

Abstract

Relative to comedy, gesture engenders a universal language by which audiences experience multiple facets of humor. Holding fast to the desire to share joy and lightness through dance, creating original work of a humorous nature, be it whimsical, farcical, clown like, or tongue-in-cheek, is at the core of my current artistic enterprise- setting my work apart from many of the mainstream dances being made today. I have investigated thoroughly the connections between gesture and humor: i.e., What is it about everyday movements that make us laugh? What are the standards we use to gauge the effectiveness of comedic movement? When do we “cross the line” from funny to grotesque to contemptible?

Throughout my MFA studies at Montclair State University, my previous expertise in dance theatre has become further informed and influenced by these investigations into humor. I am committed to continued creative development within the dance theatre genre, specifically the expressive nature of the form and its indelible link to the relationship between movement and meaning. These are the informing principals of my research. In my original silent film, *Before Talkies*, it is the communicative power of gesture that gives a voice to our heroine Lillian, her sidekick Jingles, the unlucky-in-love Oliver, and the no-name villain. In crafting four distinctive styles and impetuses for movement, I have a made a unique physical portrait for each of the archetypal individuals.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Before Talkies: The Voice of Gesture

by

Lauren Baine Ohmer

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

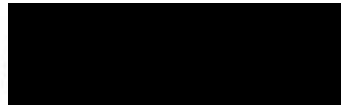
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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	7
Research	8
Methodology	13
Scene I: Lillian's Homecoming	14
Scene II: The Not-So-Handy Man	16
Scene III: The Secret Life of Cats <i>or</i> Jingles Takes the Stage	18
Scene IV: The Chocolate Tango	21
Scene V: The Intruder, The Chase, The End	23
Results and Implications for the Future	27
Bibliography	32
Presentation Materials	34

Introduction

During my low-residency Dance MFA course of study at Montclair State University, the opportunity to explore new avenues of interest relative to dance and dance making has piqued my curiosity in the realms of humor, film, and dance theatre, and the concept of *gesture* has appeared and reappeared as a common thread.

Gesture engenders a universal language through which audiences experience multiple facets of humor. Coming to terms with the desire to share joy and lightness through my work, I have recognized that the number of choreographers incorporating comedy is far overshadowed by those who do not. Creating original work of a humorous nature -- be it whimsical, farcical, clown like, or tongue-in-cheek -- is at the core of my current artistic enterprise, and sets my work apart from many of the mainstream dances being made today. I have investigated thoroughly the connections between gesture and humor: i.e., What is it about everyday movements that make us laugh? What are the standards we use to gauge the effectiveness of comedic movement? When do we “cross the line” from funny to grotesque to contemptible? How do we manipulate our gestures to toggle between these values?

With a newly-kindled interest in dance on camera, I have been called back to my love of silent film again, particularly in the physically comedic approaches of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Examining my intrigue with silent film, I was struck by the range of gestures creating meaning in communication -- from subtle, nearly imperceptible facial expressions, to over-exaggerated and unrealistic slapstick. Watching these films, I am intrigued by how gesture can bring to life an exquisitely crafted and precisely balanced world of real and make-believe. Through the magic of the camera, the

audience's eye is guided to each flutter of eyelash, clench of fist, and jarring cut from one scene to the next. In a manner unique to film, gesture can be manipulated in ways impossible to reproduce in live performance on stage.

At this pivotal point in my career, I am developing and expanding my artistic voice as an individual by exploring choreographic possibilities in the genre of dance theatre. Having performed with and been intimately involved in the creative process of New York City based dance theatre company, Anabella Lenzu/DanceDrama, for the past ten years, I now want to see how the knowledge and experience I have acquired can serve as a springboard into constructing my own body of work.

Throughout my MFA studies, my previous expertise in dance theatre has become further informed and influenced by investigations into humor and film. I am committed to continue working in this dance theatre genre; therefore, the expressive nature of dance theatre and its indelible link to the relationship between movement and meaning constitute the informing principals of my research. In my silent film, *Before Talkies*, it is the communicative power of gesture that gives a voice to our heroine, Lillian, her sidekick, Jingles, the unlucky in love Oliver, and the no-name villain.

Research & Influences

My subject, humor in dance, was arrived upon fortuitously during the creation of a solo during the first semester's Creative Practices course taught by Claire Porter here at Montclair State University in June of 2016. From the onset, my intention was never to choreograph a comedic dance; however, as the piece took shape, three essential characters materialized: the *Hero*, the *Villain*, and the *Damsel*. A complete departure

from any of my previous choreographic work, it was through improvisational exercises in Porter's class where I found myself embodying these archetypes in static poses and postures. My solo evolved into a one-woman-show in the tradition of silent film. Performed live for faculty and cohort, with no costumes, lights, or props, I danced the role of each character, enacting an attempted abduction, a fight scene, and a romantic kiss after the Hero "saved the day." The solo was well-received, and after enjoying this first taste in comedy along with the encouragement of faculty members and my community of peers, I decided to continue.

During the 2017 spring semester, Professor Maxine Steinman conducted the Special Projects course where the theme was to engage in a "true collaboration" with any type of artist outside of the field of dance. Collaborating with west-coast artist and filmmaker, Fhay Arceo, in April of 2017 I created a four minute film based on the original solo from Claire Porter's class. This time I portrayed each character in full costume and the footage was edited so that the characters appeared to have real-time interactions with each other. With Adrienne Gonzales assisting, the interior scenes were shot on location in a Coney Island apartment, and Fhay and I captured the exterior shots in Astoria, Queens. By engaging in this new medium, I was able to experiment with the archetypes' interaction with their environment (through the addition of a set and props) and utilize the camera as a tool to expose and amplify their thoughts and disposition (by way of camera angles and close up shots.) Using the film adaptation as a starting point, the final thesis evolved through a deepening of character development.

Over the two years I was completing required coursework for the MFA Dance program at MSU, I chose to broaden my scope of study beyond the classroom and dance

studio through traditional theatrical training with Movement Theater Studio. MTS is a NYC-based company under the direction of Richard Crawford, dedicated to training performers through the approach and pedagogical methods of the French actor and theater director, Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999), revered as one of the most influential theorists and teachers of what is now known as physical theater (Lecoq). Crawford attended the Lecoq School's rigorous two-year program in Paris and studied with Jacques Lecoq, himself.

In Crawford's March 2017 workshop that I took, *Lecoq 101*, there was a rigorous exercise we practiced to define what Lecoq described as "levels of tension." This study examined the spectrum through which the performer can increase and decrease the rigidity held within her body. Starting with level 1, there was so little energy put forth by my muscles that my body was in a perpetual state of melting. Lying on the floor in a structureless mass, I could do little more than roll from my side to my back and slowly wiggle my fingers. I felt like a slug. Lazy. Or ill. An invalid. As the physical tension built with each subsequent level, I arrived to level ten with every voluntary muscle in my body engaged. My joints stiffened, my jaw clenched, and my head felt as if it were encapsulated by a thick, dense covering of what was porous, pliable soft tissue minutes earlier. I started to sweat. My blood started to simmer and then boil. I felt angry. Violent.

The exercise also served as an "equalizing tool" between movement and emotion, by which I was able to ensure my physical output matched the intensity and attitude of my mental state. Each level of tension sparked an emotional response or imagery. For each character, I selected a particular tension and improvised within that level to see if the feelings that arose matched my intention for that character. Similarly, throughout the

choreographic process I would experiment by altering the tension levels of gestural movements if I was not yet pleased with how the emotions were coming through.

While exploring these varied levels of tension in class, we analyzed the physicality of familiar types of people who embody each level and we looked at different scenarios where we employ different levels of tension in our own body. For instance, we compared tense and bound skittering of a nervous individual to the loose and relaxed stagger of a drunk. This enterprise served as prime source material for the development of the characters and their actions in *Before Talkies*. Each character has a particular level of body tension that serves as their baseline, and as they move throughout the film these levels adjust appropriately to the situation at hand.

The development of *Before Talkies* was also influenced by my fascination with historical films of the silent era, including Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and *City Lights* and Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill* and *Sherlock Jr.* The work of Chaplin and Keaton, both as performers and directors, served as references throughout the creative process. For example, one artistic element I initially struggled with was differentiating between acting through pantomime and dancing by way of communicative gesture. Reading about Chaplin's approach to movement invention illuminated the path for my own choreographic approach in the film. As Alastair Cooke observed:

One of the permanent pleasures of being with him [Chaplin] was to watch the grace and deftness with which he performed all physical movements, from pouring syrup to swerving like a matador just out of the line of an oncoming truck (Kamin 100).

Following this concept, I crafted and performed each gesture in my film with the same precision, nuance, and dynamics as a classical ballet step. This calmed my urge to

determine whether or not I was “dancing” or “doing pantomime.” Every action was meaningful and simultaneously part of the dance. Continuing the ballet metaphor, when selecting music and the order of the scenes, I considered the movement dynamics and the mood of each section as well as transitions between scenes. This provided a smooth flow and compelling variation from one part to the next as the momentum built and the story progressed. Chaplin’s work also provided inspiration to the physicality of one of the characters; his trademark silhouette is referenced in Oliver’s oversized boots, splayed feet and back-tilted pelvis. In a clip from *Modern Times*, when Chaplin (as the tramp) performs his “Nonsense Song,” the giant shoes he wears highlight his turned out legs and his coattails accentuate his arched lower back, resulting in a grotesque balletic posture (The Talk Watcher).

In the third scene of my film, influences of Buster Keaton are seen not only in the idiosyncratic traits of Jingles, the cat, but also in the cinematic special effects that happen during Jingles’ imagined performance. For example, in *Sherlock Jr.*, Buster Keaton’s character is met with situations ranging from suspicion, to disappointment, to love, fear, and everything in between, yet variations in his facial expression are barely detectable. In homage to Keaton (who has always reminded me of a cat anyway - most likely due to this lack of expressiveness), Jingles holds fast to his poker face for most of the film. Also, there is a famous scene in *Sherlock Jr.* where Keaton managed to pull off a green screen effect long before the technology existed. Keaton appears to jump into the movie screen at a theater where he works as the projectionist. Magically he is integrated within the film as if he were one of the actors he was watching. Once he is inside the movie, the background continues to change while his image is transported to different locations in a

single shot. Keaton's idea of the subject's image layered over a changing background is hinted at when Jingle's is transported from under the table, to the stage, and back again (10000).

Methodology & Intention

In order to construct a definitive narrative, I first had to figure out who these characters actually were. They each needed a distinct signature- their own DNA. I knew there would be the heroine (in place of the *Damsel-In-Distress* from my previous film assignment), the good guy, the bad guy, and the sidekick. But what would these figures do? How would they move? I needed to engrave into my imagination their mental and emotional skeletons in order to learn how their physical skeletons would dance. Once I defined the characters, I wrote the narrative arc- having predetermined that the heroine would save herself instead of waiting for the good guy to "save the day."

Rather than my pulling their distinguishing characteristics out of thin air, this motley crew achieved their eventual forms through an exercise in layering exaggeration and embellishment over a familiar foundation. I sought each of them within me. After identifying one or two distinctive emotions or attitudes that each character would represent, I would "try on" that emotion or attitude to see how it felt to be enveloped in it. I would "eat" it, in a way, to sense how the it felt to have that emotion or attitude gurgling in my stomach or circulate through my veins.

The more I allowed the emotion/attitude to inhabit my body, the more fully the same emotion/attitude would fill and color the space in my mind. Thoughts, feelings, and images bubbled up from within - related to the character I was improvising upon, and at

the same time reflective of my own personal life experiences - in a similar way I used the Lecoq acting exercise to align my physical and emotional states. My posture and gait became affected and palpably different for each of them: Lillian, Oliver, Jingles, and the villain. Walking, standing, and other *gestures of action* such as carrying, sitting, and pulling (Lecoq 9) became the baseline for more complex gestures of expression and movement, as I shall now describe by moving through the work.

Scene I Lillian's Homecoming

In the opening scene, Lillian enters the frame with a swirl of excitement and then squarely faces off with her front porch steps. We only see her from the waist down, but I wanted the joyful swish of her knee-length dress, the two deliciously drawn out slow motion steps to savor the anticipation, and finally the enthusiastic scurry of her happy feet to reveal how she feels to be coming home. She can barely contain herself as she nears the threshold to her castle.

Once in her home, Lillian fully embraces and expresses her carefree and lighthearted nature. She intentionally carries her weight high on the balls of her feet as she traverses the main floor, and, in an excited rush, unpacks the groceries to retrieve the self-awarded prize at the bottom of the bag - a heart-shaped box of chocolates. This moment between Lillian and the chocolate box triggers a "bubbling over" of Lillian's delight in the present moment, sweeping the viewer through the scene as Lillian enjoys her happy homecoming.

We then witness an intimate moment between Lillian and the box of candy: eyes wide, licking her lips, lost in the sensuous prospect of devouring this delicious treat. As

the exaggerated choreography dances across her face, my intention here was to draw the viewer further into Lillian's psyche. Via this glimpse of subdued passion, the viewer is led to learn that Lillian has a lustful side and she is perfectly happy to "take matters into her own hands" and ensure that her cravings are satisfied. She sets the box of chocolates on the table as if placing a sacred offering on an altar -- with gentle hands she adjusts the bow, smooths the ribbon, and allows her fingers to linger on the box before pulling herself away. No longer able to contain the bliss she feels inside, Lillian begins to dance around the dining room table and into the living room, using her arms and hands to make circular *gestures* that arc upwards, radiating from her solar plexus and framing her gleeful face; the joy she feels in her heart emanates through her spine, head and limbs. This is her effervescent aura made visible. Before the dance carries her around the dining room table, Lillian makes a fan-like finger movement with her hands placed over her eyes. This *gesture* takes on both figurative and literal meanings. As a nod to the cliché and superficial stereotype of the eyelash-batting damsel in distress, Lillian melodramatically accentuates her own long, luxurious lashes. She also uses this gesture to express delight at all of the beauty she sees in her idiosyncratic world.

First we observe Lillian's beaming features and airy exterior; then become privy to the nature of her pleasure-seeking behavior; and finally we detect flashes of something darker residing inside the psyche of our heroine. Twice during this scene, Lillian's light and bright dance is abruptly interrupted by her own hands transforming into two talking mouths - sock puppets, minus the socks - and initiating a bothersome altercation. Lillian is not so surprised by the appearance of these two intruders, but rather annoyed at their presence and holds no interest in what it is they are trying to communicate to her. This is

not the first or last time she will hear these voices, as they are long-term residents of her subconscious. She is able to counter the “verbal” attack quickly and effectively with a threatening thrust of her tongue coupled with fierce, bulging eyes. This promptly shuts up the rude pair and Lillian disposes of them with a final (literal) blow. Without missing a beat, she then continues her gleeful dance as the queen of her dominion.

Scene II The Not-So-Handyman

For the second time, the camera leads us to see a character introduced to the audience feet-first. From the same camera angle through which we saw Lillian first step into the frame with an energetic twirl, we see Oliver’s feet slowly crossing in and then out of the frame from left to right. Lazily transferring weight from one foot to the next and barely clearing the ground with each swinging step, the gestures made by these feet in their heavy boots are meant to reveal with broad strokes the essence of Oliver’s personality. In opposition to Lillian’s light and lifted physicality, Oliver carries himself with a clumsy heaviness. His deflated, concave chest is an outward reflection of his inner wistful nature and punctured ego. The oversized work boots he wears weigh him down; yet another physical manifestation of the gravity he feels generated by his own sadness.

For Oliver, it is love at first sight when he looks through the window and sees a dreamily unaware Lillian dancing about in her living room. Turning away from the window, his gaze shifts downwards and he wraps one arm across his chest and, using that wrapped arm as a support, rests the opposite elbow on top as he brings his curled fingers to his mouth. This movement and placement of Oliver’s arms is, metaphorically, a curtain being drawn to separate him from the outside world, as well as a subconscious self-

soothing hug. These understated gestures of Oliver's arms, head, and eyes curling inward illustrate what is going on inside his mind. By instinctually following him into his awkward yet familiar pose, the audience is made aware that Oliver often finds himself in this very position. We know that he is an insecure dreamer.

This sullen attitude and sagging posture shifts, however, when Oliver becomes the director of his own daydream. In a *pas de deux* of close ups, passions swiftly escalate as he and Lillian silently negotiate their way through a series of flirtatious gestures. They exchange wanton glances echoing Lillian's earlier reaction to the enticing box of chocolates. We witness another variation on an earlier gesture when Oliver fans his fingers open in succession, as if caressing her face from a distance. He indicates a circular aura or halo around Lillian's head and gushes to her about her beauty. Continued jump cuts in extreme close up parallel the growing intimacy between the characters as their physical conversation intensifies. Oliver professes his love by holding both hands over his heart and then extending them in offering towards Lillian. With sirenic allure, Lillian invites Oliver to come closer with the smooth undulation of her index finger. Eyes widen, eyelashes (inevitably) bat, lips pucker...

At the close of the scene, the audience is once again made to observe Oliver from the outside, well aware of the fantasy still playing out in his mind. Still lost in the illusion of his fantasy, Oliver dances on the front porch with a bucket perched atop a long piece of wood. There is an unmistakable change in his demeanor, as this is the first time we see Oliver smiling from our vantage point in the "real world." Although slightly impaired by his clunky shoes, he leads his bucket-headed Lillian-substitute around the dance floor with newfound confidence and grace. His center of gravity has lifted and he carries

himself with the same lightness we saw in Lillian's earlier dance. With his head held high and eyes cast upwards, Oliver's deepest desire is written all over the simple half-smile on his face. He wants to live in the peaceful elation that comes with holding his true love in his arms.

Growing bolder as the dance continues, Oliver attempts to sweep his partner off "her" feet with a suave finale. Assuming a strong and commanding pose, he pulls the proxy tightly to his body and whispers sweet nothings into her assumed ear. He then leads her into a tight spin, dip, and kiss combination maneuver. However, Oliver never gets the chance to kiss the bucket because it slides off the end of the stick as he is dipping "her." When the Lillian substitute loses her head/bucket, Oliver is abruptly exiled from his fantasy, and we see his poise and fortitude quickly melt away. Still in the dip position, he is momentarily frozen with shock, staring in confusion at the piece of wood he brought to the house for a construction project. The tension and energy in his body transitions from flowing and dexterous during his dance, to rigid and cumbersome when he snaps back into reality, finally returning limp and lonesome as he sulks on the front steps.

Scene III
The Secret Life of Cats
or
Jingles Takes the Stage

Just as cats are creatures of very few (or zero, to be exact!) words, Jingles is a creature of very few communicative gestures. For this character, it is the lack of *expressive gestures* in this scene that reveals the most detail relative to what he thinks and feels (Lecoq 16). We are introduced to Jingles as he obediently and disinterestedly bats a ball of yarn back across the floor, from one paw to the other. With a deadpan face, he

stares off into the distance completely disconnected from the action. Making not the slightest attempt to mask his boredom, he eventually lets out a shamelessly large yawn and glances from side to side to make sure Lillian is far away from his turf. The intentional and deliberate choice of Jingles' blank expression leaves it up to the audience to interpret his sentiment towards his situation. Apathy, annoyance, and obligation could all explain such a countenance, as could the basic fact that cats are known to stare off into the distance for extended periods of time.

Once the coast is clear, and he flippantly disposes of the yarn ball that was forced upon him against his will, we see a glimmer of excitement flash across the upper half of Jingles' face along with the slightest hint of a mischievous grin. To mirror the manner in which cats express feelings through movements of their eyes and ears, Jingles communicates primarily through facial gestures of his eyes and eyebrows. We never see him smile outright, which is suitable for both his aloof temperament and his species.

Now free to get on with his daily activity, Jingles rushes through a brief series of warm-up exercises. The brisk and robotic style with which he executes these moves alludes to the fact that he is familiar with the routine: he is committed to this practice, and he practices often. Simultaneously, the changing background scenery reveals the significance that this diversion holds for the housecat. Allowed a peek deeper into his secret life, we are exposed to Jingles' vivid imagination as he transports himself from underneath Lillian's table to posing center stage in a classical opera house. This fantasy, made complete with the following sequence of refined movements and postures, paints a complex portrait of a not-so-everyday house pet.

Oozing bravura with his chin held high and chest inflated, the stone-faced cat proceeds with his classical ballet solo. Demonstrating the renowned elegance of a trained ballet dancer, even this dedicated *danseur* fails to resist chasing his own tail mid-performance. Said tail is caught, an itch is satisfied with a scratch, and Jingles composes himself once again to finish his dance to the thunderous applause of his admiring fans. After a not-so-humble curtain call, the dog-tired cat lumbers off stage to collect his yarn ball. With his daily task now complete, Jingles wastes no time getting straight to his cat nap and the theater of fantasy fades away back to the reality of the table hideaway.

Through Jingle's contrasting *action gestures* of a commonplace cat and a polished performer, his character is defined more fully (Lecoq 9). Jingles is an intelligent and contemplative creature. He is a cat of many hats, and he is discriminating in his choice of which one to wear at any given time. When Lillian is around, Jingles makes a point of behaving like a typical housecat and nothing more. He eats, sleeps, and plays with one of the dozen yarn balls she has lovingly (and obsessively) provided him with. Even though he finds the yarn play a monotonous and trivial task, as exposed through his yawning gesture, the fact that he humors Lillian by dutifully batting the ball in her presence reveals his devotion to her. His curious affinity to ballet also displays another clue to Jingles' bond to Lillian. Illustrated through both the artwork of the dancers on her wall and through her own swirly, twirly, joyous dancing at home, it is made clear to the spectator that Lillian loves dance and dancing. It would not be a stretch of the imagination to conclude that this ballet dancing cat picked up this hobby from his owner.

Scene IV
The Chocolate Tango

Having transitioned from day to night, Lillian reappears in the dining room wearing marabou slippers, a leopard print nightgown and a virtual helmet of unbecoming hair curlers- signalling that 1) she is not expecting company this evening; and 2) she is dressed this way for her own satisfaction. Sharply rounding the corner, Lillian pauses momentarily, setting her sights on her prey like a jungle cat seconds before it pounces upon its next meal. Leaning with her back against the wall, she crouches down ever so slightly while pressing her palms with spread fingers into the doorframe. Every inch of her body is alive in anticipation. This singular posture evokes the change in mood between Lillian seen earlier in the day, and as she is observed now. Where she once carried herself with lightness and upward arching gestures, Lillian now poses and traverses the space with feeling of weight in her legs and pelvis. This change in physicality corresponds absolutely to the shift in Lillian's current *objective* (Brannigan 93). No longer moving in opposition to gravity, she carries herself closer to the earth, both physically and theoretically. She intentionally carries her center of gravity, her pelvis, with a sense of heaviness connecting her to primitive, base compulsions of survival- food and sex. Lillian's primal instincts have taken the driver's seat. With eyes wide locked on her target and hunger written on her face, Lillian fluidly springs into action once again and begins circling around the object of her desire. With the lightness of a feather, she places a single domineering index finger on the box, and the fate of the candy is sealed.

In these opening measures of "Tango from Suite, España," a new layer of Lillian's persona is discovered through the *expressive gesture* of her face, the *action gestures* of turning, reclining, and walking, and the *demonstrative gesture* of her right index finger. In this scene of seduction, Lillian is the Lothario and the heart-shaped box of chocolates (which she selected and purchased earlier that day) is her love interest. The observer learns that our heroine has not only a mere appreciation for sensual pleasures, but that she delights in taking the reins to create a complete experience which will satisfy her cravings. Her pleasure-seeking impulses run deep, and she will not be languishing around waiting for someone else to fulfill her needs.

The first stage of this romantic interaction with a box of candy is marked by Lillian's flirtatious advances, consisting of a mixture of contrasting bodily and facial dynamics. With a coy smile, she softly gazes upon the box while her lower limbs execute a number of punctuated and precise *ochos* and *amagues* distinctive to Argentine tango dance. Bridging the pointed action gestures of her legs and the evasive expressive gestures of her face, Lillian's hands alternate between direct and indirect motives, teasing the helpless box of candy which in turn increases her own arousal. Softly tracing loops and swirls with her index finger over the shiny, textured lid, she fantasizes about the delights that lie just on the underside of the embellished box top. This fantasy quickly becomes insufficient as her curious hands lift the lid just enough to allow a few brief but amorous glances at the prizes inside.

Stage two of this love affair commences when Lillian, overcome by lust, disrobes her delectable paramour by wildly flinging the box top across the room. Rapture washes over her face as her mouth and eyes widen at the sight of the bonbons in all of their

chocolate glory. Her nostrils flare as she inhales their bittersweet perfume, absorbing their intoxicating essence. In the following sequence, Lillian's eyes continue to tell the story. She does not just look at the chocolates, she devours them with her eyes. Like two spotlights in a pitch black room, they remain fixated on the candies as if they are the only thing that exists in this time and space. When she raises the first morsel into the air with an exaggerated sweep of her arm, it is her eyes rather than her upper body that instigate the gesture.

As the camera angle changes to a frontal close up, her hungry eyes direct the candy's movement to stop inches away from her face at the level of her mouth. Then, the moment of truth. After all of her plotting, stalking, teasing, and self-restraint, Lillian swiftly pops the piece of chocolate into her mouth and is met with an instantaneous euphoria. Her eyes close as she internalizes the luscious experience. Although the viewer can see only her from the neck up, her rolling eyes, swaying head, and undulating brow allude to the enjoyment churning throughout her body. Time and space have shifted once again. Savoring the perfection that lives in that first bite, a universe of pleasure comes alive within Lillian -- and for a transient moment there is nothing beyond.

Scene V

The Intruder, The Chase, The End

Darkness falls over the queendom as Lillian, Jingles, and presumably Oliver (still on the front porch steps) are fast asleep. Outside of the house, an unfamiliar pair of boots slink into the frame and a claw-like pair of hands slowly slide down the top of each leg. Like two menacing spiders, the curled fingers drum in wavelike succession against their

respective legs, a gesture reflecting impatience and anticipation of something yet to come. Observing this new character from the knee downward reveals his crude and crooked ambulation, an outward manifestation of his crooked ambition. Maintaining a sharp bend at the knees and elbows while rounding his shoulders and thrusting his pelvis forward, the line of his body forms a vertical zig-zag as he moves in a two dimensional pattern, traveling only forward or backward in profile to the camera. Taking no more than three steps at a time, his walk is made even more ominous by the interjection of irrational direction changes and abrupt 180 degree pivots.

In a wide shot, the cartoonish posture of the villain's posture is shown, inspired by the stereotypical mustachioed baddie, *Rocky and Bullwinkle's Snidely Whiplash* (bullwinklecanada). At first glance the villain's gait appears complex, but, upon further viewing, the repetitive quality and lack of variation become robotic and the inefficiency of his pivots and direction changes lack reasoning. The villain is not a character of great depth or great thinking. His deeply rooted impulse to commit dreadful and immoral deeds has overtaken him completely, twisting his mind and his body and leaving no capacity for critical reasoning or decision making. When he comes to find Lillian on the sofa he reaches for her with his claw-like hands and wriggling fingers. The wavelike movement of the fingers is the same motion of the impatient and anticipatory drumming on his legs from the beginning of the scene, now happening in the air inches away from Lillian's body. When he first approached the house, the villain's plan did not extend past getting inside, but now that he has seen Lillian a new plan has developed: "Catch Lillian." He has not gone so far as to decide what will do with her once he catches her, but no doubt it will be something dreadful and immoral.

A chase ensues with Lillian, the villain, and Oliver each holding steadfast to their signature gait, now sped up to double-time. Flooded with terror (Lillian), malice (villain), and confusion (Oliver), none of the three manages to keep their wits about them in order to secure their position as victor in this race. They all simply move faster, matching the others' pace. To counter this ineffective exhibition, Jingles rises to the occasion. As chaos swells inside the house, he recognizes the problem at hand and devises a plan to triumph over the threat, assisting his beloved Lillian to secure their home sweet home.

Earlier in the film, changes in Jingles' facial expression were barely detectable while he went about his business under the table. Without even a moment's hesitation, the housecat now completely abandons his trademark austerity when he throws the yarn balls down the stairs to trip the villain. No longer concerned with keeping up appearances once the situation becomes dire, now Jingles lets loose a maniacal laugh when launching the first ball toward the intruder. The crazed look on his face is layered with amusement. This is not something that happens everyday; this is unadulterated fun for him. Fully engaged in the moment, Jingles is no longer masking opinions or sentiment. He answers the call of duty and relishes every second. Etiquette and propriety have been flung aside as the stone-faced cat bares his claws and gnashes his teeth, leaping into the face of danger (literally: jumping onto the villain's face).

Thanks to Jingles' forward thinking, the villain is distracted, and Lillian is able to compose herself well enough to step in and deliver the final blow, a punch to his gut. She ties him up using a considerable amount of abundantly available yarn and brushes the imaginary dust off her hands as if it were all in a day's work. This common gesture paired with Lillian's complacent facial expression is in stark contrast to the perilous endeavor

she survived unscathed. This disconnected reaction poses one of two possibilities, or more likely, a combination of both: Lillian is braver than she initially let on, or she is somewhat disassociated from reality. Her disconnected response is made evident in the following conversation she has with aspiring white knight, Oliver, who rushes to the scene, although belatedly.

Lacking the confidence and charisma evidenced in his earlier fantasy interaction, Oliver bumbles through an explanation of his side of the chase scene. He hurriedly speaks to Lillian without pausing to take a breath, manifesting a build up of tension through his neck, chest, and shoulders. With raised, scrunched eyebrows and bulged eyes pleading, he enlists the help of spasmodic hand movements as *gestures of demonstration* (Lecoq 9) to add emphasis to what he is saying. The physical strain in Oliver's body mimics the mental stress he is now under, embarrassed by his impotence and missed opportunity. Resigned to the fact that he has nothing left to offer Lillian other than her handkerchief, which he passes to her with a hopeful half smile, he abruptly curtails his long winded excuse and drops his flailing arms to his sides.

Rather than graciously thanking Oliver for returning the handkerchief as he imagined she would, Lillian only pauses a moment to look puzzledly at her returned property and then her thoughts return to her own agenda. There is something Oliver *can* do for her, afterall. With a shamelessly choreographed head tilt/eyelash bat/saccharine smile, Lillian passes the villain's legs to Oliver, "asking" that he take out the "trash." Meanwhile, Jingles echos Lillian's "all in a day's work" attitude as he returns to his post underneath the table.

As Oliver drags the villain out of the house, he looks back inside to Lillian and with a final glimmer of hope flashes his signature half smile. Perhaps one day this noncommittal character will be so bold as to smile at her fully and she will be able to see what he truly feels for her. Maybe then the tide will change for poor Oliver. Lillian, on the other hand, beams her brightest “Disney princess” smile back at Oliver as she waves down to him from the front door of her urban palace. Peace and harmony have been restored in her queendom.

Results and Implications for the Future

My 15.5 minute film, *Before Talkies*, was shot over the course of two consecutive days, an estimated 27 hours on set, primarily on location in Jersey City, NJ; all footage of Jingles was recorded in a green screen studio in Long Island City, NY. Jersey City based filmmaker and Montclair State University Film School alum, Annie Drew, was closely involved in the project as both the cinematographer and editor. Her keen understanding of the narrative’s undertones and characters’ innerworkings, the cinematic style I wanted to achieve, and the nature of humor I chose to express, paired with her skill and ingenuity behind the camera and in editing was instrumental in bringing my artistic vision from my imagination to the screen. Annie also made a “cameo appearance” as the villain’s legs when Oliver is dragging him away in the final moments of the film.

Kayla Affrunti, a Montclair State Dance alum, was our production supervisor and brought to the team her know-how as a trained dancer as well as a dance filmmaker. While shooting, I would often refer to Kayla as my mirror, or my eyes on the other side of the fourth wall. While Annie would be concentrating on technical aspects with regard to camera work such as focus, lighting, and framing the shot, I requested that Kayla

watch for technicalities related to the performance of my gestures and movement so that I was able to ask her for specific feedback rather than taking the time between every take to cut and watch the video playback.

Addressing another position of paramount importance was our gaffer, Caroline Hartman. A current Montclair State University film undergraduate student, Caroline procured all of the lighting and camera equipment from the university's film department, thanks to facilitation by Professor of Dance Technique and Technology, Kathleen Kelley, as well as Professor Roberta Friedman and faculty member Benjamin Wolf of the Montclair State University Film Department. In addition to executing the lighting as designed and assisting the cinematographer, Caroline graciously stepped in as Lillian's arm double in the fight scene and delivered the fatal blow to the villain by repeatedly punching me in the gut (as I had directed her to do).

Following a four-week editing process, the film premiered at Montclair State University's inaugural Dance Film Festival on November 28th, 2018, in Life Hall 1200. [See accompanying documentation]. Planning to appear at the festival and sit on the panel for a post-screening talkback, I was called to a dire out-of-town emergency the night before the event and unable to participate. I did, however, receive an instantaneous response from faculty members and other attendees via email, praising the work and informing me of the enthusiastic acclaim.

As I had set forth to do from day one, *Before Talkies* delighted the audience through its repertoire of *gestures of expression* and *gestures of demonstration* by revealing, emphasizing, and stylistically crafting the humor within these familiar movements. By designing signature postures, mannerisms, and methods of locomotion

for each character, I successfully developed four unique physical portraits which silently interacted in the film, telling the story through the voice of gesture.

It was through conducting my research that I learned how to employ techniques familiar to acting in the pursuit of finding a character's "gestural voice." There is a clear and reliable crossover between methods of improvisation for actors and dancers; I have also come to embrace the blurred line between *acting* and *dancing*. In the midst of my creative process, these two modes of performative expression became one and the same. Also acquired during my creative research was a renewed comprehension of and aptitude for filmmaking. With the first phase of creation focused on generating the narrative and choreography in the dance studio, it was the second phase - shaping the choreography for the camera - that posed more advanced challenges. I had underestimated the extensive amount of detail and effort that would indeed be necessary when considering and deciding on camera angles and the sequencing of each shot.

I was also disconcerted by the way many of my gestures "read" when I saw them on screen for the first time. Under the impression that the camera would spontaneously magnify facial expressions and postures (in opposition to the way these gestures often diminish when performed on a stage with the audience at a distance), I initially downplayed these physical expressions and actions. After reviewing the footage and realizing that much of the humor I wanted to display through physicality was watered down or lost altogether, I reworked those weakened segments, intentionally overplaying the way I articulated my face and body. This brought a dimension of absurdity to the characters, and, in turn, my desired touch of silliness to the film.

In the making of *Before Talkies*, it is through experimenting with and formalizing my creative process that I have developed reproducible and teachable methods of improvisation and character development by blending the study of emotion and quotidian gesture with traditional theatrical training techniques. Going forward pedagogically, sharing my personal approach with dance students as well as other performance artists, I will provide them with new inroads into creative endeavors of their own as well as ways they can forge personal and meaningful emotional links when learning and performing the work of other choreographers. As a dancer, the ability to physically manifest an intimate relation to the work is a fundamental component of a successful performance, an aspect of artistry that is not always taught in the studio.

The inherent nature of silent film also makes *Before Talkies* accessible to a wide range of audience demographic, because it transcends spoken language and geographical barriers. I purposely avoided the use of gestures specific to any particular culture (it was not easy to resist the abundance of dynamic demonstrative gestures, for example, that Italy is famed for) so that the overall voice of gesture would be clearly understood no matter who was watching or where they were from. This “language-less” nature, paired with the global reach of digital video, yields (I would hope) a work of art that can be experienced and enjoyed by individuals who otherwise might have limited exposure to dance and dramatic performances.

As I further my research and creative endeavors in the arena of *dance theater on film*, I am going to experiment more deeply with this concept of movement as a manifestation of the personality - real or imagined. I want to “zoom in” on the brain-body connection in relevance to everyday people in everyday life.

The archetypal conditions of Lillian, Oliver, Jingles, and the Villain are now an accessible platform from which I will launch this investigation through a series of self-supporting *solo* choreographies. This next phase of my research will fortify the existing film, ultimately serving as a kind of prologue for *Before Talkies*. Providing an opportunity for the viewer to establish a more comprehensive understanding and sense of back story for the characters, the solo studies will provide a voyeuristic blueprint as the characters go through mundane tasks, waking up and carrying out their morning routines.

By witnessing fantastical characters in physical dramas that we ourselves enact on a daily basis, the audience will become empathetic to the individual on screen and grow even more invested in the players and the narrative. In *Before Talkies* I ask the viewer to seek and find on-screen points of applicability to “real life,” and I want them to recognize the humor that lies within these humdrum moments, entertaining the notion that perhaps we are not so far removed as we might think from these cartoon-esque caricatures of silent film. I value the transformative potential of lightness, joy, and humor in dance and art, and so, in my future research agenda, synthesizing scholarship and artistry, I want to continue to serve this oft-overlooked niche through the touchstone of everyday gesture.

Just as *Before Talkies* has energetically accomplished, future dance theater films of my creation will ideally materialize as whimsical, *exaggerated realities* wherein the viewer temporarily abides, indulges in the familiarity of the fantasy, and emerges brimming with vibrant images, fresh ideas, nostalgic memories -- and, yes, smiles.

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Presentation Materials

The Completed Film:
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