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Part I: Choreography "Helen" and "Family Photo" Part II: Movement and Story: An Exploration Through the Discourse of Dance

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Part I: Choreographed “Helen” December 9-11
and
“Family Photo” May 11-13

Part II: Movement and Story: An Exploration of Character
Through the Discourse of Dance

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of the Arts
Of Bard College

By Zia Affronti Morter

Introduction: How do I start?

I start dances by visualizing an image. Images come to me when I am in the shower or driving a car or sitting and watching a dance performance. Helen of Troy was my image for the first part of my senior dance thesis in fall of 2011. I envisioned Helen standing on a pedestal, wearing a long gown, her hair flowing down her back while she held a striking pose. She stood with beauty and power, but she acted only as a statue. This image stuck all the way through my rehearsal process, ending with a finished dance, titled “Helen.” For the second part of my thesis in Spring 2012, I am using a family photo as my image. I visualize the mom, dad, two kids, and the dog, standing in front of a professional backdrop. Everyone looks groomed and perfect, but my choreography is exploring what cannot be seen in the photo. I want to show the layers of the relationships and family life.

I see an image and think about how I can make a story from that image. The story does not have to have an arc, but once I have a narrative or a stimulating characters then I am more confident that I can generate interesting and articulate choreography. I am at a period in my career where I am interested in using story to inspire my dance pieces and making work about specific characters. Neither of my theses are narrative dances, but are dances about character, inspired by story. I make dances about the people/characters I want to present to an audience. I do not know if my need for character comes from my directing background, but I have a hard time putting choreography on stage without a theatrical influence. I know movement can be done without character, and done successfully, but it is less satisfying to me as a choreographer. Choreography is exciting

because I get to create my own structure and characters. With choreography I begin with a blank slate, and I start with an image.

Chapter 1: “Helen”

Once I have my starting image, I create a concept and characters I want to explore, which goes along with the initial image. For example, with “Helen,” the first part of my thesis, I started with the image of Helen of Troy and decided I wanted to explore the concept of women as war victims. I was interested in exploring the idea of grief, and seeing how people grieved in a catastrophic time, like wartime. I wanted to look at how women could survive the war and ultimately have the strength to overcome their suffering. The women suffered as slaves to the Greeks after the war, however Helen was not enslaved. I want to show the hierarchical difference between Helen and the war victims. I wanted to use Helen as an image of pure beauty, to contrast the suffering of the victimized women. In the end the power and strength of the women won out over the superficial beauty of Helen. I showed the struggle and victory of the surviving women through lighting, costuming, and movement. The woman portraying Helen wore a long beautiful gown, a sheer cloak, and was bathed in warm light. I wanted her to glimmer compared to the war victims, who wore simple tunics and occupied a cooler and darker lit area. Through choreographic phrase work, the audience saw the suffering of the women in the first part of the dance, while Helen posed upstage center. It was not until the end of the dance that the victory of the war victims was shown in the choreographic structure. The dancers approached Helen for the first time, disrobed her and dismantled her from her pedestal. They then laid her on the ground and stepped over her to leave her on the

stage alone. The women walking off the stage after tearing Helen down, symbolizing a freeness that they could not have when she stood strong on her pedestal. They were victorious because they had the power to leave the space, while Helen did not and could not leave the space. Suddenly, Helen status did not matter because the dancers had overpowered her with their courage and strength.

Section A: What can I use to inform my process?

When I first thought of the image of Helen, I went to the library to see if I could find an actual image to resonate with the one in my head. I looked through the photography books in the library and found a variety of images that spoke to me. I used these images to facilitate a conversation with my dancers about Helen and what it meant to be beautiful. We talked about what beauty means to each person and how it can best be represented onstage. This prompted a heated and diverse conversation about beauty and what attributes were necessary for an ultimately beautiful figure, such as Helen. Some people thought she should be skinny and blonde, while others thought she should be curvy and brunette. We all agreed that she should be tall, which is one of the reasons I wanted her to stand on a pedestal. This way she could be a level above the war victims. We all decided that the woman who played Helen needed to contrast the dancers on stage so that there could be a certain level of separation and hierarchy between the two worlds. By having Helen on the pedestal, upstage, and in different lighting I hoped to achieve this separation, convey her higher status, and reflect ideas of beauty.

When I started rehearsing I had a hard time finding a cohesive way to combine the world of Helen and the world of the dancers. I knew that the imagery was important

and I wanted someone to play the part, but it took me a long time to settle on someone. I could have used time to rehearse with Helen and my dancers to make the two worlds more clear. I focused more on the separation of world and did not explore all the options with my dancers and Helen to prove that my final decision was the right decision in regards to Helen. For most of the dance, the war victims occupied three quarters of the downstage space, while Helen took up the back quarter of the stage. I treated Helen's space as sacred and untouchable, so I did not have the war victims approach her until they broke her down. I wanted to see what it would have looked like to have the dancers use the space behind Helen to include her more, or also what it would have looked like to see Helen move slowly throughout the piece. I was happy with my final decision of Helen stationary and separate, but I wish I had experimented more with her role and her relationship to my dancers. I did not leave enough time to explore and discover about the relationship between Helen and the suffering women, but ultimately I was satisfied with my choice in the end to use her as a statue.

Section B: Use of Text and Music

The Trojan Women: A Love Story by Charles Mee informed most of my movement and discussion for many of my rehearsals. I read the text for the first time during a theatrical structure class with Jonathan Rosenberg. I was horrified and intrigued by the play at the same time. The text is based on *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, and Mee combines modern war stories with classical writing. In my first couple of rehearsals we read through the beginning of the script and talked about the playwrights intention

and the choices of the characters. Talking about the characters and the text seemed to help my dancers feel the tone I was going for with the piece. They chose a monologue from the text that they resonated with the most, to get familiar with so that they would have a character to represent in their dancing. I wanted to work with text first so that the dancers could absorb the emotions from the words of the text before they took on any movement. I wanted them to establish their characters before setting any choreography because I wanted the characters to inform their movement.

We talked about the horrified victims Mee portrayed compared to the grace and beauty we wanted to portray with Helen. Our conversation about oppression and victimization, relating to Mee's text, contrasted greatly with the conversation about beauty and status we had relating to Helen. Power was a constant theme in both conversations. We talked about the power of beauty, the powerlessness of the oppressed, and the ultimate power of strength. In the end, the strength of the victimized women won out over the power of Helen's beauty.

By creating stimulating conversation about Mee's play and the idea of Helen and by having my dancers connect to a specific monologue from the text, I felt that the dancers grasped an emotional connection with the characters and the concepts I wanted to portray. I then had each dancer pick a phrase or sentence that resonated with them the most and create a movement for each word in the sentence and then string the movements together into a dance phrase. These sentence phrases became a strong emotional center of the piece. We used these over and over again, creating duets and trios, while still keeping the text attached to the movement. Only at the very end of the process did I cut most of the text, however some did make it into the final piece. The specific phrases that made it

into the ending product were there because they seemed important to a person's character and the general story of the dance. For example, when Anna Bikales, one of my dancers, said, "I stepped into the room and said good morning and suddenly it turned bright red." This sentence added a sense of identity to Anna's character and the phrase was then repeated by My Jeraffi, another dancer, to echo the first time it was said. The words gave a snapshot of what was going on in the minds of the dancers, while they danced the sentence phrases.

I worked with composer Carlos Valdez on the music for the piece, who I have collaborated with on past pieces. We had several meetings about the type of tone and feeling I wanted from the music. I wanted something dark and deep, but not time or culture specific. He sent me several tracks that eventually built up to the final composition, which I have included in a CD. We worked intensively on the arc of the music and the crescendo of the piece because the build of the music would dictate the general tone of the piece. I wanted an overwhelming sound to embrace the overwhelming concepts of war. Every time he sent me something new I would listen to it and send him back my notes. We did this several times until we both had a base of music we were happy with and then decided to add a voice. By adding a female voice we hoped to give a vocal undertone to the suffering of the enslaved women. It was lucky that one of my dancers, Zoe Elders, ended up having such a beautiful voice. I asked her originally to be in the piece because of her movement quality and her interest in theater. Her voice was a huge bonus. Mr. Valdez worked with her to achieve the sort of sound quality we both felt went along with the already set music. Zoe ended up writing a poem because I asked her to write something about her emotions around the piece. She and Mr. Valdez eventually

translated this poem into a song, which became the song in the music. This was recorded on top of the instrumental music. I also decided to have her sing live, which add another thrilling level of drama and intensity to the piece.

It was wonderful to have a final product of the music so early on in the rehearsal process, but it was also a curse. The music made me feel stuck. I felt as if I was hitting a wall creatively because I could not expand outside of the realm of the music. I had a hard time creating movement to the music and it even took me a long time to feel comfortable with the music and movement as one piece.

I thought the music fit the piece beautifully, but I did not enjoy choreographing to it. To help myself I made phrases to other music, more modern pop music, which inspired movement more freely. I could count the modern music, making it easier to create choreographic phrases. I set these movement phrases on my dancers and then they translated them to Mr. Valdez's composition. This style of phrase work helped contrast the rhythm of the dancing with the rhythm of the music because the dancers kept the fast of slow rhythm or the original music when translating the movement to Mr. Valdez's composition. This ultimately resulted in a complexity of rhythm, which catered to the ending product of the dance.

Section C: Reflection

After watching the final version of my piece, I see that I used my skill as a director to bring character to life within the piece, while I used my choreographic skills to create and translate phrase work. I was satisfied with the end product. The tone of the music and singing dramatically matched with the intensity of the dancing. I tried to tackle

a huge dramatic subject, which was hard because it was less about the individual and more about the global issues of victimization in war. The subject matter was fascinating and satisfying to work with, but I would have like the characters to be more realistic and less symbolic. For example, when I worked on “Echo” in fall of 2010 with Conor Brown and Isa Cottingham, I used my personal experiences about grief and relationships to inform my choreography. This gave the piece a sense of realism and a strong emotional center, which lacked slightly in “Helen.” With “Helen,” I tried to tackle a global issue instead of an individual or personal issue and I felt that as a result the war victims and Helen were only symbols of these people and not realistic characters. With a global issue, it was much harder to find a way into the piece emotionally and bridge the gap from ancient characters to present characters.

I came into rehearsal for “Helen” with a very tight framework in mind, which made it very hard to explore other ideas. I conceptualized everything, from the music to the story. Thinking made me highly organized, which was very important because I was working on my directing senior project at the same time, but I wish I could have broken out of my framework occasionally to explore. By the end of my process I was artistically exhausted from working on two projects, which made it hard for me to refine the piece to its fullest extent. It was also very hard to go from working as a director to working as a choreographer. I found that in each role one has to deal with people in different ways. Most of the time one cannot talk to actors the same way one would talk to dancers. The vocabulary is different in each medium. I learned that dancers and actors have different ways of understanding and taking in information. The fact that I only have to work on

one piece this semester with benefit me immensely because I will have more creative capacity for my dance project.

Chapter 2: Family Photo

Section A: The Current Process

My definition of family:

A group of people who are in some way related to you
Does it have to be blood related?
People you have a connection too.

I am especially interested in exploring the concept of family. I focused on *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel for my directing my senior thesis in theater because it had a central theme of family and I wanted to explore the relationships and dynamics within the play. Now I am creating a piece about family dynamics and relationships through dance. My image for the second part of my senior project piece is a groomed family photo with a mother, father, two kids, and a dog. The family looks perfect and happy, but the dance is about what we do not see in the photo. The concept of family is one that inspires my work as both a choreographer and a director. I can relate to family on a personal level, which makes it easy to create realistic relationships.

My main fascination with family stems from my lack of experience with family. I grew up as an only child and my parents got divorced when I was eight. I lived in the custody of both parents so I was always moving from one house to another. Most of my close extended family lived across the country. Because of this my teachers and peers became a part of my family. I trusted my teachers and instructors and still have very close relationships to them now, but the concept of big family gatherings or even family dinner

did not exist for me growing up. I did not have the tradition Italian Sunday dinner with the family. I usually ate dinner in the car, on the way to rehearsal. Focusing on family dynamics and relationships within my directing and choreography work, helps explore a concept I missed out on in my childhood.

For the most part my parents were all the family I had, and I spent a majority of my time with my mother. I have focused closely on the mother/daughter relationship in both my theater project and my dance project because of my close personal relationship with my mother. Because my mom and I are extremely close, I know how influential a mother/daughter relationship can be. A daughter's relationship with her mother can influence her relationship with herself and her relationship with the rest of the family. I know that I depend on my mother's opinion for about major life choices and if she does not approve I find myself questioning my own choices. She has my best interest at heart and she is usually right about what is best for me, but sometimes I wonder what would happen if her influence was not as strong. A mother/daughter relationship comes with lots of love and care, but it also comes with dominance and power and sometimes it is a fine line between the two. I want to explore this delicate line in my choreographic process through the relationships of the characters.

I am interested in exploring the specific kinds of movement vocabulary each character in the family executes. It is forcing me to deal with character through a variety of choreographic choices. The characters are informing my movement choices. I have also left the details of the characters up to my dancers so that they can create a personality that they feel comfortable with. With this exploration, we have constant

conversations about each character, so that all of my dancers are very clear about whom they are playing and what is going on between characters.

Each dancer has movement restrictions because of character. For example, the dog has a different movement vocabulary than the daughter to make sure that an audience member can distinguish between the two different characters. It is similar with actors who play characters. A play has several defined characters and it is up to the actors to adopt certain characteristics to define themselves as those characters. There are certain restrictions that an actor or a dancer has to consider when portraying a character. If the character is supposed to be shy and quiet then big flamboyant movement would not be appropriate, but maybe small and contained movement. Once I have developed a movement vocabulary with each dancer then I can start exploring their interactions and relationships to the other characters.

At the beginning of our first full cast rehearsal I told everyone to write down three words or phrases that they thought of when we talked about family. I wanted to know what my cast immediately thought of in regards to family. I specified that it did not have to be about their personal family in particular, but could also include what they thought of the concept of family. These were the words they came up with:

Walls, Pride, Pain
Always, Choose, Support
Separation, Love, Food
Support, History, Love
Openly Secret, Crazy, Backbone
Cyclical, Survival, There

I am interesting in the repetition of concepts, like Love and Support, but even more interested in the contrast of words. There seems to be many mixed feelings about family.

I want to use this idea of opposition as a main basis for my piece. I want to capture

comedy and tragedy. I want the dance to show a tension and strangeness, while also showing a familiarity and connection between characters. How can relationships be in opposition, but still be connected as a whole unity? What are the connections and holes in the family I am creating?

Section B: Building the Dance

As I have worked on “Family Photo,” I have created the piece in scenes. Each scene features an insight into one, a couple, or all of the family members lives. I show the characters on different levels, first on the surface level and then on a deeper level, below the surface. I want to portray how different members of the family relate to each other and how they depend of one another. For example, on the surface, in the starting image, the mother, Claire Martin and daughter, Frances Slote, look normal and typical, but later the mother and the daughter have a duet where we see that the mom is overly dependent on her daughter. She clings to her daughter as Frances carries Claire across the stage. The young daughter tries to take care of her mom and be close to her, but the relationship is tainted by mom’s inability to be open to her child. Each scene sheds more light onto the family dynamics, so that by the end of the dance the audience sees more of the depth of the characters in the ending image, then they did in the identical starting image.

I have been working with Carlos Valdez on “Family Photo.” We are approaching the music differently than we did with “Helen.” Instead of starting out with one composition that plays through the entire piece, we are creating different sound backgrounds for each scene of the dance. Each piece of music enhances the emotional

tone or action of the scene. For example, Frances, playing the young daughter, runs out for her solo to a hectic piano piece, which sets the chaotic and crazy tone fit for childhood. Then when her mother, Claire, comes to meet her a softer and more soothing piece of piano music comes in bringing a comfort effect to the duet. Later in the dance, the comforting piano music is heard again, but the roles have shifted and the daughter is now the one comforting the mother. Each piece of music lends itself to the tone of each scene. Some scenes are in silence for contrast and to emphasis the sounds coming directly from the stage. For example, when all the family members come out to mess up Mom's nicely cleaned living room by moving props around and making noise. Dad, played by Ben Hoppkins, laughs at his phone conversation while the Son, played by Ainesh Madan, plays forks and a can from the trash. These natural sounds from the stage are enough and do not need any other outside enhancement.

With "Family Photo," I have created a play within a dance. Instead of making a dance with one cohesive idea carrying the piece from start to finish, like I did with "Helen," I have put together several scenes of movement that give the audience insight into the family's life. Some of the movements in the scenes are more theatrical than other phrases and some is of it is more choreographically technical, but all of the vocabulary helps create the world of the family. The piece does not have an arc. It begins and ends in the same place, while the scenes inform the audience about the personalities of the characters and their relationships to each other and their environment.

The piece officially begins with a pre-show of the family running synchronized to "Mickey" by Toni Basil. This sequence adds to the strangeness of family dynamics. It was inspired by a family I used to know in high school, who all went running together in

matching jogging suits. It was a family activity for them, but to me it seemed so unreal and weird. On the outside this family looked healthy and happy, but surreal. I wanted to capture a level of surreal action with the running and synchronicity in the beginning of the piece. When the beginning façade dissolves, the family takes their places for the starting image of a posed photo. At this point the house lights will go out and the piece officially begins with the parents standing behind two chairs where the children sit and the dog curled up under the daughter's chair. At this point the audience knows very little about the posed family. All they see is a tableau of a mom, dad, two kids, and a dog. As the piece progresses the family dynamics are uncovered and each character reveals other layers of themselves. By the last tableau of the dance, identical to the first image, the audience sees the family differently than they did before because of the progression of the piece. They are given insight into the character's lives and traits and now the audience has a tainted view of the posed photo.

I feel like I have successfully created a world or environment for my dance to live in. I want to keep shaping and defining the world until the dance goes into performance. I have explored many different ideas about family and I tried to compile scenes that would make this family come to life most effectively. My dancers have become a small family because of this project. We support each other when it is needed and encourage when we can, which is either a result of the dance or the dance is a result of our care for each other. One of the words that someone wrote on the first day of rehearsal that has stayed with me through the entire choreographic process is "there." No matter what, family is there. The family in the dance is there, even if they are inappropriate or rebellious or annoying, and my dancers are there also, no matter what.

If I had more time with this piece I would work on pushing the boundaries of the environment even more. Families can be so strange and chaotic, and I think this family could be more so. I wonder what would happen if the dog evolved into a different animal by the end of dance, like a parrot, or the dad transfigured into a dog. These transfigurations could represent different metaphors. For example, if the dad became the dog it could be a metaphor for the great influence of family. Everyone in the family has such a strong influence on everyone else that they slowly turn into each other.

“Family Photo” could easily be 30-60 minutes long. To fully be able to explore each relationship and personality I could have used more time. I learned that it is much harder to show complete and effective work a short amount of time then in a longer period of time. I started out with about 20-25 minutes of material and every section I cut took away from the development of the characters. Ultimately I am satisfied with the sections I decided to keep in the piece, but it would have been nice to have the luxury of time.

Conclusion: How do I see myself as an artist?

I see myself as a lover of theater and dance. I would primarily call myself a director and choreographer, but also a dancer and actress. I never want to limit myself to one specific title because then I limit my ability as an artist. As an artist I need to be everything combined in order to make the best possible and most informed work. This is why I have elected people from all different fields to inform myself as an artist. There are certain people like playwright Patrick Marber, composer/writer/performer Lin Manuel Miranda, and poet Taylor Mali who have always held my respect and admiration. I am

informed by these people and their work, even if they have not directly influenced pieces that I have made.

Patrick Marber's *Closer*¹ has always been one of my favorite plays. I am interested in the deception of love and the difference between love and lust that the play portrays. It is a messy play. It shows very raw and vulnerable relationships. Life is messy, especially when it comes to love and relationships and this play does not skirt around that fact. There is a satisfaction for me in the discomfort of this play. I am interested in making people feel uncomfortable through art because I believe it makes them think and question their own lives. The simplicity and wittiness of the writing gives the characters very bold and direct natures. They are not afraid to say what they want, even at the expense of someone else or the discomfort of the audience. This boldness is something that I strive for in my own work. Bold character choices in any piece make things about the play or the dance clearer to the audience.

Lin Manuel Miranda started writing *In the Heights*², a musical about Washington Heights, when he was in college. When the musical finally made it to Broadway in 2008 he played the leading role, which I saw when I was 17. I have never seen so much heart and soul in a musical before that. He wrote a musical about his home environment and everyone he grew up with in that community. It was a piece of theater that had so much life and passion embedded into it. Miranda was playing his dream, and I could tell by the

¹ Patrick Marber was born on September 19, 1964. His play *Closer* opened in 1997 in London, directed by Marber himself. He later turned it into the screenplay, which was released as a movie in 2004.

² Lin Miranda was born on January 16, 1980. He started *In the Heights* when he was a sophomore at Wesleyan University. When it came to Broadway in 2008, he won the Tony for best composer and lyricist.

way he took his bow at the end of the show that he was not taking a second of it for granted. I strive to find that kind of passion and drive in all of my work because when I do then I know I will have engaged myself fully. With this level of passion I can create work that satisfies my interest, but also influences and prompts others who view the work to do the same.

My seventh grade English teacher introduced me to Taylor Mali's slam poetry³ and I still watch him perform when I feel like I need inspiration or I need to be emotionally grounded. He is a teacher and a poet and many of his poems relate to his experiences as a teacher. I wanted/still want to be a teacher at some point and his poetry helps me stay motivated to follow that path. He uses his skill as a writer to inform people about the pleasures and power of education. He uses his artistry to make a point to his audiences and he is very convincing and moving. He is able to convey his passion for teaching through his poetry. I hope that I can continue to use my art to make a point about concepts and relationships that have significant meaning to me.

These are just three people that I look up to and admire out of many. Many people and many different kinds of work have influenced me over the years one way or another. I have elected these specific performers and writers to influence my work and act as motivators for my artistic process. All three of the influences listed above, cater to what I stand for as an artist by making work about emotional rather than abstract material. Because they have written a play about love and lust, composed a musical about home, or performed poetry about personal experiences, they have shown that they are informed by their emotions to create art. I am also informed by my emotional responses and interests

³ Taylor Mali was born in New York City in 1965. He is one of the most well-known slam poets in the country.

to create a dance or work on a play. Dealing with emotional and realistic characters enables me to passionately invest in my work. I am not as interested in abstract and absurd relationships. For example, I find more interest in working on a Tennessee Williams'⁴ play than a Beckett⁵ play because of the absurdist style of Beckett compared to the realistic dramatic style of Williams. By defining and looking closely at character I am able to access an emotional piece, which caters to my drive as an artist.

Another reason I resonate with Patrick Marber, Lin Miranda, and Taylor Mali is because they evoke a very strong emotional response from me while I am watching their work. Catharsis is important to me as an audience member and as a creator. Ideally I want people who watch my work to have a strong emotional response to the piece. I chose to work with emotional material in the hopes that the audience gains some cathartic satisfaction from watching my work. I know that this cannot be achieved every time from everyone because every person watching will see something different, but that is what makes the process exciting. I will always continue to create art for an audience and with the help of many influences and audience feedback I will continue to grow and change as a director and choreographer.

After graduation I hope to work in a regional theater. I want to learn everything I can and as much as I can about how a theater company is run. I enjoy being involved in whatever way I can, whether it is assistant directing, choreographing, or stage-managing. I want to continue to help produce theater or dance in whatever way I can and I feel that Bard has given me the appropriate skill sets to do that. I feel that I have taken advantage

⁴ Tennessee Williams lived from March 26, 1911 to February 25 1983. He was one of the most influence classic American playwrights, know for writing in the style of realism.

⁵ Samuel Beckett lived April 13, 1906 to December 22, 1989. His work defined Absurdist Theater in the 20th century.

of many resources available to me in the performing arts building, like working at the scene shop, for the electrics crew, and taking a plethora of dance and theater classes. I also have learned how to clearly communicate with professors and technical crew to ensure a smooth production process.

I want to eventually work as an accomplished director, who also focuses on movement and choreography within my theater work. I want to primarily focus on theater, but also find a way to incorporate my dance background. My skill set in dance will help me work with actors and other directors in new and more innovative ways. To enhance my directing and choreography skills and education, I eventually want to go to graduate school. I want to use my experiences in the arts to help teach others about directing, theater, and dance. I am very interested in teaching while directing and education within the arts. I want to use my work and knowledge to give others the opportunity to explore their interests and passions.