

Abstract

Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) was a dance artist whose rejection of ballet and theatrical spectacle set into motion the beginnings of modern concert dance. Isadora's interest in self-expression and use of the breath set her apart from other choreographers of the time. As a contemporary choreographer surrounded by many modern stimuli, I am drawn to Isadora's internally focused method for creating her dances. Isadora Duncan developed a process for creating movement consisting of breathing into an area of the body known as the solar plexus and waiting for internal inspiration, without force or affected design, to move her. Working and creating in New York City I am impacted by the typical fast-paced lifestyle of a big city, but also bombarded with other external information through technology, social media, and ego-centric pressures. In an attempt to see if a change in how I approach my choreographic process would result in a change in the choreographic product, I experimented with Isadora's internally focused, solar plexus breathing technique as the impetus for creating movement with my company. In the last year, I have embodied Isadora's philosophy, process and repertory and wanted to experiment with her method of manifesting the breath and focusing solely on the internal response to see how her breath centered preparation would inform or even change how I generate movement and create work.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“LESSONS FROM ISADORA: RE-EXAMINING A CENTURY OLD CREATIVE
PROCESS TO CREAT NEW MOVEMENT AND EXPRESSION.”

by

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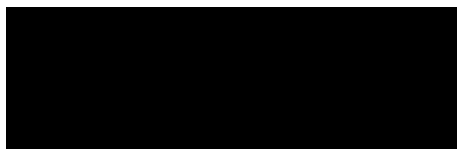
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I. Introduction and Rationale

At the turn of the century, in the United States, dance performance consisted primarily of ballet and vaudeville acts. In the late nineteenth into twentieth century, Western fashions called for women to dress in restrictive clothing such as corsetry, bustles, and layered skirts, which altered their natural shapes. Amidst this cultural repression, Isadora Duncan was a pioneering artist who changed the notion of how dance was created and viewed, and at the same time, conducted her personal life without regard for societal norms.

Embracing personal expression over presentation, Isadora experimented with movement that originated from inside the body at the solar plexus (where Isadora believed the soul resided), and radiated out to the limbs. She performed barefoot, corset-free, and in a diaphanous tunic which revealed her bare legs and arms. As a modern woman and choreographer, creating work some ninety years after Isadora's death, I have found myself attracted to, and inspired by, her repertory and philosophy. Isadora's world was one of repression, and while there are fewer restrictions and far more freedoms for women today, there also exists an increasingly complex amount of stimuli impacting the creative process such as technology and the information and exposure to many different styles of dance techniques. I would contend that the overly stimulated environment in which we live, created by an ever-increasing amount and kind of technology, has inadvertently created its own kind of restriction - a tyranny of freedoms. I hoped to discover a new approach to my creative process, by quieting the outward stimuli and utilizing Isadora's practice of finding the movement internally. In my thesis project I have explored approaching the choreographic process in the same manner as Isadora; each rehearsal period began with a quiet, meditative practice where I brought my focus to

the solar plexus, letting movement generate from the same source as was used by Isadora. Allowing Isadora's choreographic process to inform my own, I investigated how her method of letting the movement be sourced from the breath and body informed or changed my own work. In shifting my choreographic attention to an inward generation of movement (letting my body speak), I hoped to find a more authentic voice, relevant to my contemporary experience, rather than an imitation of the experience of a past generation.

In my own choreographic practice, I always begin with an improvisation based around an idea. This idea can originate from a movement phrase, a piece of music, a literary concept, or other outside stimulus to give my dancers and me a reference point. I approach choreography without music so that the emphasis is on the dance. I work with a focus on movement invention, creating movement that feels new to my body because it is not based in my technical training or vernacular, in an attempt to create work that is truly authentic to my experience. I want to find new ways of moving to expand my body's vocabulary outside of the technical training I have already received. While I am interested in creating dance both as a theatrical and personal experience, I find that this goal of movement invention has guided my process in a more external rather than internal way. In this externally driven fashion, I rely on using the mirror, video recordings, and peer feedback as a way to assess my own process and work. The mirror is a valuable tool for helping me to see what it is I am creating, and outside of the studio I often spend many hours studying the video recordings of my dance to decide how to edit and proceed with the work. This becomes a cerebral habit driven by visual examinations of my work, which is why I am drawn to Isadora's internal process.

Isadora's process heavily involved an authentic internal impetus and response, which I feel is lacking in my own process. I sought to embody this authentic internal impulse to discover what movement occurs as a result. I chose to explore Isadora's process over other internally driven methods such as Authentic Movement or Ohad Naharin's Gaga movement language, because of my professional involvement and prior experience with the Duncan work. I have trained and worked as a dancer and teaching artist with the Isadora Duncan Dance Foundation (IDDF) since July 2016. Under the guidance of artistic director Lori Belilove, I have had the opportunity to experience and perform many of Isadora's pieces. I am also a candidate in basic teaching certification with the foundation, which has allowed me to work and study with Belilove in a creative, educational setting. For this thesis project I temporarily suspended the way I approach my choreographic process in order to find a more internal way of working. Instead of relying on the mirror or video recordings, I focused on internal sensation and authentic internal impulse. I also shifted my focus from movement invention based on external stimuli to Isadora's method of moving from the solar plexus to create movement that is more visceral. Unlike the early nineteenth century when Isadora was creating her work, there are few restrictions in 2018 for women choreographers. In a world of seemingly limitless possibilities, I explored the creation of choreography from the breath emanating in the solar plexus; to the degree possible, I removed outward stimuli, such as the mirror, externally derived ideas, and an over dependence on the videotaped image, to determine value.

II. Research

To understand Isadora's creative process, I investigated written resources and practiced Duncan's repertory and technique. In addition to my professional work with the IDDF, I have spent the past four semesters at Montclair State University expanding my research in the various aspects of the Duncan style and method by focusing all of my independent study courses around this theme. In the first semester, I focused on Isadora's philosophy via an educational and pedagogical framework; in the second semester, I began to explore the technique and musicality through a choreographic lens; this past summer led me back to Isadora's meditation on the solar plexus as the initiation for movement; and in the fall, I began creating this dance. I have learned much in these past semesters about Isadora's technique, repertory, and process, and I felt prepared to experiment with her process to create a contemporary work of my own.

Isadora Duncan, known as the 'mother' of modern dance, was born in San Francisco in 1877. Unsatisfied with the concert dance forms of the time, she spent her life in pursuit and development of a new form of dance until her death in 1927. Though she established several schools throughout her lifetime, none are still in existence and the teaching of her technique has been passed down, teacher to student, through generations of Duncan practitioners. This lack of formal establishment of a school or curriculum has impacted the availability of her work and repertory. Prior to the start of my two-year research into the Duncan technique, I only knew about Isadora in the context of a dance history lesson. By immersing myself physically in her technique, examining her body of choreography, and reading several books that explore and detail her life and dance philosophy, I have experienced both the simplicity of her vocabulary and the complexity

of the thematic content of her work, all of which were derived from the breath moving in and out of the solar plexus.

Isadora was interested in discovering a type of dance more natural and organic than ballet and theatrical dancing. She believed that dance should be an expression of the moving 'soul'. Unlike the ballet of her time, Isadora was interested in expression that emanated from inside the body, from the area she identified as the solar plexus. The solar plexus, known medically today as the celiac ganglia, is where Isadora felt the power of the 'soul' resided. The celiac ganglia is a grouping of nerves associated with the autonomic nervous system located below the sternum, between the halves of the ribcage (Fikes). Isadora believed that there should be awareness and breath in this area of the body first, followed by movement sequencing from the solar plexus into the limbs. In her autobiography, *My Life*, Isadora said:

I spent long days and nights in the studio seeking that dance which might be the divine expression of the human spirit through the medium of the body's movement. For hours I would stand quite still, my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversities of movements are born, the mirror of vision for the creation of the dance — it was from this discovery that was born the theory on which I founded my school When I had learned to concentrate all my force in this one center, I found that thereafter when I listened to music, the rays and vibrations of the music streamed to this one fount of light within me, where they reflected themselves in Spiritual Vision, not the mirror of the brain but of the soul. (*My Life* 61)

In this passage, Isadora locates a physical landmark from which her movement stemmed, notes the long meditation she experienced before discovering her movement, and recognizes there existed a spiritual quality about the process while she simultaneously rejects a cognitive one.

In another example, Isadora described the making of a dance as mimicking an emotional ‘motor’. She claimed that emotion and action do not spring up in the body immediately; that they build slowly and with intensity. Isadora stated that the dancer, “starts with one slow movement and mounts from that gradually, following the rising curve of his inspiration, up to those gestures that exteriorize his fullness of feeling, spreading ever wider the impulse that has swayed him, fixing it in another expression” (*Art of 99*). In one account, Isadora describes standing before the Parthenon wanting to make a dance but feeling as if her ‘soul was scattered’ and stood waiting to be called by her ‘inner voice’. She continues:

For many days no movement came to me. And then one day came the thought: These columns which seem so straight and still are not real straight, each one is curving gently from the base to the height...And as I thought this my arms rose slowly toward the Temple and I leaned forward – and then I knew I had found my dance, and it was a Prayer. (*Art of 65*)

With openness, focus, and concentration, Isadora was inspired by her surroundings to create a dance. To Isadora, this creative process and its product were spiritual acts.

Using a source of inspiration to guide her mediation was a regular exercise for Isadora. Irma Duncan, an Isadorable and pupil of Duncan, said of Isadora’s process:

Her creative procedure followed the natural sequence of closely studying the piece of music involved, which she usually did lying relaxed on a couch with eyes closed while it was being played repeatedly by her pianist, this in the quietude of her studio, with never a third person present even the musician had to sit with his back to her. She waited for inspiration to take over. Only after the idea of the dance creation and [illegible] the sequence of movements to illustrate it had formed themselves in her mind, did she venture to try them out on a physical level. (Daly 142)

In a world of ballet and vaudeville, Isadora Duncan’s dances spoke with a language all humans know. By using meaningful gestures such as those used in cradling a child,

waving a flag, and pedestrian movement such as skipping and running, Isadora created dances that facilitated the conveyance of meaning, rather than creating innovative vocabulary for its own sake. Isadora wrote, “art which is not religious is not art, it is mere merchandise” (*Art of 62*). Isadora believed dance had a spiritual quality. To prevent the creation of “merchandise,” Isadora began her process with an internal meditation, used a universal language drawn from human experience, chose simplicity of costume and set rather than theatrical gimmick, and aimed for integrity over spectacle.

III. Methodology

To begin my physical exploration of this process, I divided my rehearsal time into three categories spread out over three days. The first category focused on solo work; the second focused on small groups (duet and trio); and the third focused on the full company of six dancers. I chose to use six women in this work because Isadora worked with six female dancers in her own company, the Isadorables. Primarily, I wanted to work with a group of dancers in order to gain a broader perspective on how this process would unfold in the studio. I knew that I wanted to study my own personal response to the method, but I was curious to see how, and if, this quiet, reflective process could be negotiated amongst a larger group. Each rehearsal period rehearsed in two-hour increments at the Gibney Studios in Manhattan, New York. While my Isadora research began more than a year before, the choreographic process began in September 2017 working towards an April 7th, 2018 concert to take place at the Martha Graham Center.

I spent the first few months of my research, and the beginning of my choreographic exploration, on solo and small group rehearsals, while the full company rehearsals did not begin until much later in my process. From September 2017 to

February 2018, I only worked in these divided settings, and I introduced full cast rehearsals in late January 2018. I chose to work this way because I recognized the importance of solo time in the studio, particularly to allow room for meditative, reflective study early on in this new process. I chose to work in small groups (a duet and a trio) to also support and ground this quiet, explorative tone and because I was particularly interested in how this method would work in a collaborative setting. In the early stages of trying on this new process, I predicted that six dancers in a room would be overwhelming and unnecessary without fully understanding the direction of the process or piece. While smaller groups of solos, trios, and duets were relevant to this process, as they mimic a large portion of Isadora Duncan's actual repertory, I wanted to work in this way to study and collaborate without inviting too much stimuli into the studio. I also wanted to give the dancers time to relax into this new process.

In my solo rehearsals, I always began with a meditative exercise, which focused on breathing from the solar plexus, and waited for an internal impulse to move me. However, during these rehearsals I implemented a few variables. I would alternate the position in which I began this 'listening' process. I began in a standing position with my hands placed on my chest, echoing Isadora's initial discovery of her movement source. However, I also experimented with different levels and positions. I found that my movement and energy level were restricted if I began in a seated or low-level position. If I began standing or kneeling, I found my movement to be more uninhibited and I found more options in terms of level and qualitative changes.

Another variable in my practice was the in the use of music. I was surprised early on in this process to discover the link between my meditation, my breathing, and the

music, resulting in an interesting blend of internal and external realizations. Isadora Duncan was greatly inspired by music; through my readings and performance work with the IDDF, this has been seen time and again. For Isadora, the music directly related to her choreographic choices. Conversely, I do not consider myself a very musically dependent choreographer, and I prefer discovering the movement before choosing music. Through my meditation and improvisation exercise, I found myself initially moving in sync with the music. As if the music was the dominant force in the room, it occurred to me that the music was overpowering the drive from within.

At first I was only slightly aware of this; Isadora obviously let the music inform her movement, but this was a conscious choice on her part, as opposed to an incidental one for me. To ensure that the breath was creating my movement choices, I worked with no music at all, or I frequently changed the music. I was curious to see how different types of music, or the complete absence thereof, affected my own choices. It became evident that the breath and internal impulse had enough drive to carry and develop movement without music. Furthermore, if the improvisations were given enough time to develop and grow, they would begin to take me deeper into my own rhythms, even with music playing in the background. When the breathing and improvisation period was sufficiently extensive, I was able to override the outward influence of the music and allow for the generation of a more authentic, breath-initiated movement vocabulary. This was all dependent on my mental state, however. If I was not completely committed to my exercise, I found myself relying on the music for guidance.

In my duet and trio rehearsals, I had the interesting perspective of being an outsider to the process. In the beginning, I explained the process to my dancers and

guided them through the improvisation sessions. When I encouraged the dancers to close their eyes and focus only on their own breath and resulting bodily responses, I observed the similarities and differences in all of their approaches. Shared traits, in the early rehearsal periods, included slow, fluid, even, and lightly-bound qualities. I did notice that when the dancers were aware of one another and the room, they often fell into sync with each other and the music. Allowing the dancers to build their improvisations over longer periods of time, or by varying the tone and type of music, they were able to find different tempos, textures, and approaches in their movements.

In order to create a shared movement language created by this solar plexus breathing, and to expand this improvisation experiment into a dance work, I began manipulating how I approached this process in the small groups. Instead of each dancer working individually, I employed a series of variations to help the dancers create as a group. In one experiment, when a new mover entered the dance space, the second and third dancer rested their hands on the first dancer's solar plexus to connect to their collective internal impulse. I also experimented with having the dancers project the energy of their own solar plexus and breath to different locations in the room, pass energy to one another, and constantly switch roles of leader and follower.

Eventually, the small groups and the solos revealed trending themes. During this solo work, I paid attention to what movements or motifs were naturally occurring, regardless of variables. I began to repeat these movements as a basis for finding vocabulary and structure for the choreography. After a session of solo practice, I would journal about what I noticed was working and how I felt during the process. With the small groups, I had the advantage of being on the outside of the practice and, as an

observer and manipulator, I was able to guide the movements and breathing to structure lightly-set phrases. In this way, I had established shared movement phrases and a unifying theme. I brought these to the full cast rehearsals and begin arranging the dance.

After months of experimenting and playing with Isadora's process in a variety of ways, the intent of the project's internal impulse became realized through the breath. Isadora herself developed her process over forty years, and it was demonstrated in numerous works which all used her technique and a similar movement vocabulary. For this shortened experiment, I decided to focus the performance around the development of the breath, so that the breath became both the process and the subject of the product. I structured my dance into four sections. I referred to these as: The Awakening; The Breath in Space; Variation; and, Full Voice.

In the first section of the dance (The Awakening), I opened with a group of dancers, simply breathing, in a remote upstage location. This first breath was unadorned and did not cause locomotion, but was intended to be simply an acknowledgement of the natural occurrence of breath. As this section developed, the breath began to change and deepen. First, this caused a natural movement of the chest and solar plexus. Gradually, this built to fuller upper body movement and gesture. The soloists were the first to perform these larger movements, which took them from the group to a location slightly downstage. The responding group of dancers, who were also slowly traveling downstage, "inhaled" the soloist back into their collective and, in doing so, copied the soloist's change in breath. The group's movement and breath became larger each time the soloist returned. The third soloist's return initiated a change in space for the group to a downstage position, which was a stronger, more prominent stage location.

In the second section (The Breath in Space), I played with the physical, expulsive push of the breath in two ways: (1) the breath traveling the dancer through the space and (2) the individual's breath moving another dancer through space. For this section, I used Otar Taktakishvili's *Sonata for Flute and Piano* recorded by Marina Piccinini. As the breath was developing into full-bodied movement, I felt that an accompanying sound score, which was created by vibration of the air, was appropriate. This section was crafted in harmony with the music, so that the breath of the dancers and sound of the flutist were equally visualized onstage. In this section, I used the breath to create locomotive movement. In the last section, the breath had begun initiating movement in the dancers' upper bodies. At first, I used this development to shift the dancers' weight off balance, causing a traveling, fall and recovery of the body to reclaim balance. The soloists from the initial group, who led the expansion of breath, used this breath-initiated fall and recovery to travel to opposite ends of the stage. As this section progressed, the breath became fully embodied so that the lower extremities were informed by the breath, not just the torso and upper body. The focus of this section was a duet, which consisted of listening and responding to the other's breath impulse, as if in conversation. Upstage, the rest of the cast subtly echoed this idea.

In the third section of the work (Variation), the duet partners were "inhaled" again into the larger group. The intent of this section was to explore how the movement changed when the breath evolved from the calm, even pattern of breathing, into more forceful, irregular breathing. The breath in this section included gasping, stopping the breath in the throat, making vowel and guttural sounds, and a variety of other ways of affecting a normal inhalation/exhalation process. In response to this affected breathing,

the movement became less precise and gained speed and intensity. I discovered that a change in the evenness of the breathing could change the movement and a change in the movement could change the breath. So a movement phrase that had been learned by the group using an even, calm breath pattern became less exact and more individual when the uneven and irregular breathing was introduced. In this third section, each dancer became caught up in the chaos of this more irregular breathing. Because I am the first dancer to move from the group at the onset of the dance, I led the group into these uneven, irregular, expulsive movement ideas through a solo. My solo weaved around the other dancers on stage, and my proximity to their bodies activated their own irregular breathing. The third section ended with everyone moving simultaneously, with the even and uneven breathing, keeping the movement from becoming pure unison.

In the fourth and final section of the piece (Full Voice), the breath was fully embodied by becoming full-voiced. In this section, the dancers revisited movement motifs, previously introduced, while beginning to find their actual voices. Using a piece of text by Sylvia Plath, the dancers first spoke in broken whispers. This grew into repeated vowel sounds (chosen because vowel sounds pass through the vocal tract unobstructed), brief phases or syllables, and then, eventually, graduated into full and clear speaking. The full piece of text from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* reads, "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am. I am. I am" (Plath 256). I chose this piece as I was reminded that it occurs during a pivotal point in the novel for the main character's mindset when confronting death. The character recognizes that the breath and the heartbeat confirm her existence. The text speaks to the power of breath, movement,

and pulse of our organs as a symbol and sign of fully living. The dance concluded with the voice fading back into simple breath as the bodies quieted.

IV. Results

The research culminated in a performance on April 7th, 2018 at the Martha Graham Dance Center. I titled the concert *Spiritus*, which in Latin has a host of meanings including breath, the spirit, life, and the individual. I costumed the dancers in one-piece jumpers with simple, fitted upper bodies and flowing shin-length pant legs in muted, earth-tone colors. The lighting design featured cool colors of blues and purples. I chose costumes with simple, soft lines and muted, cool colors to promote a calm feeling. I did not want the color or design to distract from the breath or overly embellish the movement.

Comparing my breath-inspired dance to Isadora's aesthetic and values produced results that were both expected and unexpected. Isadora's movements resulted in light, sustained, upwardly accented movement. As I have experienced as a dancer in the IDDF, her dances often make use of light weight, sustained time, repetitive motifs, and were greatly informed by the music. Such an example is her solo dance *Narcissus* danced to Frederic Chopin's *Waltz in C Sharp minor*, Op. 64, No. 2. She begins on her toes, solar plexus lifting towards the sky, and arms lightly swaying in the air. The dancer's body then dips down towards the earth, shifting weight from one side to the other in two small jumps, but remains light in the body. *Narcissus* displays her light, quick-moving steps but the main focus is always on her upper body's emphasis on the solar plexus and breath

that propels her across the stage. The dance closely follows the score of the musical composition, and repeats a movement section as the music repeats.



Figure 1. Isadora Duncan displays a signature movement that reflects light, sustained, and upwardly accented movement

In my own interpretation of her process, I chose to not always follow the tempo of music, but instead primarily worked without music so as not to distract myself from the internal impulse and breath. When observing the even breathing patterns, the quality of my

movement was initially soft and lightly bound. However, when playing with the uneven breathing, the product was more sharp, erratic, more strongly bound and more difficult to control. The movement also had a tendency to be downwardly directed. The uneven and unpredictable breathing set up an unpredictability in the body in regards to direction and how my body would stabilize weight placement.



Figure 2. Performance still of me displaying strong, sudden, direct and downwardly focused movement



Figure 3. Uneven movement in response to uneven breath

Isadora's movement philosophy, that of searching for freedom from constrictive cultural norms and dance forms, strongly resonated with me in preparing for performance. I, as a contemporary choreographer, have almost none of cultural restrictions with which Isadora was confronted. However, my search for freedom in the pared down, unembellished, internally driven movement, made the preparation for public performance more difficult. Before this experiment, I had not realized the extent of the pressures I experienced in making a dance 'stage ready'. Finding the freedom and the naturalness in movement meant focusing on the process of the natural evolution of breath. Engaging honestly with this process meant not giving in to external pressures or aesthetics. This included: not forcing a narrative or story; not incorporating elaborate costuming or use of props; and, not leaning on or other audience-pleasing tactics. While this time in which we currently live has almost no restrictions on how an artist can work, the restrictions are instead supplanted by the artist's own ego and the barrage of

information coming at oneself in the exponentially increasing use of social media and other technological systems. What I reluctantly discovered was that in the preparation for presentation, the underlying restrictions of peer consideration, audience approval, pride and reputation all influenced how and what I prepared for the stage. This process challenged me to set aside my own ego that wanted to please and impress, and instead stay true to the movement created by my internal response to my breath.

Overall, engaging with this process has been very satisfying. Learning to have the patience to wait for internal sensation, and not forcing out movement, gave purpose and structure to the start of every rehearsal. Beginning a new dance can often feel daunting. With so many external distractions normally influencing my creative environment, it had become my habit to “muscle through” creative blockage. Through this process, I learned to listen to the body and wait for the movement that naturally comes, if allowed. This has provided me with tools to handle the creative blocks in a more honest, gentle, and efficient way.

That is not to say that using this process made the creation of the piece any easier. In fact, in many respects, as the process continued, it forced me into avenues of emotional risk and discomfort. It was through the live, public performance, and in the latter half of the rehearsal process, that I discovered how vulnerable and uncomfortable this process made me feel. To invite an audience to witness such a private and intimate practice was unnerving. During rehearsals I became very uncomfortable with my solo in the third section. Vocalizing and allowing myself to follow my impulse within the phrase made me feel exposed and vulnerable. I could not predict how my breath would manifest in sound or movement, and this created some tension for me in rehearsal and especially when I had

an audience. I wanted to cut my solo from the piece; however, I chose to go against these uncomfortable feelings and left the solo intact. Likewise, my dancers were also initially uncomfortable with performing the audible breath and text. In order to avoid having to make the breath sounds or speak the text we tried a number of approaches. We tried having pre-recorded text and having the text read live from the wings. It seemed most authentic, however, when the dancers pushed past their insecurities and made the audible breath sounds and vocalizing as part of the performance.

Performing this piece live and in front of an audience, and transitioning the work from an intimate studio setting to a larger venue, felt slightly counterintuitive to the process. Contrary to the private and internal method of the process, the culmination of the work was a very public, exposed event. I think, however, that this performance was crucial to the intent of the work. Being a live witness to the event, the audience member was able to hear the breath and see its influence on the movement in real time. If this work had been shared via a recording, live stream, or other method, I do not feel the witness would have been able to authentically engage with the dance. As a large focus of this research was about stripping the process of external stimuli, it would have been ineffective to have a barrier (technological or otherwise) between the observer and the dancer.

Though the dance was choreographically structured, because the breath was the initiator for the movement, the dance was never performed the same way twice. An exact replication of the performance would be impossible, as elements of the timing and nuances of the movement were directly influenced by the breath in the moment. My dancers and I actively practiced waiting for internal impetus of the breath, which caused

variations throughout the dance. In this twenty-minute work there was only one piece of recorded music, lasting about four minutes. With the only gauge on time being internal sensation, there was no exact measurement of time for each section. An element of variation also occurred in the movement itself. While phrases were set and shared, even resulting in some unison moments, I structured the work so that the breath had complete influence over the movement. This meant that even though phrasing was shared, the dancers were encouraged to follow their own internal impulse in the moment. This influence led to variations in how the movement was accomplished and accented.

V. Discussion

As I addressed earlier, the process and performance were, at times, uncomfortable for the dancers. Specifically, the exaggeration of the breath and the vocalization was troublesome for them. Dance is often a rather quiet, non-verbal art, and in the many hours of movement and technical training for the body, the breath and voice are not necessarily addressed. Through this process, I noticed that some of the dancers, myself included, were unsure of how to breathe and how to effectively use the breath as both an initiator of movement vocabulary and as an audible part of the choreographic sound score. I took one rehearsal to invite an actor/singer into the process to briefly discuss with the dancers how to more efficiently use breath. While this was not comparable to the breath training an actor or singer receives in a formal conservatory setting, the coaching and instruction helped us to feel more comfortable and effective in our task.

I also found that communal breathing before performing was very helpful in organizing our own bodies and uniting the group. Before a run of the dance, we would gather together and have a quiet five-minute meditation. This also helped the dancers to

take their time on stage with their breathing, and not force the breath or rush through the motions simply because they felt uncomfortable. Rather, it helped the dancers to allow and trust the breath and its resulting movement as opposed to controlling it.

Through this process my relationship to the breath grew in stages: the waiting for the breath; allowing it to present itself in an unforced manner; and then succumbing to it. As stated, both in rehearsal and performance, I did not restrict myself in maintaining a strict adherence to the choreography, but rather improvised somewhat with whatever was naturally occurring. I found some of this freedom more readily as the creator and choreographer. In this role of choreographer and improviser, I not only understood the process the more fully, but I granted myself the license to deviate from the structure.

I found it easier to harness the breath for movement invention and the creation of vocabulary after giving myself permission to audibly use the breath and to disrupt its evenness. As previously mentioned, in the beginning of this process the gentle breathing produced predictable, slow, gentle, sustained, even movements. In these early and very quiet, still moments, it felt more effortful to block out the external stimuli. I was aware that the movement outcomes in the early rehearsals had a sense of generality with respect to the vocabulary that was created. However, in the sections with more aggressive and irregular breathing patterns, I felt that the possibilities for movement (like the breath) were more dynamic and unexpected. This afforded the opportunity for more dynamic range, choice, and specificity in the movement vocabulary that was produced.

Going forward with this project, I want to initially spend more time in the studio exploring these ideas without the looming deadline of a concert. I have more to learn through this process, and this experiment was only the beginning step. I would like to

challenge myself to stay longer with the slow, quiet breathing. The irregular breathing of the third and fourth sections and the resulting movements were probably more in line with the styles of work I have previously created. Without having to over think and plan, contrasts of speed, levels, and qualities were created naturally in the movement. To remain longer in these quiet moments (without the extra anxiety associated with the thesis) could deepen my engagement and productivity with this process. The pressure of a public performance and the accompanying thesis requirements caused the solar plexus breathing process to feel slightly forced, especially as we neared the performance. I want to spend more time working privately in the studio, without the external pressure of a show, to allow this investigation to deepen.

VI. Conclusion

While social, political, and cultural restrictions do not provide limitations to my work as a modern choreographer as they did to Isadora Duncan, I discovered that the ‘noise’ of life in New York City in 2018, from social media, exposure to multitudes of techniques, and ego-driven constraints, have produced in me its own kind of creative restriction. Stepping away from externally driven factors allowed for a return to the quiet and constant breath, which was both a satisfying and challenging process. The quiet moments of self-reflection were difficult to maintain due to the pressures of an upcoming performance and presentation. Diving into the process, letting it take root inside the body, required time, patience, courage, and concentration. I found that the longer I stayed inside of a single meditation and improvisation, the more I let go of the ego and succumbed to the process. Through this work I began to rediscover some truths I had already known about my body. I re-learned that my body wants to move sharply and angularly, but sending breath and

awareness to these moving parts instantly changes the texture by adding qualities of fluidity and roundness, giving me conscious access to more qualitative choices.

Reflecting back on my body of choreographic work prior to this project, my main concern was with movement invention. I relied on external influences, such as the mirror and information about other choreographers' dance works, to actively design movement to satisfy my ego and deal with peer pressure to create 'unique' movement. I was very externally focused when I set out to create. While this new process is still developing and inconclusive, I am beginning to see the difference in movement innovation when working from the internal impulse of the breath. My previous choreographic work has been very gestural, and even my own dancing has the habit of becoming all about the limbs. In returning to this very basic element of human life, the breath, I have started to see signs that continuing on this research will bring connectedness throughout the body and between the torso and the extremities. In addition, while I previously focused on the outward appearance of movement, I am now finding new sensation from focusing on the feeling of the movement. Working in this internal, breath-initiated way, I felt more intuitive and in the moment, rather than constantly thinking ahead to the next movement. Isadora's process valued the internal, authentic response to pave the way for a less restricted artist. I have found that, previously unbeknownst to me, I had been restricted in my own creative process. The external influence of peers, colleagues, and teachers guided a part of my creative process. I stifled myself with expectations and reputation before even getting into the studio. Isadora's abandon and disregard for critics and societal standards was in line with her process and art making. Through this experiment I was forced to confront feelings of discomfort and vulnerability to find a new freedom in

dance making. Engaging more with the breath and internal sensation, both as a way to prepare for art making as well as a method for the creation of movement ideas and vocabulary, has provided me the opportunity to begin to shed these notions of ego and discover more uninhibited movement. In this process of “breathing with Isadora,” I feel she has whispered to me to trust the breath and the connection it forged with my creative internal self. It has given me the confidence to be more authentic in my movement creation and to explore breath-initiated movement, without undue reliance on, or fear of, the external influences and voices to which artists today are constantly exposed.

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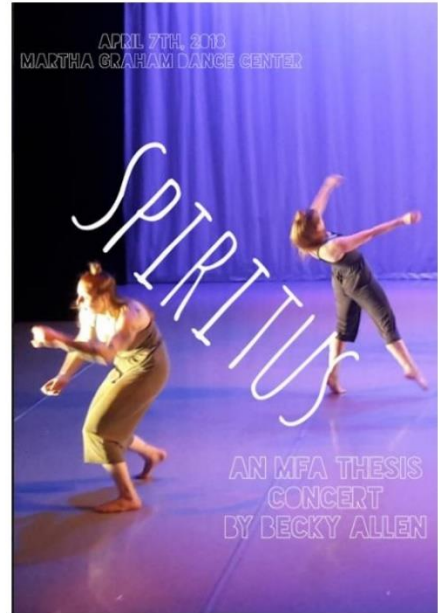
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VIII. Performance Documentation

- A. Link to performance recording: <https://youtu.be/TT-9LpOVIJk>
- B. Program Materials

Becky would like to thank,

Lori Katterhenry, Maxine Steinman, Diann Sichel, all the faculty at Montclair University, Lori Belilove, Aaron Parker Fouhey, and the Cowgirl Seahorse Restaurant



Program Cover and Back Page

Spiritus

A Premiere work in partial fulfillment of an MFA in Dance at Montclair University

Choreographed by Becky Allen

Performed by Amanda Adamczyk, Becky Allen, Brittney Bembry, Jill Serrano Michalsky, Mackenzie Tyler, and Caroline Yamada

Music by Otar Taktakishvili, Sonata for Flute and Piano in C Major/ Aria: Moderato con moto performed by Marina Piccinini, Eva Kupiec

Text by Sylvia Plath

Becky Allen is the Artistic Director and founder of LatticeWorks Dance Collective. From Hamilton, New Jersey, Becky received her BFA in Dance and a minor in Religious Studies from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. In 2016, Becky graduated with a Masters in Dance Education from Hunter College on a full scholarship from the Arnhold Foundation. The concert tonight is in partial fulfillment to receive her MFA in Dance from Montclair University.

Becky is a company member with Lori Belilove and the Isadora Duncan Dance Foundation, as well as a candidate for Duncan Technique Certification. She has performed works by choreographers Rebecca Bliss, Doug Elkins, Jeff Friedman, Randy James, Julia Ritter, Raegan Wood, and Merce Cunningham. Becky has also been a member and done various projects with companies Derling Dance Arts and SwiShWiSh Dance.

Since founding LatticeWorks the company has produced and presented many new works, including choreographing an adaption of Euripides' The Bacchae under director Robert Ribar and appearing in both the print work and national commercial for the Nikon Cool Pix A ad campaign by Doug Muenz. Becky is the recent recipient of the Lounsbury Award and has been presented by Greenspace, MachineH Dance, Sans Limites Dance, at 100 Grand, Ailey Citigroup, BAX, The Drilling Company, The Hatch Presenting Series, and The Secret Theater.

www.latticeworksdance.com

Jill Serrano Michalsky is the Artistic Associate and a founding member of LatticeWorks Dance Collective. She is a graduate of Slippery Rock University with a Bachelor of Arts in Dance and Minor in Communications. There, she studied with Ursula Payne, Camille Brown, Jennifer Keller, and John Dayger. She has performed in works by Lar Lubovitch, Princess M'Hoon Cooper, Tanla Isaac, and Camille Brown. She is currently the Studio Coordinator/Development Assistant for Battery Dance and is a founding member as well as Dancer for Abundance Dance Company.

Amanda Adamczyk started her Latticeworks career as a guest artist, and after refusing to stop attending rehearsals, is now a happy full-time company member. Before LWDC, Amanda attended James Madison University in Virginia and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Dance and Theater. During her time at JMU, she was thrilled to be selected to perform and tour with the Virginia Repertory Company. Since moving back north, Amanda continued to study dance under many marvelous dancers and perform around NY, NJ, and VA whilst receiving certifications to teach Integral Yoga, Kidding Around Yoga, and kickboxing. She continues to create dance pieces, to punch things, to play with puppies, and to wave "hello" to her company members at every chance she gets

Brittney Bembry, a native of Newark, New Jersey, received her BFA in Dance at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. Since graduating, Brittney has been diversifying her dance palette by working with a wide array of choreographers. She has studied as an Apprentice with Jennifer Muller/The Works for four years, and performed with the Droye/Marinaro Dance Company. She has worked with several choreographers such as Jennifer Muller, Randy James, Carolyn Dorfman, Cleo Mack, Joshua Bisset, Laura Quattrocchi, and Rebecca Allen.

Mackenzie Tyler hails from Connecticut and has been performing for almost 20 years. She began competitively dancing at age 9 and went on to receive her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance in 2011 from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. She has performed with Doug Elkins, Danielle Agami, Banu Ogan, and Amanda Selwyn Dance Theater. She has been a member of LatticeWorks Dance Collective since November 2013

Caroline Yamada grew up in Portland, Oregon, and started her dance training at the School of Oregon Ballet Theatre. She also studied at The Portland Ballet and graduated from a performing arts high school. Upon graduating high school she furthered her training at The Alley School in the Certificate program and had the opportunity to work with and perform works by Matthew Rushing, Renee Robinson, Sylvia Waters, Ellenore Scott, Holly Wright, and many more. Caroline became an apprentice of Lori Belilove's Isadora Duncan Dance Company in July 2016 and first performed alongside the Company at the Alice Austen House in August 2016

Inside Program

C. Performance Stills



Ending Scene



The First Dancer Leaves Clump Section 2



Still of Duet in Section 2