavoidable. I wanted to figure out a way to utilize each dancer’s strengths and weaknesses by creating moments that would allow room for failure. These moments were created by encouraging *adaptation* rather than *avoidance*. I was determined to shift my philosophy of what I valued within a choreographic process. I wanted to encourage people by accepting them at their worst because I believed they deserved room for imperfection and deserved to be loved despite their imperfections.

### 5.1 Rehearsing Imperfections and Disruptions

I was intrigued by the accidental and emergent tensions, the moments in rehearsal where errors would result from disruptions and imperfection. Adorno referred to the tension between what is unintelligible and what wants to be understood as the climate where art lives (Adorno, 1970). I sought tension, desiring the layers of ease to slip away. I was constantly thinking about how I could transform the way I viewed my dancers as they worked, and how I could encourage dancers to truly be themselves during rehearsal and while in performance. I coached my dancers to shed the layers of projections they might use as coping mechanisms. This tactic was a reflection of my experience with Ketley.

I was able to bring my mind into a state of repairing and adapting moments in rehearsal along with life, so that I could accommodate and ameliorate the space into the “what-can-be” (Bailes, 2011). I knew if I began working with dancers in this way, the unpredictable nature of behaviors would begin to produce the potential for “a new” or “other” way to view and discover movement. Physician and essayist Lewis Thomas wrote “Our behaviors toward each other can be the strangest, most unpredictable, and most unaccountable of all the phenomena with which we are obliged to live. In all of nature, there is nothing so threatening to humanity as humanity itself” (Thomas, 1981, p. 88). This idea of humanity being “threatening” made me wonder if perhaps most choreographers were haunted by the idea of transparency within their moments of failure. I began to wonder if my own dancers “threatened” my process through opportunities of unpredictability? I faced this “threat” head on, to see if my possibilities for creating were limited by my fear of failure.

I decided to give prompts, establishing beforehand that I would have malleable expectations. When mistakes happened, I encouraged the dancers not to worry about being exact or perfect. I encouraged them to be impressionable regarding their definition of “success.” I mentioned that their habit of apologizing when “mistakes” were made was actually distracting them from the process of exploring how to recover or utilize the “mistake” as an opportunity for innovative choreography. I would take these moments of imperfection and, instead of working toward what I had planned to accomplish in rehearsal that day, adopt the imperfections allowing them to change the material I had originally created.

All scenarios were received as potential for art making. If the worst situations

were upon us—injuries, sickness, obstacles of personality dynamics, the inability to remember what was rehearsed previously, confusion, or bad moods—how could everyone negotiate and accept the circumstances? Imperfection, such as moments of dancers not remembering movements or even entire solos, imperfect technical delivery of dancing, miscommunications within translating my promptings, and friction between dancers, manifested in movement signatures and narrative for each particular dancer's role in the work. The absence of ideal circumstances transformed the creative process and the end product.

My process was less than ideal when several dancers dropped out of the work. I also had over 13 instances where dancers forgot to show up to rehearsal. At times, it was difficult not to be resentful toward the dancers when continual error or forgetfulness occurred (this was mainly frustrating within the scheduling aspect of rehearsals). I adapted within these moments of imperfection and was at times inspired to create sections based on this adaptation.

For example, one of the duets was based on the concept of self-adaptation. I asked the dancers to run a unison phrase, but before they began, I would secretly prompt one dancer to change their timing. The aftermath of these secret prompts allowed opportunities for me to observe the dancers responding to each other while encountering states of confusion. I never gave the same idea twice and each time we ran the duet I would begin to hone in on what I found the most interesting about these two dancers and their interactions while negotiating the planned disruptions.

Within my process, injuries became a disruption to my dancer's expectations. Dancer's perceived themselves as limited beyond their ability to perform. I aimed to

develop these disruptions by incorporating them into the solos and duets. Who is to say what bodies can perform and what bodies cannot? One particular dancer was confused when I invited her to be in the piece. She said, “I need surgery, so I won’t be able to walk. What could I possibly be able to do?” Before we began rehearsals, she thought of herself as “not good enough,” “not ideal,” and believed that a choreographer would be unable to see beyond her physical circumstance. However, I saw her as having great potential as a collaborative thinker and also physically for how she *was* able to move.

I wanted her to be on stage for the entire piece, and I asked if she felt comfortable standing on stage for 27 minutes before performing a solo crafted around her abilities as a dancer. She welcomed the idea and was thrilled to perform. While crafting a solo around her “limitation,” we began to dig into her injury. What were the qualities that were difficult and easy to dance, walk, possibly stand (if all recovered well)? I allowed the ideas of “perfection” surrounding a dancer’s body to fade. Moments like these invigorated the narrative and my need to adapt to what life was giving me. For me, this act of practicing courage, compassion, and connection is to look at life and the people around us and be “all in” (Brown, 2012). I decided to use and create disruption as a means of being “all in” and allowed this tactic to power moments within the work. Removing the amount of time dancers were able to think often moved us towards more imperfection and disruption. The prompts were executed at fast speeds, and the dancers were trying to keep up.

Another example for disruption occurred during the creation of the one of the duets. I began by asking the dancers to close their eyes so that they would not feel “traditionally” grounded by using their sight. I aimed to facilitate a process that provoked

a “lack of stability” in order that everyone in the room could grow accustomed to the “anxiety” that can arise in situations of disruption. From this point, I used the un-choreographed reactions, the dancers’ confused and unbalanced responses, as movement for the work. The variations I observed within the dance, and the constant shifting of confidence in our world, became the inspiration for my approach to generating movement.

I encouraged the dancers to voice perspectives and opinions. My cast wanted to communicate what they perceived as “ideal” in their movement choices. Several dancers continually expressed wanting to “get it right” so that they could make me happy and also so that they could feel comfortable knowing they had accomplished the goal “correctly”. They wanted mental preparedness for the future, which was counter to my intentions. Despite the dancers’ desire for specificity, I would quickly speak the movement prompts and, at times, intentionally avoid clarity while giving instructions. The dancers would ask questions and seemed to have a continual desire for a full explanation of my expectations before they danced. They wanted to comprehend what I wanted as an end result, as this would help alleviate their confusion. Some dancers became openly frustrated and voiced their need for further understanding before they could feel prepared to dance. They requested more information about the goal of the task and the “why” of what they were doing/dancing.

I believe that this way of working in the studio was one of the most telling methods I have ever used to understand my cast. It enabled me to see how each dancer negotiated the obstacles, prompts, and each other. I attempted to constantly shift their expectations of what I would ask of them. My dancers and I were accustomed to

censorship, as this is how we commonly present ourselves, aware that we are constantly surrounded by others throughout our lives. However, I was uninterested in allowing dancers the time to censor their movement, since I was aiming to show a side of people that was uncensored.

A method I used to limit the amount of censorship was encouraging impulsive choice-making, dancing at quickened speeds while making choices when given spontaneous tasks. By utilizing impulsive choice-making as a method, I removed the space and time for them to give careful thought to their decisions. I decided to build certain sections of the work on movements that were created through these methods in hopes that it would reveal a new quality within my movement research.

Often, I tried to throw the dancers' expectations off-track while asking them to lean into the disruptions I created. Periodically, I took my dancers outside for rehearsals, where I was in constant motion, running, walking, jumping over stairs, and moving through space to build a spontaneous and unpredictable movement vocabulary. Eventually, the dancer's movements began to unlock new potential for me as they survived the disruptions. The dancers learned to survive these disruptions by negotiating space and tasks in real time with a sense of determination and found a stronger sense of commitment to their impulses when not given time to calculate their movements.

Encouraging this adaptation to quickly shifting circumstances, I used impulsive choice-making as a method to implement adaptation within the rehearsal process. I wanted to bring out the first response in the dancer's body, where nothing but their reaction to the circumstance was used. This reminded me of how I am not guaranteed predictable interactions or conversations with others; my lack of control urges me to be in

a state of constant listening in order to maintain a healthy relationship. This realization led me toward an impulse to fire ideas quicker toward my cast to see if they were listening, and to use their reactions as a means to create phrase work. Instead of censoring my ideas and asking myself if the thought was creative enough or cool enough, I allowed the idea to be. I chose quickly to make and accept my idea as is, without censorship.

In an effort to coach the dancers, I encouraged them to be 100 % themselves and to embrace the results of uncertainty and impulsivity. Differing individual perspectives, paired with my choice to change the situation, or prompt, with little mental preparation for the dancer, began to create a collision of movement signatures. These movement signatures were rooted in the building blocks of how each dancer negotiated their expectations around disruption, how they viewed their imperfections, and how I encouraged impulsive choice-making and adaptation as a means to transform disruptions and imperfections.

By staying consistent with these methods in order to craft the thesis, I allowed freedom for myself to create movement as if I were recrafting images and pictures of how I had experienced others and myself. My observations of acceptance, trust, desperation, commitment, care, brokenness, and misunderstandings influenced all of the choreography.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

It has been over a year since I was immersed in this process. Living and creating with the ideas developed in this thesis have only brought on more personal confusion, complexities, and humility as I continue my research and allow the ideas space and time to deepen. This thesis has grown over seasons as I have observed and developed it. Other people have observed it, advised me on how to prune and cultivate it, and others have watched me develop it in an incomparable way to what they had seen or recollected. In the end, what I have gleaned from this research is that it has evolved into a new understanding and truth.

Through creation to performance, this thesis follows a journey in which I attempted to investigate the human capacity for, and creative potential of, imperfection and how it could transform my creative process. Looking back at my process and product with over a year's worth of reflection, I continue to feel illuminated by my findings. Each discovery is the continuation of an idea that, with enough time, will begin to show a new version of itself. My thesis continues to die and grow, be pruned and harvested. It is not finished, and there are no ultimate claims that can defend a concrete ending, only claims of an evolution that supports the importance of continued reflection.

Remembering the different stages of what this project was, what it could be, and

what it is, I have had the opportunity to hear and respond to multiple varying opinions of support and disapproval, and also to step back from the product and assess where the moments of failure occurred. How can the next work I make be a better reflection of my values? Does it lie within time, observations, and reflections on what went “right” or what others found “successful?”

This process brings me to the conclusion that whatever is next is more certain and clearer than before, but this research has not helped me define a new “right” way or “wrong” way to work. Unfortunately, the conclusion is more complex than that, and at the same time, simpler. It is complex because of my inner desire to have a choreographic system or routine that I know will help facilitate “success” for my choreographic future. However, it is simple because the conclusion led me only to the realization that the importance of reconciling imperfections and disruptions through avoidance and adaptation inspires me, both in dance and in life. Was I able to change the way I viewed myself through constant encouragement? Were my dancers able to redefine imperfection without noticing? No!

As humans, we imagine “ideal” situations constantly. Our expectations become a form of ideal and, in the next moment, fail to be fulfilled. I was not able to free myself from the desire to appear put-together, creative, and confident. In a similar vein, I was not able to free my cast from their impulse to constantly try to please me, anticipate how to appear technically in control of their bodies and know how to handle the disruptions. My attempts “to free” us from our censorship or “the disappearing act” were often futile.

Upon completion of, and reflection upon, this thesis, I have concluded that I will continue my research utilizing imperfections and disruptions, with the most transforming

component of my methods being encouragement, dare I say love. In the end, the cast's errors and imperfections in the studio were no longer experienced in an isolating way. We were/are/will be in it together. These inescapable experiences in life, if embraced, transform the way we view each other as individuals. The moments in rehearsal when the "ideal" and "real" were exposed allowed for individual reoccurring experiences of loss and recovery, sadness and happiness, love and hate, and trust and doubt to be seen/felt/experienced together. We were a community of people attempting to survive and embrace mistakes, and the facets of rehearsal and life collided unexpectedly and imperfectly.

This notion of surviving and embracing the unexpected permeates my memory and reflection. I encouraged everyone to choose the act of accepting error. This act is what lingers with me. Through this act, communities were formed that, in turn, sculpted the movement in a way I never could have anticipated. I witnessed moments of abandon, restraint, desperation, precision, the malleable along with the rehearsed, the attempts of my dancers to push towards an image of excellence while adapting to their imperfections. The greatest revelation from my thesis process is that the human tendency to avoid disruption and imperfection can be approached in a way that allows us to experience disruptions and imperfections collectively, thereby alleviating our sense of isolation as we attempt to live/dance through them. The alleviation of isolation enhanced interpersonal connections within the collective. At the end of the creative process, we were transformed into a community of people transcending into varying manifestations of survival and trust.

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