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# MY YEAR AS A CHOREOGRAPHER

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# MY YEAR AS A CHOREOGRAPHER

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Fine and Performing Arts Honors Program

By

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The Honors College

Fine and Performing Arts Honors Program

East Tennessee State University

April 13, 14

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## I. Introduction

*My Year as a Choreographer* analyzes the art and craft of dance choreography. My training as a theatre and dance student at East Tennessee State University from 2010-2014, culminated in my final senior capstone experience as a choreographer for two productions, the ETSU Division of Theatre and Dance's *2014 Dance Concert* and University School's musical, *Sleepy Hollow*. Composing a new dance in a concert setting and choreographing for musical theatre provided significant material for analysis, and the following research compares the two processes. In addition, the research of the history and development of dance choreography and its modern practices created a better understanding of the artistic field. Both in theory and in practice, I explored the multitude of artistic responsibilities that are imperative to the process of a choreographer.

## II. Discovering Dance

I didn't really discover dance until my sophomore year of college. I had danced a little bit as a child, but it mostly consisted of standing on stage and waving to your mommy. I wouldn't say that I successfully learned how to move or dance. I feel harsh in saying that, and I loved my dance classes and teachers, but they were not successful in teaching me any type of dance technique. At first, when my dear friend Josh Holley suggested that I should register for a dance class, I laughed and rolled my eyes. What a hilarious and preposterous suggestion! I thought I was the most awkward person on the planet; I was ridiculously self-conscious and could not imagine going outside of my comfort zone like that. Just the thought of attending a dance class frightened me. What if I embarrassed myself? What if I couldn't do it? What if people judged me? For a while,

brushing off his suggestions was easy. Any time the idea was mentioned again I would politely explain, “I’m not a dancer like you, Josh” and with outstanding encouragement, he would reply, “You could be.” His words were ever present in the back of my mind, and slowly but surely I became curious about the suggestion. Then, when I attended the 2011 Spring Dance Concert the second semester of my freshman year, it was as though someone had flipped a switch inside of me. I was mesmerized and moved; the movement spoke to me. I wanted to learn to express myself and be free the way that the dancers seemed to be in each and every piece. Dance was calling my name.

I signed up for my first dance classes in the 2012 Fall Semester—Beginning Tap and Beginning Jazz—partially because I had some experience in these forms of dance and partially because a few of my friends were in the classes too. I hoped that if I were with friends, people I am comfortable around, perhaps it would be easier to let loose and put myself out there. On the first day of class with Cara Harker, I immediately felt comfortable. She was relaxed and easy-going, yet it was apparent that she took dance very seriously and wanted the class to be structured towards successful training. If you were just taking the course because you thought it was an easy A and were not actually interested in dance, the dance courses would not meet your expectations.

Her classes changed me as an actor and as a person. They opened up a whole new realm of possibility: compelling and effectual movement. My body language began to reflect me and not my fear or anxiety. I was growing. I was learning how to express myself organically and honestly. I wanted to learn more and more—dance tugged at my heartstrings—so every semester I would register for at least one more class.

Each level (Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced) teaches a new, distinct layer about dance. The beginner classes are about building the foundation in dance technique. I was taught the essential steps to each style and how to successfully combine them. Intermediate courses tended to focus on combination work. Combinations are fragments of dances that may not be fully developed, but serve a particular function (whether it is implementing technique, style, or characterization). In addition to working on the expression of an entire story, you learn to utilize “the character” in a dance. Advanced classes are about performance and advanced technique. I learned how to combine the movement, the character, and the story into one successful package that is big and beautiful enough to have an audience. We polished the technique that we already knew, taking it to a new, complex level. In a sense, advanced classes are the “icing on the cake” in the learning process. I learned the most when I was able to take all three levels in one dance style.

Once I got the basics down, I began to take more adventurous courses like Musical Theatre Dance, Modern Dance, and Dance Composition. Musical Theatre Dance was fun and a great asset to my audition package. I learned what to expect when auditioning for a musical, what directors and choreographers would be looking for, and how to be confident in doing it. Modern Dance was a brave quest for me because of its foundation in ballet technique. I did not take the beginner level of Modern, I jumped straight into the intermediate level, and so my Modern class was very challenging. It was an entirely new way to move, the rigid structure seemed antithetically free. It was mentally and physically exhausting to remember the specific technique, but I liked its freedom and fluidity. The course helped me to develop and establish a stronger, wider

dance vocabulary, both physically and verbally. Dance Composition, however, had the biggest impact on me.

### III. Becoming a Choreographer

I learned more than I would have ever imaged in Dance Composition—a class that exposes students to the intricate process of creating and performing their own choreographic works. I expected the course to challenge me—I knew that it would be a valuable learning experience—but the class itself was not what I expected. When we got to class on the first day and it was essentially entirely made up of improvisational exercises, I did not understand how they would translate into dance choreography. I overthought things, probably because I was nervous. I didn't have enough confidence in my dance abilities and physical instincts to trust myself, and I began to doubt my choice to take this class. I often do not have enough faith in myself, which is a problem that this course helped me address. It was not two sessions later that I had fallen into the groove. Each exercise taught how to add structure to creativity by fluidly piecing ideas (movements) together in a specific context. The assignments to be achieved by the end of the semester were to choreograph a solo, a duet, and a group piece.

The final exam was the *Winter Dance Composition Showcase*. It blew my mind when other people from the class wanted to use me in their pieces. It made me realize that maybe my passion for dance was beginning to shine through. I opened the show with my solo piece titled *Sleeping with Sickness*. It was a breath of fresh air to perform it for an audience. I knew it was weird, and maybe not “difficult” or “advanced” technique, but I was very happy with it. The movement was my style, a good representation of me. I was wholly connected to the piece.

Next, I performed in a group piece with my three close friends and co-choreographers Maggi Hines, Katie Wilburn, and Chelsea Kinser. It was enlightening to see how different all of our solos were from the group dance. When I worked with others to compose this piece, I learned perspective, compromise, and patience. Each choreographer had a distinct style. One choreographer would create certain movements that made sense within the piece to them, but not to the outside eyes of the other choreographers. The collaboration unveiled possibilities that I might not have discovered if I had continued to work alone. We all created and discussed our choices in movement to find as much compromise as we could within the piece. We each had our own unique styles; the group piece was very obviously bits and pieces of us all. It was a collage of styles, and I think they meshed well. We all really listened to each other and embraced the others' ideas. We created an upbeat, silly, and totally fun dance. It was a great representation of the relationship of our personalities as choreographers.

Chelsea Kinser and I choreographed a duet together. We have different bodies and move in different ways, but our movement worked well together. I believe it was enhanced by our friendship; our connection; our trust in each other. We weren't afraid or embarrassed to try anything, and we worked very equally as a team. We would put on music—mainly The XX—and think up scenarios that we wanted to explore. We would begin to “dance them out”. Once we found a concept we liked, the ball didn't stop rolling. We had idea after idea after idea. It ended up causing some indecisiveness and over-obsessing. We had to tell ourselves to let go. Then we found what we wanted in the movement. I remember the day in class when we showed it to Cara. She cried and told us all how moved she was. How proud it made her to watch our choreography. It was really



motivating and nice to hear after all of the stress that goes into putting yourself out there. At the showcase, the duet seemed to be a success as well.

I did not realize that dance choreography was such an intricate process. It had never registered that I would be acquiring tools that would aid me in artistic creativity. I learned to tell a story in justified, plausible, yet innovative ways. The course was also a release for me as an artist. The opportunity to create my own work, invent my own movements, and tell stories from my own head was liberating and stimulating. I experienced an irrefutably organic, emotional catharsis; I just let myself out for a semester. It was revitalizing. This deep connection to choreography surprised me. How did I have such a strong passion that I had never before realized? I wanted more! The class was not enough exploration for me. I began to wonder if dance choreography was—I know this sounds cheesy but—something that I was born to do, a part of my essence. I decided that this question should be explored and that I could easily do so by focusing my senior thesis on dance choreography. Devoting my thesis to this topic would allow me to spend an entire year learning about dance choreography and its history.

#### IV. The Evolution of Dance Choreography

Dance, unlike other art forms (primarily visual arts), is not physically traceable. The likelihood of discovering discernable remains is minimal; Greek pottery is the largest source of accessible evidence from the ancient history of dance (Garfinkel 205). Therefore, the origin of dance remains ambiguous. The definition of dance remains a philosophical debate. What is dance?

The 2014 Merriam Webster Dictionary defines dance as “a series of rhythmic and patterned bodily movements usually performed to music” (Merriam-Webster.com).The

Oxford Dictionary's definition of dance is to "move rhythmically to music, typically following a set sequence of steps" (OxfordDictionaries.com). However, many scholars would argue that corporeal movement is only a fraction of authentic significance in the true definition of dance (Van Camp 19).

Although movement seems to be the largest component to dance choreography, movement alone does not suffice as the core element of choreography. "Human movement is almost certainly a necessary condition of dance and its most distinctive characteristic. However, movement is by no means sufficient, and the ontological status and identity of dance performances cannot be understood solely in terms of movement" (Van Camp 19). The spirituality and soul that lie with the movement, the energy and affect that it creates, and the unspoken communication of the piece; these are the quintessential elements of dance choreography. A dance is so much more than movement. A dance must have soul. It must have a story and a purpose. The energy of a piece holds just as much significance as the movement itself. Otherwise what difference is there between walking to class or scratching your head and truly dancing? This creates difficulty in accurately illustrating the history of dance and choreography (Garfinkel 207). Hence, one must rely greatly upon written records to tell the story of choreography, what it is, and where it began.

In the Neolithic era, non-literate societies depict dance in artwork as a form of social interaction (Garfinkel 210). Scenes of dance are portrayed on rock art and ancient artifacts that date all the way back to eighth millennium B.C. "Community rituals, symbolized by dance, were the basic mechanism for conveying education and knowledge from one generation to the next" (Garfinkel 212). However, this impact on early societies

has no written documentation, and thus, dance choreography cannot be confidently reconstructed. Choreography is not considered to have evolved until the development of dance notation (Dance Instruction Manuals).

In Europe during the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, dance functioned primarily as a classist, social activity. One's nobility or class could be easily distinguished by the level of elegance and development in dance prowess ("Dances of Late Renaissance"). Dancing was regarded as equally informative as a conversation; one could distinguish another's background directly from their training in dance. The nobles and members of the upper class regarded dance as a basic, fundamental social skill ("Dances of Late Renaissance"). Thusly, most courtiers attended dance lessons everyday. Each court maintained at least one dance master.

Dance masters were principally responsible for preparing the courtiers to thrive at social dances. However, their full task consisted of preparing young courtiers for all social circumstances and this included discipline in good manners (Draskoy). As a matter of fact, an extensive knowledge of social dance technique and form was considered to be good manners. Many of the masters compiled their own individual instruction manuals that included notation of dance technique and methods of displaying courtly demeanor (McGowan 23).

*De Arte Saltandi and Choreas Ducendi* by Domenico da Piacenza is considered by some scholars to be the earliest existing choreographic piece of work (rendance.org). Domenico da Piacenza choreographed social dances for Italian nobles' galas, weddings and other gatherings. In his manual, he depicted his dances through five distinct, yet cohesive elements: Misura/Measure (the music's tempo in alignment with the body's

movement), Memory/Memoria (remembering the order and timing of each step), Agilitade/Agility and Maniera/Manner (the poise and ease at which one displays the movement and its rhythm), Misura di terreno (the control of one's body and movement), and finally, fantastme (physical agility and swiftness) (dancemaster.org). His choreography was explained through descriptive words, explaining the qualities and components of dance rather than symbols and images like those found in ancient ruins.

Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro is another 15<sup>th</sup> century dance master who composed a written documentation of his choreographic work, *De practica seu arte tripudii* (dancemaster.org). "[The manual]...includes a theoretical introduction proving the moral and ethical worth of dance, the fundamental concepts on which the art is based, and the practice which includes thirty-one dances (dancemaster.org)." Guglielmo's manual includes similar elements to those of Domenico da Piazenza, focusing on the rhythm and appearance of each movement.

16<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance was much the same in that Italian dance masters were the prevalent source of choreography and it was primarily recorded for the nobles, but two new developments took place in this period. First, the composition of dance manuals became pandemic among court masters, such as Fabritio Caroso and Cesare Negri, and for the first time they began to be reproduced and widely dispersed (McGowan 36). Next, the notation of dance for the lower class was finally composed (McGowan 38). Jehan Tabouret, pen name Thoinot Arbeau, was the first to depict peasant dance and music, making dance more relatable to the lower class (McGowan 38).

The reign of French King Louis XIV contributed to the evolution of dance choreography by introducing dance not only as a means of spectacle, entertainment, and

social interaction, but also by establishing a school of dance. Louis XIV had achieved success in ballet at a young age, earning the nickname “The Sun King” from a ballet role that he originated at fourteen years old (Hilton 9). He loved dancing, and decided that it was a necessary skill to acquire before one could become a knight. In 1661, Louis XIV established the first known dance academy, Academie Royale de Danse, to give the finest education to young nobles in the art of dance (Hilton 15). It was extensive training that only catered to the most assiduous young men.

Pierre Beauchamp directed the academy; he was known for his “dignified style” in ballet technique (Hilton 25). It was at Academie Royale de Danse that Beauchamp created the five positions that are still used in ballet today. Although Beauchamp never published this system, it was eventually published by one of his pupils, Raol Feuillet, in his manual *Choregraphie, ou l’art de decrier la dance par caracteres* (“Baroque Dance”). Thus, Beauchamp’s five positions are often referred to as Feuillet notation. Feuillet’s manual represented over a hundred dance steps through drawings that traced the pattern of the movement, with different symbols representing specific movements or positions, much like music notation. “Bar lines in the dance score correspond to bar lines in the music score” (“Baroque Dance”). This system of notation allowed dance choreography to be recorded more thoroughly than ever before.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romanticism dominated dance choreography (Brinson and Van Praagh 31). Dance, particularly ballet, thrived as a form of theatrical art as opposed to aristocratic spectacle. Choreographers began to take risks by inserting ideas that seemed “unconventional”, allowing movement to appear freer. Ballet transformed from its classical form into two distinguishable forms that we utilize today: Romantic Ballet and

Classical Ballet. Romantic choreography differentiated from classical by allowing less structure and more creativity. The movement was emotional and imaginative, and often focused on dreams and tragedy. Two great choreographic works from this period are *La Sylphide*—choreographed by Fillipe Taglioni—and *Giselle*—choreographed by Theophile Gautier (Brinson and Van Praagh 37). These ballets successfully incorporated a dramatic plot into the choreography. The movement suggested love, danger, heartbreak, anger; a wide range of human emotions that had yet to be explored in terms of choreography. Dance choreography became poetic and less rigid.

The invention of the waltz is another vital fragment in the development of dance as an art form. The waltz is recognized as the earliest form of ballroom dance, emerging in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Vuillier 293). The choreography required two partners to closely embrace with the male partner's arm around the female's waist, and the upper class society found it to be offensive and vulgar. By 1844, however, it became widely accepted as appropriate social behavior in the ballroom (Vuillier 298). Unfortunately, by the end of this era social dance began to fizzle out. The young generation felt bored with the old choreography and music. Aristocracy transformed to democracy. It was no longer societally necessary to be well versed in every style of dance (Vuillier 301).

Shortly after the development of ballroom dance, choreography took an interesting turn into the world of show business: vaudeville. "Beginning in the 1880s and through the 1920s, vaudeville was home to more than 25,000 performers, and was the most popular form of entertainment in America" (pbs.org). Vaudeville was comedic, exaggerated and over the top. It made light of seriousness, very unlike ballet or ballroom. Vaudeville dance numbers had to grab the audience's attention. They needed to be fast-

paced and upbeat. Ragtime music, tap dance, and burlesque were the most common types of choreography found in a vaudeville variety show.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Modern dance movement was born in America as a response to the confinement of vaudeville and ballet choreography (pbs.org). The pioneers of this movement did not support the “rigid and imperialistic nature of ballet” (pbs.org), but did not want their choreography to be written off as a meaningless form of entertainment. Their work was an expressionistic art. Their choreography was innovative and truthful, unlike anything explored in choreography before. The “pioneers” of this movement are Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Ted Shawn (Maynard 10).

Loie Fuller combined stagecraft technique and design to create powerful visual effects. She was not technically trained in dance (Maynard 29). She began her career on stage in the burlesque circuit (Maynard 32). It was on the burlesque circuit, however, that she found interest in the effect lighting could have on natural, improvised movement. She performed with a long, silk skirt, and experimented with gas lighting (Maynard 32). Her movement was snakelike, slow, and smooth, and quickly earned the name “The Serpentine Dance”. By 1908, Fuller began her own company where she trained dancers in the art of physical improvisation (Maynard 30).

Isadora Duncan is revered as “the mother of American modern dance”. Born in 1877 as Dora Angela Duncan, she grew up as the youngest of three fatherless children in an Irish-American Family (Maynard 33). Isadora was not classically trained as a dancer, but began dancing as soon as she could walk. By age six, she was teaching dance to children in her neighborhood for pennies (Maynard 33). Isadora found inspiration in Greek

Mythology, nature, and the rhythms of her own body. Isadora renounced the costumes of classical ballet by creating her own natural look (Maynard 35). She chose draped gowns that would move freely as her body moved. She also rejected conventional footwear by dancing barefoot. Duncan's movement was often discovered through improvisation. She listened to her body, believing that dance is "the expression of a natural inner urge" (Maynard 43). Her movement challenged audiences, offending some and inspiring others. In her early career, her choreography was free-spirited, light-hearted, and spiritual.

As an activist in women's rights, Isadora did not believe in the convention of marriage. She birthed two children out of wedlock, but in 1918 her life took a tragic turn. Her children and their nanny drowned in a horrible car accident (Maynard 63), and her heartache from this tragedy bled quite obviously into her work. Her dances became centralized on heartbreak and pain, but her movement was freer than ever. The stories were dark and somber. In 1927, her neck-scarf got caught in the rear wheel of an automobile and snapped her neck (Maynard 67). This, of course, resulted in her death.

Ruth St. Denis, born in 1880, was raised to deny social convention (Maynard 71). Her father was an atheist engineer and her religious mother was a doctor of medicine before her marriage (Maynard 69). Between the two, Ruth was well educated in a myriad of subjects. They encouraged her to read and explore. Her mother did not believe in wearing corsets, and preached that the grammatical practices of Delsarte held equal significance to the teachings of the Bible (Maynard 67). When her parents put in a local school of dance, Ruth immediately excelled. She began her career as a performer in vaudeville at age sixteen (Maynard 68). The piece that she performed was more a series of tricks, and although she longed to be on stage, this type of "dance" did not fill her artistic desires and



needs. In 1904, St. Denis moved to Europe and was introduced to style of Isadora Duncan, whose legacy had prevailed (Maynard 70).

Upon her return to America, Ruth's destiny as a dancer was uncovered when a cigarette advertisement of Egyptian Deities sparked spiritual enlightenment (Maynard 108). She created a costume much like that of Isis in the advertisement and began to choreograph movement influenced by this. In her exploration, Ruth found inspiration and motivation from many different cultures (India, Japan, China, Babylon) and eventually her choreography struck the fancy of some wealthy and prominent patrons of art (Maynard 107). They rented the Hudson Theatre to stage a show that was composed entirely of St. Denis' choreographic pieces (Maynard 107). This is where she came into her own. Her choreography was mysterious and sensual, and her ability to personify these cultural figures through dance captivated American and European audiences.

Ted Shawn's, born in 1891, early life was cataclysmic (Maynard 74). He lost his mother and his older brother when he was only eleven years old, and at age 19 suffered from paralysis (Maynard 74). When Shawn graduated high school, he began studying Theology and in this discovered dance therapy (Maynard 76). Not only did this cure his paralysis, but he also fell in love with dance. He found that the movements came naturally to him, and decided to dedicate himself to dance lessons. Shawn enjoyed learning styles of dance, but yearned to create something new. Shawn, who was the first male dancer to achieve worldwide fame, developed a style of dance that was completely masculine (Maynard 77). His choreography pulled from ordinary male subjects, primarily laborers and those in the work force (Maynard 78).

In 1914, Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis met and later in the year decided to marry (Maynard 67). They opened Denishawn Company and School and became one of the most notorious schools of modern dance. “One of Denishawn’s greatest contributions to dance lay in the fact that its founders never subjugated the natural talents and instinctive powers of expression in their students (Maynard 67).” Denishawn gave birth to the next generation of modern dance choreographers: Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman (Maynard 110). Unfortunately, their marriage, and the company with it, dissipated in 1930 (Maynard 111). This invoked Shawn to create his own company of male dancers and he started Jacob’s Pillow Festival, which still exists in America as the longest running dance festival (Maynard 110).

Martha Graham, perhaps the most creditable choreographer to evolve from Denishawn Company, was born in 1893 (Maynard 106). Raised by a doctor, Martha learned at an early age how one’s muscular movement could voluntarily or involuntarily betray the mind (Maynard 109). This is perhaps what influenced Graham’s definition of dance, “A graph of the heart” (Maynard 112). Martha began dancing in church as a child, but never attended a dance class until she joined Denishawn Company (Maynard 115). Ruth St. Denis performed at Graham’s highschool during her junior year, and Martha idolized her, but St. Denis did not believe that Martha had what it would take and sent her to the classes of Ted Shawn instead (Maynard 116). Shawn was rather imperturbable, and he respected Graham’s hard work ethic. After two years of intensive training, she became Shawn’s assistant and partner in dance. She worked with him until 1923 (Maynard 120).

In 1925, Martha Graham began teaching drama at Eastman School of Music in New York (Maynard 120). As a teacher, she had the freedom to candidly explore movement

as opposed to exploring the styles of dance that already existed. She began compiling her own language of dance (Maynard 123). Graham's choreography resembled the work of Isadora Duncan because it was original, free, and natural. However, Martha Graham's movement differed from Duncan's in that it was "an expression of the human self" (Maynard 119). She had no desire to make her movement conventionally beautiful. She relied on basic physical components—walking, running, and leaping (Maynard 118). She did not romanticize human experience, but rather illustrated its rawness. Her imagery seemed distorted and Graham's work invoked a harsh response from audiences who felt that her choreography was degrading humanity (Maynard 120). Despite these ideas, Martha refused to create movement that was inorganic. She wanted to "break through the seemingly unending frieze of feminine beauty" (Maynard 120).

As her innate dance vocabulary expanded, Martha Graham focused much of her work around nerve impulses flowing through the body and how they were connected to breathing (Maynard 121). She called these impulses contractions and taught dancers to contract and release with their breath. Another element of Graham's technique is suspensions and falls, exploring a dancer's connection weighted to the Earth (Maynard 121). She did not believe that dance was meant to be airy or light. Graham gave birth to our present-day translation of modern dance: Contemporary choreography (Maynard 121).

Today, with the advancement in technology and machinery, dance exists as it never has before. Because of the valorous choreographers that came before, choreography exists quintessentially as human expression, and whatever that means to each dancer and choreographer. Audiences are accepting of daring work, and dance thrives in many

different forms of art including drama, performance art, cinematography, and anime. Dance is finally being recognized in an academic setting at many colleges and universities. The enticing question, “What is dance choreography?” may be unanswerable, but isn’t that the beauty of the art? In the wise words of 20<sup>th</sup> century American choreographer Agnes De Mille, “The truest expression of a people is in its dance and its art. Bodies never lie”, and history proves this true. No matter what current social, political, or economical circumstances exist in a culture, dance has survived and continued to flourish. Its ever-enticing, raw spirituality is entrancing. Speaking from experience, dance entranced me.

#### V. A Blank Canvas: Composing Dance for a Concert Setting

During Dance Composition, I choreographed a solo that Cara and I decided we would like to revisit. It was perhaps my first great (great may be an exaggeration) work of choreography. We decided that I would use the solo as inspiration to create a duet, and hopefully Josh Holley would agree to perform it (which, thankfully, he did). Josh and I have a long history. We came to college as a couple, and although our romantic relationship ended rather dramatically, our friendship prevailed over the years. We know seemingly everything about each other and because of that have an incredibly capacity for trust. This makes us good dance partners—we aren’t afraid to try anything—so I knew that I could create something amazing for us to perform. I had many ideas that I believed would suit us well, especially with the theme (taken from my solo) of insomnia and codependent relationships at the core of our piece.

At the beginning of 2013 fall semester, Josh Holley and I met a few times to just improvise and get back into the groove of things. We would video-record our work

sessions, analyzing the choreography and searching for something inspiring. One night, we improvised a dance that we thought had potential. I showed the video to Cara to seek her opinion. She suggested that we combine ideas from the improvisation and from my solo to create our duet. We watched my solo, watched the video of the improvisation, and took notes on both. We discussed how the two could fit together. About once a week—with a few exceptions for academic conflicts and illness—Josh and I met to rehearse. Josh, being a wonderful partner, would always bring his own ideas to the table. I would give him movement or give him a concept, and together we would make it look right. We stitched together a story and a direction for the piece. We developed our characters' relationship, ultimate goals, and journeys. We met with Cara throughout this process to show her our progress, and she helped us clean it up. We also explored different songs to set the dance to.

The choreographic process is unique to each individual. It can be difficult as a creative individual to construct aesthetically cohesive movement that effectively displays the beautiful ideas that one might have. In any case, a dance must have a beginning, middle, and end, but the choreographer will not always create these in a specific “order”. Dances are discovered through a natural process of improvisational exploration. A choreographer may know exactly how they wish to end a dance before they can possibly conceive the beginning. Akin to writing, choreography develops and evolves through exploration. Ideas constantly change as the body and soul work together. That being said, this dance evolved VERY slowly. Perhaps I should repeat this for emphasis: this dance evolved VERY slowly.

In my own process, creating the story of the dance (perhaps not every detail, but the basic premise) is the first step. This dance focuses on a married couple and their relationship with sleep. The wife, who is played or danced by me, suffers from insomnia and depression and this creates a severe codependency in their relationship. The husband, played or danced by Josh Holley, is exhausted and overwhelmed by the wife's emotional needs. Their nightly routine is monotonous. "She can't sleep, so he can't sleep, so she can't sleep," and this cyclical pattern is unbearable. In moments he wants to leave, but her need for him has developed into his own codependent issue to be needed. Their love is fervid, but is it strong enough to save them from drowning in this dangerously dark psychological sea? With this theme and these questions in mind, my mind was racing with ideas and images. I was ready to paint this story as vividly as possible through physical imagery and rhythmic patterns in music and movement.

I, being as over-analytical as I tend to be, took entirely too much time to choreograph the first half of the dance. I knew how I wanted to begin the dance: the two of us would lie side by side as if in a bed. I put together movement that was almost directly pulled from my solo that consisted of a series of arm and leg movements similar to those one might experience when stretching or rolling around when trying to get comfortable enough to fall asleep.

That is the only portion of the dance that didn't change drastically every time we met. It stayed consistent with slight variations in timing. There were other movements that originally followed this opening phrase when I began choreographing in the fall semester, but something about the choreography did not feel right. I felt stuck and incomprehensibly disconnected with the piece. Josh and I had been meeting once a

week, and each meeting became less and less productive. I worried that Josh hated the dance, hated the movement, hated the story, and then I began to feel negatively about the piece. I did not know where to take it. It was becoming inexcusable that the dance had not developed more than it had, and I had to do something. We met with Cara, showed her what we had, and discussed our concerns and disheartenment. We thought that perhaps we were not challenging ourselves enough. She suggested that we make things more specific and had the idea of working within a space constraint the size of a queen size bed. The constraint would also attribute immensely to the idea that the couple is in bed. With this in mind, we dismissed for Winter Break to meet again during the spring semester.

During long sessions of choreography over the break, I beat myself up emotionally and mentally. I felt like a horrible choreographer and, even worse, a horrible dancer. My lack of faith in my work grew into sickening sadness, but I knew that my emotions did not hold any significance and the dance had to be finished. I sat on the ground, closed my eyes, and envisioned the scene as if it were not a dance but a scene in a play. I began to translate what I saw into movement, and (taking some advice that Cara had given me during Dance Composition) just began to say yes. It didn't matter if I hated it. It didn't matter if it looked stupid. We could change anything later on, but right now I needed to finish the dance. I needed to finish the story. I needed to finish MY THESIS in order to graduate with Honors. This was not an option and I did not have time for my mind's ridiculous tendencies.

By the beginning of the semester in spring 2014, I had actually choreographed a minute and a half (less than half of the song) that I was sufficiently pleased with. I taught

Josh these movements one Friday morning, and after we rehearsed for an hour, Cara came to watch our developments. She enjoyed the movement, but gave me some notes to help perfect the piece. She questioned my decision to have us stand, wondering if it took away from the image that we are in bed, and she asked if I could tweak the movements that required us to be standing to be lower to the floor. This would place another space constraint; not only were we limited with space in which we could travel horizontally, but now we were limited vertically as well. This idea inspired me, and left me with so many ideas. I felt my choreographic senses reawaken.

I had many ideas and would continue to teach Josh when we met once a week, but after every rehearsal my brain was flushed with new ideas. I kept reworking movement that we had already established and changing things. I do not regret this because I feel like the movement that I created got better every time, but it definitely stunted our productivity. During our first rehearsal with Cara Harker for the dance concert, she reprimanded me for not having more done. I had only choreographed and taught Josh a minute and a half, but I had planned out up to three minutes, and thank god for that. During that rehearsal, I taught Josh the rest of the movement. Having Cara there was helpful because her insight kept me from overworking or overanalyzing the movement that we were doing. I discussed my vision for the end of the dance, and in this rehearsal we created the end of the dance. I decided to end the dance the way that it began, but to change the position of Josh and myself. It was Cara's idea to end the piece sitting up, facing forward, and holding hands.



## VI. Working with a Director: Dance Composition for Musical Theatre

Working under the guidance of a director is an almost entirely different process than choreographing from a blank slate. Not only because musical theatre dance is a style of its own and follows a particular story with already set parameters for motivation and character choices, but there are also many limitations that occur when working under someone else's vision. The choreographer must find a way to combine his or her own artistic vision with the specifications that the director requires. For instance, when University School produced the musical *Sleepy Hollow* in October 2013, the director of the program, Dr. Joseph Borden requested the opening dance to be a ballet. With that in mind, I—the choreographer—am able to create a piece from my own imagination that attend to his requirements. Perhaps I would not envision a ballet if I was to read the script and hear the music on my own terms, and in a way that requirement takes away some creative freedom, but there is still room to create. This was new territory to me. I was treading unmarked waters, but thankfully I was not blind. Anytime I had a question, anytime that I felt remotely uncertain about any aspect of the job, I knew that Cara would be readily available for advice.

Choreography in a musical theatre setting requires greater specificity within explicit creative parameters. I would have creative freedom in some regards, but the movement that a choreographer in this genre creates has to fall in line with the director's vision. This makes communication a vital aspect of the choreographical process.

### *Sleepy Hollow: Choreographer in Action*

In a way, this job fell into my lap. It made me realize how important networking is. Creating a positive rapport with the people that you work with is essential in working as an artist. Dr. Joe Borden is the director of the theatre program at University High School. Having worked with Cara before, Dr. Borden decided to contact her in search of a choreographer for the high school's production of *Sleepy Hollow*. He was interested in using students from ETSU's Theatre department as designers for 3 elements of the show (a dance choreographer, and costume and make-up designers). The first week of school, Cara asked me if I would be interested. She then referred me to Dr. Borden. I emailed him:

Dr. Borden,

My name is Hannah Hasch. I am a senior Theatre major/ Dance minor in the Honors College at ETSU. Cara Harker told me that you are looking for a choreographer for your upcoming show? I am very interested in this! My thesis is actually focused on dance choreography. What kind of schedule would it involve, and what is the pay? Cara discussed the styles of dance that you are looking for with me, and I think I could do a great job with this show.

Thanks so much,  
Hannah Hasch

We set up an interview for Wednesday, September 11th at 8 a.m. That morning, I tried to be relaxed, but assured. I wanted to make a good impression because it sounded like a fun opportunity! Dr. Borden was an odd character. When he entered the room, he entered with a quiet, polite woman named Allyson Ross. She is another music teacher at University High School and was assisting Dr. Borden with the production of the musical. They asked me why I was interested in the job. I told them about my experience with dance, training under Cara, how much I love it, and about the topic of my thesis. I also

told them about working at *Horn in the West* over the summer and the styles of dance that I learned during my time there. I told them about my experience working with children as a nanny, and how I taught Playwriting & Shakespeare for the Kingsport Renaissance Center's Arts4Kids program. Mrs. Ross said that she thought that I would be a great fit for the job. She suggested that it would be a learning experience for us all because they didn't know much about dance and I hadn't choreographed a musical. Dr. Borden agreed. We set up the rehearsal schedule, discussed pay, and talked through what dances I would be responsible for.

Dr. Borden talked me through what he wanted for each dance. Time period, setting, dramatic relevance, and characterization were all components that were necessary to commemorate. In order to appropriately choreograph the musical, I would need to be well acquainted with the script and the music, as well the notes from my conversation with Dr. Borden. In the opening number, Dr. Borden requested a ghost ballet with intermediate level technique for the three female banshees. Their movement would be the central focal point, but other characters (trees and monsters) would be present in the background, so they needed basic movements as well. He did not know exactly how many characters this would be, but he knew that he wanted the characters working together to create ominous images. He suggested subtle transitions in the positioning of their arms and legs.

The next piece appearing in the show would be a polka for twenty or so village characters with a brief duet for the farmer and his wife. The piece is titled "A Superstitious Yankee Folk" and necessitated upbeat, energetic movement. He also specified that movement should predominately be synchronized group movement for the

ensemble with a slight variation for the farmer and his wife. The movement needed to be simple because the kids had no formal dance training and had a very limited amount of space in which they could move.

A minuet was my next task, where Ichabod (the austere new teacher in *Sleepy Hollow*) teaches the students how to minuet in an attempt to show off in front of the towns hot shot Bram Bones. Dr. Borden was open to ideas, but envisioned Ichabod interchanging partners three times, so that he ends up with Katrina, who happens to be the subject of both he and Bones infatuation. The dance would end abruptly as Bram Bones aggressively steps in.

The conjuncture of the minuet motivates the next piece—“Katrina Won’t You Let Me Walk You Home?”—where Bones and Ichabod would foolishly fight, dancing in attempt to one up the other in front of Katrina. Dr. Borden had no specific desires for this particular dance, but he did ask me to play around with incorporating a section where the boys would hook arms, make a chair, and carry her about the stage.

The last three dances with which I was tasked were reprisals of the earlier pieces, so they only required slight deviation from the original movement. Dr. Borden suggested that I wait to create that movement until I see the other dances on the students. He thought that perhaps it would come to me easier that way, and I agreed. With an extensive amount of notes, it was time for me to embark upon the adventure of choreographing a high school musical.

I never could have fathomed that amount of time I would spend choreographing *Sleepy Hollow*. Once I was given the music and lyrics, I began to familiarize myself with the story and sound of the show. I would turn the music over in my head all day long,

thinking up ideas and writing them down. At night in my room, I would count things out and set the movement. I kept thorough notes to use in rehearsal so that teaching it would be easier. I spent an hour or two on each dance, and sometimes more when a new idea for something would strike me! We set the rehearsal schedule so that I would be teaching one to two dances a session, depending on the difficulty of each dance.

One thing I wish I had done differently in my choreography process is that I did not ever work in front of a mirror. Because of this, the original choreography that I planned didn't always work out the way I had imagined when I put the dance on the students. Occasionally I would film myself on my laptop, but even then I could only dance one part at a time. I needed to have a clear vision in my mind of what I want, and even then you never know what will or won't work. The Ghost Ballet was the easiest to choreograph. Although it was ballet, it was beginner ballet and thankfully I am well versed in beginning ballet technique from my Modern and Jazz classes (these genres evolved from ballet technique). "Superstitious Yankee Folk" was easy too. It had a great beat and story to work with. The dances that took longer to choreograph were "Katrina Won't You Let Me Walk You Home?" and "The Grasshopper" (the minuet). It is difficult to choreograph partner work without being able to work with a partner.

There wasn't a single dance that I did not have to modify upon teaching it, but it never took too long to discover the parts of choreography that would actually work and to recognize what changes needed to be made. I don't think it was bad, I just didn't have a great idea of how many people would be on the stage, a realistic idea of the amount of experience they had with dance, or how long certain things take to teach. The general shape and pattern to the movement would stay the same, but we simplified a lot of the

movement. I always asked the kids if they were comfortable with the movement too. Dr. Borden had to let go of certain ideas that he had because they were too elaborate for this level of theatre. I had to let go of certain ideas because Dr. Borden wanted something different. There was a lot of compromise that took place.

### Rehearsal Process

The rehearsal process was inspirational and insightful. Not only was it my first experience in teaching children and teenagers to dance, but it was also my first experience being “on the other side of the table”, working with people who had absolutely no dance training. I realized what it must have been like for Cara Harker to teach me when I first began dancing, and this strengthened my appreciation for her willingness to educate me in dance. I was so fortunate to work with these kids. I learned so many important lessons from them about communication. They were so enthusiastic and hard-working. They always tried anything I asked of them and—although sometimes it required some coaxing—they gave it all that they had. My greatest concern had been that my age would affect their level of respect for me. I was not so much concerned with the younger children, the age gap between us would make me seem ancient and authoritative, but I was worried about the teenagers. I don’t look or sound very much older than they are, so I knew that I would have to establish it with my body language and a sincerely distinct professionalism. This either proved to be effective or they are just well behaved kids to begin with. They treated me with respect and never acted out. I thought it was very impressive. Occasionally they would talk amongst themselves excitedly and I would have to sternly quiet them down, but even that did not happen often. The first time that it happened I simply raised my hand and at a normal volume

said, “Guys, I did theatre in high school, too. I know how exciting it is to work with your friends on a show and how hard it is to keep your thoughts and ideas to yourselves, but as you can probably tell, I have a naturally quiet voice. Please don’t make me raise it.” They giggled, and we never really had that problem again.

I’m not going to lie, the final outcome was nothing at all like I had originally envisioned, but in my opinion it worked out perfectly. The movement was cute, fun, appropriate, and achievable for these students. Was it perfectly clean? Was the choreography “impressive”? No, but it functioned successfully in the domain of high school theatre. Unfortunately, I was unable to see the performance (because of performances and rehearsals of my own—ah! the life of an actor), but the dress rehearsal was enjoyable and I felt confident that the production would be a success. As far as my own work on the show goes, I was proudest of the ghost ballet, but as far as the show as a whole, I was proud of the work of all of the students. Here were teenagers (and let’s be realistic, they have a hard enough time as it is) who were expected to sing, dance, and act for the first time with little to no experience, and they pulled it off smashingly! The experience made me realize how insignificant expectations can often be.

I expected the experience to challenge me by learning to work with kids, choreographing within a specific period and style, and working under the guidelines of a director. I expected to gain useful experience in Dance Choreography. I expected to face more challenges with the kids and for the director to have a clear idea of what he wants. I was relieved that the experience was relatively painless. Not that I did not experience stress, but the stress never overwhelmed me. I was thoroughly pleased and did not regret my decision to take on this assignment.

## VII. Conclusions

Choreographing within these two realms was a challenging experience. I feel successful looking back on all of the knowledge that I have gained through my studies in both the academic research and the physical exploration. In the famous words of Voltaire, “Let us read and let us dance; these two amusements will never do any harm to the world.” I never could have anticipated the difficulties and challenges that I would face as a choreographer. I could not imagine the valuable lessons I would learn or the memories that I would make while working on this thesis. I have enjoyed my time as a choreographer, and I hope that I will continue to choreograph for my own personal pleasure. Choreography is an art that I feel is underappreciated, and I am happy to say that I am well educated on its development and its significance in our world. These experiences will aid me as I search to find my place in the professional world of theatre and dance.



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