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# Rhetorical Circumference: Building Relationships and Conversations

Sarina Ramirez-Ortiz  
*Loyola Marymount University*

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DANC 461: Senior Thesis Project

*Rhetorical Circumference*: Building relationships and conversations

Sarina Ramirez-Ortiz

In partial fulfillment of  
The Bachelor of Arts Degree in Dance  
Loyola Marymount University  
May 2, 2016

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## **Foundations, Expectations, and Assumptions**

In preparation for my thesis, I intended to embark on a project that would challenge my creativity and prepare me for my future artistic endeavors. The inspiration to complete a choreographic project stemmed from my previous experience in completing my first choreographic work, *Refugium*, which premiered in 2014. The challenge of creating group choreography for the first time seemed daunting, but also brought about an excitement that fueled my desire to embrace this novelty. Although my thesis marked the first of many group-focused choreographic projects I will experience throughout my career, my personal expectations were quite high as I constructed this idea of success that had to be attained. Once I chose the type of project I would complete, I began to sort out the possible pathways I could take to finish my choreographic work. I came to the conclusion of creating an evening length thesis, which undoubtedly was going to change and alter as time went on. I intended to challenge myself in creating a self-sufficient movement story that could fulfill a night of dance performance.

Initially, I developed this false perception of clarity in regards to what I expected I should learn and achieve by creating an evening length work. I had expected to learn and develop strategies for producing choreography that could progress into the longevity I hoped for. I thought the challenge of producing a work of this length would help prepare me for my choreographic studies in graduate school. Overwhelmed with the urge to create a momentous performance, I hoped to gain skills for producing choreography that could maintain significance and clarity over time. Although I was a bit intimidated by embarking on the unfamiliar path of group choreography, my dancers were willing and able to learn what I had envisioned as well as give back to the process by adding their own ideas and interpretations. We were able to produce three different group pieces throughout the research and creation of my project, and I gained

valuable tools for allowing inspiration to flourish from life experiences. My expectations and intimidation led to much dialogue about my intentions and abilities, which allowed for my ideas to morph into something tangible and accessible.

Throughout the course of my initial brainstorming, I was influenced by my time spent at the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance over the summer of 2015. My conceptual basis drew upon some of the random snippets of discourse from my teachers that I wrote down in my journal. I began to use these snippets as motivation to develop the foundational intention of my project. In summation, my project was driven by the idea of relationships, both as a choreographic intention as well as a development of the group dynamic between my dancers. Early on, I managed to compile a list of possible dancers I would invite to participate in my project. My intention to be fully immersed in the choreographic environment of a group piece led me to ask ten young dancers that I saw the potential and ability to contribute to my project. Inviting younger freshmen and sophomores to participate in my project was a result of wanting them to experience first-hand some of the exercises I had planned. I expected that not all of them would have the time to make this commitment, which resulted in a fulfilling cast of six young dancers.

After solidifying my cast and establishing a rehearsal schedule for the fall semester, I began to compile a list of musical choices that I could utilize as inspiration for my movement exercises and choreographic explorations. The musical possibilities that I compiled served as the starting point for developing choreography, but the compositional integrity of the music in combination with choreographic intention did not become a serious priority until a few weeks before the presentation of my final project. I utilized my list of musical choices to kick start the choreographic process by focusing on learned improvisational skills and tools. Moved by

musical cues, I allowed my improvisations to serve as the infrastructure for my movement phrases and the majority of my choreography grew out of improvisation recordings. I was able to relearn my own improvisations while exploring the idea of filtering information through learning material. This allowed me to build my own relationship with the material I developed and examine the process of filtering a stream of consciousness improvisation to my own body and then to other bodies.

Some of the main challenges I encountered throughout my process arose out of my personal assumptions. These assumptions became a hindrance to my creativity as I forced myself into this idea of perfection driven by a length of time. It became a struggle in attempting to meet the longevity I imagined without sacrificing the significance behind the work being created. This expectation of time became extremely limiting to my process and negated my abilities to continue choreographing relevant material. After producing two pieces of about 3 minutes each, the conceptual groundings I maintained for each piece became a bit too disconnected. With the separation of the two pieces, I was faced with the challenge of finding a way to merge the two pieces by producing other content that might serve as a bridge between the two. By aiming to merge my concepts into something cohesive and presentable, my goal of length became too overwhelming and diminished the quality of work I was creating. I experienced a rigid pull between creating movement that was true to the conceptual foundations and producing choreography just for the sake of length.

Being someone who is accustomed to organization, clarity, and preparation, it was exceptionally challenging to plan a timeline that would allow me to accomplish my goals. Of course, my original thesis project and expectations morphed into something rather different towards the conclusion of my movement research. However, after leaving my original idea and

allowing it to become something else, I became far more fulfilled. Since my timeline was driven by a concept for length, I became unaware of exactly how I would complete my project, and this made me rather uncomfortable. With each passing week, I was inched closer and closer to April 9th, and it seemed as though I would not have enough time. After allowing myself to talk about my fears and limitations with my mentor, I came to the drastic conclusion of moving away from my previous two pieces and performing something else for my project. Upon leaving these two works as springboards for my final project and performance, I released my ideas from my own limited views and was able to embark on a new choreographic creation with the combined efforts of my dancers and myself.

Throughout the progress of my project and taking time to reflect on my years at LMU, I've come to realize that my approach to choreography and my artistry in general is far too dependent on outwardly seeking authenticity and significance. As a dance artist, when I create movement, I tend to actively seek out significance and whether or not something will be received as impactful and resonant. Although this drive towards successful significance can sometimes be a positive approach to surround my choreographic process, I've found that my process itself can bring authenticity to fruition by changing my focus to simply creating content, rather than searching for meaning. Once I created material to work with, my dancers and I could engage more fully in allowing the material to be altered so that we could maximize its facility. My experiences in creating choreography based on improvisation were helpful in letting go of my assumptions and discovering movement phrases through improvisational choices. Once a skeleton of the movement was created, the working process of making choices and discovering change provided an outlet for individual interpretation, which I've realized may not always reach a significant conclusion.

### **Building Relationships and Conversations**

When we began our first rehearsals in September of 2015, my dancers were not too familiar with each other. My cast consisted of freshman dance majors Eva Crystal, Halie Donabedian, and Courtney Sprouse, freshman health and human sciences major Alexandria Ortiz, and sophomore dance majors Nicole Closson and Rie Fukushima. Among the seven of us, my first priority focused on building a group dynamic that would foster an environment of trust, vulnerability, and companionship. This choreographic process was not only a novel journey for myself, but it was an experimental, creative process of feedback and dialogue that many of my younger dancers did not have a shared experience in. Before we could jump into learning choreography intended for my thesis project, I utilized learned movement explorations as a starting point for developing their confidence in learning my personal movement language as well as in being open and vulnerable to uncomfortable challenges.

I asked my dancers to engage with challenges intended to introduce them to valuable skills for learning choreography, filtering movement for their bodies, and exploring movement and thought. I implemented a teaching approach borrowed from Alex Ketley, a teacher at the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance and Artistic Director of The Foundry. Without any verbal communication, I began to teach them movement through accumulation, allowing for the movement and gestures to feed their understanding and embodiment. After utilizing this form of filtering movement from a visual input to a physical output, we worked on performing the movement phrase with our eyes closed, while simultaneously allowing our voices to speak any thoughts that came to our mind. As we encircled the person performing in the center of the studio, the growing confidence, trust, and vulnerability was visibly noticeable. Upon discussing our experiences, we addressed issues such as struggling to create a polished replication of the



phrase, developing authenticity for our own bodies, and approaching this challenge as a group effort rather than a competitive game.

As we continued to establish our group connection, we created two pieces that were performed at different venues. Through improvisation, dialogue, and modification, *Rung* developed into a conversation about how female leadership and success are often seen through a negative lens. Throughout the piece, we developed a consistent diagonal movement pattern, yet each dancer became unable to attain consistent forward momentum. Manipulating gestures undermined qualities of strength and power. The urgency of recognizing this issue stemmed from my own personal experiences in hearing voices of subordination towards leading women in my life. I have heard harsh labels and names ring loud in my ear, words that are aimed at young third grade girls, female college students, and even accomplished businesswomen. *Rung* portrayed our society that encourages success, achievement, and leadership, yet fosters a hostile environment for women to be doing so. This conversation, relevant to our own lives as women, promoted social justice for performance at Artists Speak in November 2015.

After completing this section of my thesis, I became inspired to dig deeper into the contexts of situational reactions and relations with experiencing loss. I began the conceptual formulation and choreographic creation of *Recovery* the day after the shootings in San Bernardino occurred in December 2015. These mass shootings occur so often that most of the time, only those in the immediate surrounding areas are affected by the mass killings. There is a lack of conversation about what these shootings mean for our society, how to prevent them, and most importantly how to cope and survive together. It's noticeable that our paths to recovery after loss are often forced into fast paced trails as we attempt to get back on track with our quick lives. Erupting out of an improvised solo, *Recovery* captured the essence of not really

recognizing beauty, life, and peace until it becomes violently uprooted. The movement of this piece was very quick, and much of the intricacies of the effort and dynamic were subtly present in the gestures. The solo quickly turns into a group moving along together, but at different moments in the space and time. *Recovery* was completed and performed for Impulse in February 2016, sparking further recognition of unspoken issues and the lack of conversation about heavy matters.

Upon completing these two three minute sections of my thesis, I hit a creative barrier that prevented me from successfully bridging these pieces with the rest of my vision for my thesis. While attempting to untangle my ideas, I used a previous concept from my journal to stir up a series of duets. This series was intended to serve the larger conversation about the lack of meaningful dialogue within fast paced environments. We began to mold this third section of my thesis at our rehearsal on February 24th. After meeting with my mentor that following Friday and speaking to my mother about how stressed out and lost I felt about connecting my thesis, I came to the drastic conclusion of leaving the two pieces behind. My mentor, Kristen Smiarowski, mentioned something to me that became a watershed moment for my project. She suggested that if I continue to struggle with bridging my thesis together, I may also think about leaving something out that might prove to be unnecessary. Upon reflecting further that weekend, I made the choice of leaving our previous pieces behind as research. At this moment, I reignited my desire and excitement to complete my thesis with a driving creative force.

The conceptual basis of the piece was formed from the hustle and bustle of everyday life in which our passing conversations with people are futile, mechanical, and filled with empty rhetoric. To emulate the sense of constant motion, the recurring traveling patterns of each person were created through a visual drawing of random pathways on a piece of paper. These patterns

were manipulated throughout the piece to include walking and running with occasional interactions driven by conversations. The beginning section of what would become my thesis began to take shape as it was built off the every day script of “Hello, how are you?” “Good, how are you?” “Good!” As a whole, we worked on creating independently scripted movements for each person that would be utilized as our mechanical conversations. These scripted phrases were then altered from simple, to circular, to large versions incorporated as building blocks for more intricate interactions. After determining a pattern of two simple, three circular, and two large phrases, I encouraged my dancers to engage with each other randomly, starting these conversations and including dynamic moments of waving, shaking hands, or making eye contact as the patterns escalated to running.

The expectation of running for about 6 minutes straight proved to be a challenge on its own as my dancers built stamina over the remaining six and a half weeks of completing the project. The second series of duets interspersed throughout their patterns served as short, slightly more engaged dialogues, as well as moments for catching their breath. With the skeletons of these second duets created from my improvisations, we worked together to include more moments of intimacy. To build conversations that would embody the idea of actually engaging in meaningful dialogue, I worked with the duet partners as couples to create intricate duets based on previous phrase work from *Rung* and *Recovery*. Halie and Courtney’s duet was created by transposing a section of *Rung* to the floor while simultaneously finding ways to interact with each other. Rie and Nicole’s duet formed out of manipulating the solo of *Recovery* into a quick, travelling whirlpool that embodied a slightly disconnected conversation leading to a connected moment of moving against and for each other. The last duet between Eva and Alexandria moved

away from the phrase work, allowing our creative energies to interact with each other in search of connected moments and an established relationship.

In this short period of six and a half weeks, we created and cleaned the duets as I searched for a proper ending to the movement material. I utilized tools for developing consistency, transitions, and awareness so that the intention of the movement had more clarity. I worked with my dancers on details such as establishing a universal wave of the hand, maintaining a gestural position with pauses, and allowing our reactions of smiling or laughing to be genuine rather than uncomfortable. Pulling from our previous exercises of building our own relationships amongst the group, we were able to utilize our established sense of trust and confidence with each other to be vulnerable. Each section of the piece was bridged together through repetition and familiar patterns that were molded to encourage dynamic and fresh changes. To end the piece, we engaged in the creative process of accumulating a section of *Rung* as a group. This ending group interaction also included exercises of untangling a web of arms into an open circle and responding to movement interjections, just before scurrying off into dynamic versions of the beginning patterns while a single dancer continues the conversation alone.

As we finished the group sections and worked on clarity of intention, I completed the last details of the performance with urgency as the day of the show approached. The name of the piece, *Rhetorical Circumference*, stemmed from the conceptual foundation of the lack of meaningful dialogue, what happens when we allow intimate conversations to occur, and the dissatisfaction of still being stuck in an environment of ignorance. At the suggestion of my mentor, I finally met with David Karagianis to search for music that would compliment the movement phrase work that had been created. With his guidance, I was able to select sound

scores, created by David himself, which would successfully communicate the idea of a pedestrian environment. Complemented with dynamic sections from Steve Reich's "Sextet", I designed an appropriate combination of the musical compositions to be edited as one sequential sound score. As music was selected and finished, I collaborated with my mother, Sandy Ortiz, to design and create the costume for my dancers, which was intended to be free for movement of its own and of a neutral color to promote unity among the group. Upon teching in the theater, I worked with Samantha Whidby to design the lighting that would create depth, shadowing, and environmental cues to complete the final product of my senior thesis project.

### **Success, Fulfillment, and Knowledge**

When I look back at this long process and the journey I took to complete my project, I am fortunate to believe that my project was indeed successful. Although I began this project with much anticipation and high expectations, allowing myself to move away from my first vision served as the precedence for the successful completion of a feasible project. Admitting that I embarked on a challenge that was too far out of reach is difficult to do, but I accept that giving myself the opportunity to change my intentions was necessary. Caught up in the successful execution of a self-sufficient movement story, choreography and creation took priority. In doing this, I did not realize the little time I had to develop a relevant sound score that would not only compliment my project, but also allow it flourish even more as it came to fruition. Speaking with David Karagianis as suggested by Kristen Smiarowski, the vision for my project gained many more intricacies and meaning that I had not previously recognized. At the end of it all, on that final day of performance, all the details of my 20-minute show made for a successful ending.

One detail in particular that I did not account for was the filming of my finished project on the day of the show. When I reflected on all of the details I was focused on and what took

priority, I did not realize this final detail until I was already sitting in my seat about to watch the performance. I did have the opportunity to stand at the back of the theater and hold my phone to film to show, but this did not feel appropriate to me. Although I regret the unfortunate lack of planning for this last minute detail, I have since come to terms with the disparity of experiencing something as it is in that moment and re-watching the moment captured through a mediated experience. When it comes to performance of any art, I believe that performance is living and breathing. These human qualities I attribute to performance encompass the concept of finite moments and unrepeatable content. Despite performers being able to perform the skeleton of the steps, their current experiences, emotional groundings, and situational contexts will differ, rendering an altered version of the performance each time that will elicit different responses.

The fulfillment I gained from watching my work alongside the select few in the audience satisfied my outline for my thesis in a way that I did not expect. My beginning goals for my project were based in creating a movement story that was self-sufficient, developing work that could embody longevity, and maintaining a conceptual foundation relevant and significant to current society. As we focused on the idea of futile conversations, my dancers and I were able to delve deeper into a conceptual framework that produced carefully crafted movement stories. Leaving the idea of an evening length work behind, I still managed to make a work that surpassed the brevity of my previous accomplished pieces. This achievement has revealed many possibilities and taught me about how I can approach choreography and further hone my craft through concentrated research and dedication. The foundation for the story of this piece spurred from relevant experiences and even opened up our eyes as the creators and performers to our very own structured scripts. The relevancy of this piece holds true for everyone and suggests further analysis into the norms we have fallen into.

With gratitude and humbleness, I recognize that mistakes were made and other choices could have aided in a more developed and solidified performance. I believe that approaching this last creation sooner and working on the piece with more time would have led to better engagement with the material. In regards to the personal connections, we could have developed stronger personal attachments to the movement stories. It may have been beneficial to create more of the duets based on actual conversations in order to gain more connections to the gestures and phrases. Perhaps exploring character development further would have allowed my dancers to feel more involved with the stories that unfolded. Aspects such as performance quality and character establishment are necessary for successful understanding and engagement with the movement being created. Personal attachment could have been improved had there been more dedication to this detail.

Another detail that would have benefited from more attention is the aspect of understanding the intention of the work. It's challenging to create work that comes from your own specific intentions and attempt to gain understanding from the people asked to embody such intentions. Working with younger dancers provided an opportunity to teach useful means of engagement. We incorporated movement exercises to focus on engaging with and knowing intention. One of the exercises we did focused on the interactions between each other and the recurring walking patterns that seemed to have lost momentum and purpose. We worked with verbal cues such as calling someone's name from the freshman dorms to St. Roberts Hall, walking from the dance building to University Hall in under 10 minutes, and trying to be the first to reach a million dollars sitting across the room. These verbal cues elicited personal relationships to the purpose behind this section of movement. The changes were visibly recognized as we continued to rehearse the piece. More exercises such as these would have

benefitted the work by focusing on making choices and actively seeking the purpose behind the movement.

The drive for authenticity and originality led to my choreographic choice for creating much of the movement from improvisation and recordings. This choice was appropriate for my project because I wanted to focus on untapped conversations and natural reactions. Utilizing this form of creation is something I will continue to incorporate as a means of creating the infrastructure of my material. Although there are projects that will not benefit from this approach, I would argue that it is extremely beneficial for all choreographic processes to include improvisational aspects from the choreographer and the dancers alike. Giving the dancers the option of making choices allows for creative energy to be maximized and includes all working bodies. My projects course of action did not pan out as I thought it would, however, I learned many different techniques for approaching choreography and the creative process that I can continue to employ and build upon.

### **The End of an Introduction, Beginning of a Story**

With the end of my undergraduate career in close proximity, and the start of my graduate career solidified, I am filled with the utmost appreciation for the lessons learned and mistakes made. Throughout the completion of this project, spending eight months surrounded by these six young, inspirational dancers taught me more about artistry and human connection than any other experience thus far in my life. With all of the chaos that ensued, changes of direction, and honest conversations, I depended on my dancers as rocks of support more than they probably imagined. Their involvement with my project and what I believed was a chaotic web of disconnected intentions proved to be successful through their dedicated support and willingness to try any challenge I gave them. Throughout this next year of graduate school, I plan to utilize my



approach of developing a group dynamic as part of the choreographic process. I believe that practicing engagement and learning how to interpret and embody intention are valuable aspects that need attention and care. I hope to continue fostering an environment of trust, vulnerability, and confidence for the students I will continue to work with throughout this next year of school.

As I continue my education, I hope to further enhance my artistic voice through guided exploration and research. At the start of my project, I took any support and guidance for granted and did not truly understand the benefit of reaching out to others for feedback. This immediate access to guidance and support will not necessarily be readily available once I leave the culture of university work as a student. Using the experience of completing my choreographic project, I also hope to engage in bigger risk taking and explore movement languages that I am unfamiliar with. Contemporary and modern dance are my safe zones where I feel most comfortable, but venturing into new avenues of choreographic choices will be beneficial to my growth as a well-rounded artist. Before my time in graduate school is complete, I aim to make more deliberate choices in taking risks and allowing for my artistic visions to have the chance of falling flat, allowing for the unexpected to arise from mistakes.

Searching for a concrete future seems to be rather difficult for me when I have so many aspirations to strive for. In the time immediately following graduate school, I hope that I am able to secure my artistic voice and perform for a concert dance company. I have not yet prescribed a specific type of company or know of one company that I want to pursue, but I do know that I want to be a part of a community similar to what I experienced with my cast of dancers over this school year. My hope is that I will have the privilege of working with a company that fosters the communal environment I strive to be a part of. Along with performing, I believe I will still be in search of my own authentic self and hope to never stop exploring and growing from the

influential people around me. Perspective is a valuable notion to understand, and there is much to learn from the people who are willing to share it. Authenticity might just be an ongoing journey that constantly morphs and changes without conclusion, an understanding I have gained from this experience of choreographing without expectation and assumption.

Beyond the next few years of my artistic and personal maturation, I look forward to creating my reputation and establishing my place in the field of dance. Some expectations I have set for myself have become suggested pathways rather than concrete assumptions built for failure. I aim to work as a university educator at some point in my dance career. I already know that I will gain some of this experience throughout my time in graduate school, and I hope that this introduction to university level teaching will provided me with the proper foundation for moving forward. I intend to give back to the community that contributed to my personal growth as a person through dance education, sharing creativity and joy with choreography, and directing a company to inspire and provide opportunity for other dancers. The experience of working alongside other undergraduate students during my thesis project revealed just how much university teaching will fulfill my desire to give back to the future generation of dance artists.

With the all-encompassing experience of creating my choreographic thesis, I was able to fully recognize the benefit of writing things down. I was never too fond of the journaling experience until I was encouraged to journal throughout my time at the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance and for my senior thesis project. It became evident that all of my previous, current, and future experiences can be and should be used as building blocks for engagement. Much of the experimental inspiration I utilized throughout my project was produced from re-reading specific learning experiences I had over the summer. It is necessary for growth and progress to constantly be reminded of how you got to the moment you are in.

Performing, educating, and choreographing are firmly rooted through assimilated knowledge, connections, and relationships. To continue to be an artist and a person of the community, it is imperative that I remember where I come from and where I am going. I know that there will be moments of stress, forgetfulness, and confusion, but I hope to continue exploring these conversations and engage in meaningful relationships throughout my artistic endeavors.