STAGE PEACOCKING: THE AMPLIFIED SELF

IN PERFORMANCE

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

Within this thesis, I will be exploring the notion of authenticity in performance. I have found that the word 'authenticity' can take on a litany of meanings and is not necessarily synonymous with 'actuality.' Throughout this thesis, I am asking: Can something be fabricated construction, yet hold some sort of compelling truth that convinces us of its reality, in some way? I believe there is authenticity, a deep sense of truth, within even the most make-believe of situations. Several creative methods for exploring authenticity are expounded upon, including: 'stage peacocking,' preliminary regression, imaginative play, creating a persona, physical embodiment, dilation or stage presence, amplification, asymmetry and performance identity. This thesis is in no way a comprehensive list of how to experience authenticity on stage, but is a guide built upon my own, personal experiences in choreography and performance to offer insight and direction for others who are on a similar quest.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

<u>Stage Peacocking and Transparency of Self</u>

How do we, as performers, cross the threshold between reality and heightened reality but still maintain a sense of authenticity? How does a performer become something real in an imagined scenario? Is there a way to go beyond pretending and be fully present in a contrived environment? I am grappling with these questions in my research. It can be difficult to explain the transcendent quality of performance. In performance, we engage in a heightened reality: a multidimensional, nonlinear realm of artistic expression. When a male peacock fans his elegant, large tail feathers to attract a mate, he is not putting on an extraneous mask, but accessing a part of himself that already exists. It is not wearing a guise so much as an unveiling practice for a specific purpose. What if a performer could employ a similar ritual of display when approaching the performance space?

While writing my original thesis proposal for the Department of Modern Dance at the University of Utah, I was convinced that if a performer was pretending to be someone

else in a 'put on' manner and offered no self reference, authenticity was simply impossible and the performer was nothing more than a stage peacock, flaunting an artificial facade. I titled my proposal, 'Stage Peacocking vs. Finding the Self in Performance.' I have since experienced an enormous paradigm shift in which 'stage peacocking' no longer holds a negative connotation.

My original bias was that 'stage peacocking' was an artificial practice in which performers donned a metaphoric mask and pretended to be something they were not; now I see it more as the act of unearthing new sides of a performer requisite for the work at hand. The male peacock is not pretending, he is fulfilling his mission as a performer of his species. He is destined to do this. Dancers, who are artists, have the same prerogative. They rise to a heightened level of performance and/or choreography that they are destined to fulfill. Performance analyst Richard Schechner observed the Tsembaga tribesman preparing to dance the *konj kaiko* or 'pig dance' in Papua New Guinea and relays:

> Our performer host showed us his headdress of four foot long feathers. Then he stepped out from the darkness of the hut into the brilliant glare of the sunshine. As he emerged, his casual air vanished and he literally thrust his chest forward and up, gave a long whooping call, put on his headdress and displayed himself. He was costumed...not to a fictional character whose life was separable from his own, but to show himself in a special way. (1988, p. 122)

Stage peacocking has, in fact, become a method of illuminating authenticity, synonymous with transcendence, or going beyond pretending to fully become something else. Through a process of digging in and/or peeling away layers to unearth new sides of the performer, stage peacocking is the act of actually becoming an entirely new identity in the performance moment.

Because performance is a heightened reality, woven meticulously with artistic

choices, the atmosphere can potentially draw an audience in. The desired result is for the elements of performance to excite, dazzle, and pique our interest as an event separate from the everyday realm, yet also contain truths that touch us on a human level. Mixing the worlds of heightened reality and reality can create opportunities to explore authenticity as performers find a physical embodiment of the choreographer's ideas.

Starting with physical movement allows for a natural momentum to be present and the dancer can be a conduit for impulse thus rendering the performance unforced. It is a matter of experiencing energy in the moment instead of acting or pretending anything related to performance moment. If a dance is somewhat sorrowful, one should not think about trying to look anguished, (scrunching the face, looking downward and so forth), but allow the hunched over position and heaviness in the movement to do the telling. Everything about the movement itself should speak to thematic integrity.

Though performers can find moments that parallel reality, performing is inevitably about representation. Much like written language is a set of symbolic pictures or letters used to communicate concepts, choreographed movements are a representation of the choreographer's thoughts, ideas and the overarching theme. Movement is the language of the choreographer. If performers are interested in feeling real on stage, constantly looking for ways to transcend the construction of representation, how is this achieved and who is the judge of authenticity? Contemporary Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, poses an interesting question that helps me reevaluate my own performance and choreographic approaches: 'Can it be fake and at the same time authentic?' (Hirshhorn Museum Exhibit, Washington D.C., Dec. 2012).

Can authenticity, in fact, be present in both the previously lived experience and an

imagined scenario? If the stage is associated with a heightened reality and uses

representation to showcase that reality, this does not necessarily undermine authenticity.

The imagination can be a powerful vehicle for developing believable characters and is, in

fact, a kind of lived reality. Throughout this thesis, I aim to offer suggestions to other

performers for embodying authenticity as well as tools for choreographers in creating

work and coaching dancers to find a deep sense of authenticity even within the most

illusory of worlds.

CHAPTER II

AUTHENTICITY

What is Authenticity?

After watching Tom Hooper's film adaptation of *Les Misérables*, I was haunted for weeks by visions of a dirty, shattered, and shrinking Anne Hathaway singing *I Dreamed a Dream*. Something about that scene stirred me at a gut level and filled me with deep sorrow for the downtrodden and unfortunate everywhere. How could a song that I had heard so many times before seem as though it was my first time hearing it? Something in Hathaway's performance allowed for a grand transformation to take place. Not able to shake the image of the tuberculosis stricken, penniless prostitute, I watched the stage version a few days later and was taken to places of introspection as well, albeit not as viscerally and vividly as I was by the film. Upon further reflection, I decided it was the vulnerability in Hathaway's voice and the unbridled emotion bursting out of her that convinced me to believe her so deeply. Hathaway, as Fantine, did not try to control the melodic tune of the song or sing each note perfectly. The scene was what it should be, a terrifying plight that would cause one to shake with the fear of uncertainty and

impending death. Her performance spoke to me because it was authentic.

When I think of something that is authentic, the words 'genuine,' 'real,' 'unprecedented,' and 'truthful' come to mind. Merriam Webster's dictionary expounds on authenticity as, 'worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact; conforming to an original so as to reproduce essential features; not false or imitation; true to one's own personality, spirit or character' (Merriam & Webster, 2013). When discussing authenticity in relation to the performing arts, for me, there must be something within the performance that I do not have to work to believe. Within the characterization, or plotline, I want to be seduced unknowingly until I have surrendered to an entirely different world. In simple terms, if I have to struggle to be convinced that what is happening could be real, I tune out very quickly. A performance should, in my mind, entice audience members to be swept away into this alternate dimension of reality.

Many times performance is a heightened, alternate reality, which paradoxically helps the audience to feel something 'real' in their own lives. The world in which we live is not one of people breaking out into song as they go grocery shopping or pump gas. Why then do we sometimes get sucked into an alternate dream world and accept it as truth for the moment? *Lilia* and *maya* of the Sanskrit text are words that refer to performance as illusional game play; *lilia* meaning 'sport or play' and *maya* meaning 'illusory' (Schechner, 1988, p. xix).   Performance researcher, Richard Schechner, suggests that the double negative of performance as an illusion within an illusion creates something that might well become more real and truthful than the ordinary. It would seem that there is, in fact, room for authenticity in the world of musicals, make believe, and science fiction; viewers feel a momentary suspension of disbelief and connect to

something.

Does something have to be 'real' in order to be authentic? Authenticity may not necessarily be synonymous with the word 'fact' or 'actuality.' Can one have an authentic reaction to something that is obviously not reality because it does, in some way, relate to his/her life? There are many actors who create a stage or film persona that the audience believes, even if they are portraying a life nothing like their own.

On the contrary, I have seen television series, live plays and dances wherein I wanted to believe that the characters were in love (or otherwise being authentic), but the chemistry was uncomfortably forced and completely devoid of any palpable, raw passion; dreadfully unbearable to watch. What is the difference, if in both scenarios the performers were portraying something outside their actual lives? A possible answer can be found in Koestler's creative precondition theory.

According to Arthur Koestler, author of *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe,* all major creative acts in science, art, and religion are preceded by a preliminary regression; reverting back to a primitive level of negation will enable one to find the essence of what is needed to carry out the creative act (Barba & Savarese, 2005, p. 56). The negation principle implies that there is a preconditioned action that is necessary for the action to occur, (such as bending the knees before jumping). So, if we were to look at someone getting punched in the face, the wind up before the blow would be considered the creative precondition (or negation) to the punch (action). Studying the wind up could give us further clarification for the essence of the punch.

Performers can likewise benefit from reverting back to the original or basic premise

of a role, such as the historical setting, essence of the character's behavior and then dig into the complexities of this character further as the performance develops. Perhaps an authentic performer simply understands the value of laying qualitative groundwork. By qualitative groundwork I mean getting into the character for him or herself in a given role. Qualitative groundwork is the behind the scenes preparation that an audience does not always witness. This could include creating a persona, engaging in imaginative play, or impulsive improvisation. In addition, the performer could draw from personal experiences or even immersively emulate another to lay the groundwork for an authentic performance. As this principle pertains to dancers, one can find the primal premise, (what is most essential to the dance), through understanding the roots of the movement vocabulary. Is one moment in the phrase meant to be voracious, the next lofty, static or voluminous? Finding the roots of the movement and exemplifying those roots will help to establish a qualitative groundwork. Once this groundwork is established and embodied, instantaneous discoveries can be made that lend authenticity to the performance. So much of performing is about peeling off layers to uncover what is essential to the dance or role. Through the act of unpeeling and unearthing, performers can actually dig into alternate dimensions of reality. Perhaps this is why the so called 'unreal' or 'constructed environment' can actually feel real.

According to Eugenio Barba, authentic performance also contains an environment spiked with opposing forces. Within any creative process there is, as Barba says, a utilitarian life and a chaotic life; a purposeful organization of material (utilitarian), and a sporadic, unleashing of uncontrollable happenings (chaotic). When these two lives collide, we are left with a big bang creation that the Chinese call, *li,* or 'an asymmetrical

and unforeseeable order of organization which characterizes organic life' (Barba &

Savarese, 2005, p. 58). Part of what makes something feel authentic lies in its

asymmetry. Can you imagine how strange it would be if, in this imperfect world, every

human had a perfectly symmetrical face, or raindrops always made perfectly round splash

marks? Something would feel a little off, I presume. If choreographers can discover how

to supply an asymmetrical atmosphere comprised of organized steps and more open

structures, like improvisation, an organic breeding ground exists to experience an

unpredictable immediacy of action. Opposites, (such as a utilitarian life and a chaotic

life) going head to head produce something real in the moment because the interaction

between the two is unprecedented and no one can predict what the outcome will be. It

happens as it happens. It is authentic.

The best explanation I have found for engaging in unpredictable immediacy exists

within the principle of dilation. Performer dilation, in its simplest sense, is an opening up

of mental or physical pores and waiting to receive new information, like walking in the

dark slowly waiting for potentialities (Barba & Savarese, 2005, p. 56). A dilated body is

a body primed for creative expression with the senses sharpened, alert and ready for

action; dilation is what we like to call 'stage presence.' Once these mental or physical

pores are open to the surrounding space and action, a performer can gain (and extend)

valuable information. Dilation is what differentiates the performing arts from ordinary,

everyday life and gives performance its sense of heightened energy.

Working in tandem, a dilated body/mind can offer opportunities for a genuine

performance quality to take place. For me, it is not enough to see technical virtuosity

paired with a blank stare. There is something to be said for activating the mind while in

motion: it adds another complex layer of believability that I refer to as 'living inside the experience' as opposed to merely doing steps, reciting lines, or going through a routine.

> Physical training exercises make it possible for the performer to develop a new behaviour, a new way of moving, of acting and reacting: s/he thus acquires a specific skill. But this skill stagnates and becomes unidimensional if it does not strike deep, if it does not reach down into the performer's being, made up of mental processes, the psychic sphere, the nervous system. The bridge between the physical and the mental causes a slight change of consciousness that makes it possible to overcome the monotony of repetition. The dilation of the physical body is in fact of no use if it is not accompanied by a dilation of the mental body. (Barba & Savarese, 2005, p. 57)

This phenomenon of dilation is present when thought fuels movement and movement fuels thought. I feel this within my own performance experiences. Motion has a way of unearthing new sensations because it requires multisensory engagement. For me, movement itself, the actual sensations of air whipping past the body or reverberations coursing through my limbs from repetitive stomping, kicking or shaking help to further involve the mind. Although I mentally prepare myself to enter a dance on stage, the true turning point happens when the movement begins to bubble under the surface of my skin and then pour out of me. *That* is when a mind is primed for further investigation. As the body moves, my mental capacity is somehow activated, moved to a place of asking questions, making discoveries and finding new insights.

While in motion, especially within a structured improvisation, one must be a conduit for thought, yet allow that thought to fly along with the speed of that motion, much like keeping up with a bullet train or being present in stillness. If one stops for only a second, deactivating the mental processes, the thread between body and mind is lost and we experience a breaking of the spell. Performing dance authentically requires one to be present, to make choices in the moment and through this split second decision

making, find a deeper body/mind connection in order to live authentically inside the experience.

> Moving in space is a manifestation of a way of thinking: it is motion stripped naked. Analogously, a thought is also motion, an action--that is, something that mutates, starting at one place in order to arrive at another, following routes that abruptly change direction. The performer can start from the physical or from the mental, it doesn't matter which, provided that in the transition from one to the other, a unity is reconstructed. (Barba & Savarese, 2005, p. 53)

I theorize that if the physical and mental dilation is not piqued in the performer, that the audience will not be engaged. As we have established, authentic performances have one thing in common, the yin and yang principle: a harmonious balance of opposites. As stated previously, authenticity stems from the interaction between a chaotic life and a utilitarian life, as well as two other opposites that Barba refers to as seduction and comprehension (Barba & Savarese, 2005, p. 52). *Seduction* being the mysterious, spellbinding element that sweeps a viewer into an alternate world and *comprehension*, the more concrete concepts an audience can recognize and understand right away.

Barba's theory of seduction and comprehension is similar to Stanislavsky's physical action concept in which, 'action is not only external, i.e., connected with motion in the course of which man changes his position in space, but also internal (psychological), taking place in the consciousness of man and causing a change in his mental condition' (Litvinoff, 1972, p. 41). Engaging the creative mind in the moment paves the way for a body to explore authenticity in the alternate dimension of performance; let us now explore how creating a persona can also bring life and authenticity to movement.

CHAPTER III

CREATING AN AUTHENTIC PERSONA

Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre

Russian theater legend, Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavsky, was indeed partial to his actors living in the scene as if those were the actors' actual realities for the time being. Words and lines themselves were never as important to him as *how* they were spoken and felt; the actor's delivery of them was key (Toporkov, 2004, p. 52). Some choreographers, such as Pina Bausch, have adopted similar philosophies to heighten the believability of a dancer's performance. I find myself much more captivated by what a dancer brings to my movement than whether they can perform it exactly the way I did. Precision and reproduction of the steps is, in a way, secondary to the performance of them. Dance steps are nothing without intention and performance quality; stage presence and mental alertness enliven the movement to give it significance for the viewer and/or doer. Without these core qualities, steps are dull and lackluster, in my opinion, no matter how high the leg is or how turned out the feet are. Being fully present in body, mind, and spirit allows the performance to come to life.

Stanislavsky understood the power of the imaginative mind and its capability to

transport actors into another realm, electrically charging a scene. Stanislavsky's rehearsals were painstaking, filled with taxing background information that the audience would never see, but he believed this meticulous set up was crucial for getting the actor in a frame of mind to *become someone else* rather than to pretend to be someone else (Toporkov, 2004, p. 16-22). The following are remarks he gave to a pupil:

> This is utter madness, the monstrous destruction of his world, a tragedy! But you didn't create this world, you didn't experience it inside, you didn't try to bring it to life on stage...did you, when you were alone in your office, with the windows shut so no one could see you, during the action, or before rehearsals began, in your own small corner, actually live through your character's little actions: dusting, cleaning the lamp, putting notes into piles, sharpening pencils, etc., etc.? At best you were trying to find ways of saying the dialogue, how would you deliver your first line, when you open the window to your office, when the part of your role the audience can see begins. You didn't put down the roots through which to feed your role. (Toporkov, 2004, p. 18)

To achieve the degree of convincing that Stanislavsky was after, he urged his actors to take on the minute, daily tasks of the said role, actually doing them before the scene opened and contemplate what the character's mind frame would be like. It was not uncommon for the great master to spend 3 or 4 hours on a single line or standing posture (Toporkov, 2004, p.15-25). The Stanislavsky system of acting was a precursor to the modern day method actor, in which an actor deeply immerses him/herself into the world of the person he/she is portraying; trying to find every detail of this person's existence (or would be existence in the case of fictional characters).

As is now quite obvious, Stanislavsky was interested in physicalizing his actors' movements in order for real emotive expression to issue forth. 'Experiencing' as Stanislavsky called it, was the simple matter of association psychology; experiencing a feeling from past memory or imaginatively creating a memory to evoke emotional expression in the actual moment of performance. It was Stanislavsky's desire to:

Call up in oneself a feeling once experienced and, having called it up, to convey it by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, images expressed in words...art is that human activity which consists in one man's consciously conveying to others, by certain external signs, the feelings he has experienced, and in others being infected by those feelings and also experiencing them. (Whyman, 2008, p. 49)

These tactics and methods were Stanislavsky's attempt at removing the fourth, voyeuristic wall, so to speak. There was no theater, just stories unfolding. Similarly, contemporary Vsevolod Meyerhold created what he termed 'biomechanics,' which required an actor to learn specific movements and gestures to further enhance emotional expression. In his mind, an actor's physical and emotional states were inextricably linked. By developing a number of body poses, gestures and movement based expressions, Meyerhold shaped actors that could call up emotions from past experience on stage, thus heightening an actor's believability in character roles (Borovsky & Leach, 1999, p. 364).

Scottish thespian, movie and television actor, Robert Carlyle, has managed to create one of the most vivid characterizations of the ABC series *Once Upon a Time* through his use of gesture, and movement based expressions. For his portrayal of Rumpelstiltskin, television critic, James Hibberd, hails Carlyle as 'arguably broadcast TV's most extreme character, a devilish, vindictive, childish wizard who offers to fulfill desperate wishes 'for a price'' (Hibberd, 2012).   According to fellow cast members, Carlyle's real life disposition could not be further from this Rumpelstiltskin character and they had to remind themselves, before the cameras were rolling, that they were afraid of him (Hulu.com, 2012).

When asked how he put that particular characterization together, Carlyle recalled that his character was an amalgam of three things: 1.) His work with masks in drama

school, several years previous, (noting that everything can change under a mask), 2.)

Italian Commedia dell'Arte and the practice of grand gesture, and 3.) the voice of his

six year old son, high pitched and slightly throaty. Of his performance, Carlyle

remarked,

> There's no way I could speak in my normal voice while looking so extraordinary
> and while having this bizarre stuff to say. I tried many different types of voices
> and the thing that I landed on was completely by chance, really, thanks to my son.
> He was wandering through the house making these high pitched voices and
> sounds... I thought, 'Rumpelstiltskin has a childlike quality to him, he kind of
> enjoys gleefully tricking people.' He's 300 years old. He's met so many people
> over the years that he's been impressed and unimpressed by, he's taken on their
> voices, he's taken on their accents and their mannerisms. He's layered so much
> he's lost himself. (Hibberd, 2012)

Obviously Carlyle is not an outlandish, fairytale creature in real life, but the

detailed persona he created has allowed for an enticing, and completely believable

transformation to take place. Starting in a physical place of gestures and postures, he

then dug into the mental realm of what Rumpelstiltskin might be thinking and how he

might act. Digging deeply into the core of Rumpelstilskin's persona allowed Carlyle to

transform himself and fully become the character.

Within the early stages of creating my thesis work, *The Rolling Main*, I

experienced challenges as I made ineffective attempts at layering. This caused me to lose

my intention, much like Rumpelstiltskin lost his identity. Layering on too many

extraneous coatings muddled my purpose and clarity with regard to the overall goal of

authenticity. My goal in making this piece was to dig in and peel away the false

'performance' layers to find what makes something authentic. Ironically, the more I

worked, the more I was layering on new movement material and gestural motifs like a

thick mask of unnecessary makeup. In the next chapter I will discuss this process and the

struggle to find my own authenticity as a choreographer.

CHAPTER IV

CHOREOGRAPHING AUTHENTICITY

Choreographing Authenticity through Physical Action

While choreographing my thesis concert work, *The Rolling Main*, my cast and I experienced an interesting process of mixing one's own personal memories, physical action and imaginative play into the creation of duet material. The key to unearthing authenticity within the dancers' relations was found in the interplay of imagination and physical action. During my earliest stages of the choreographic process, I thought I had to keep layering on multiple ideas if a section felt unclear. At one point, my futile attempts included an entire section in which the dancers were lip syncing to Elvis while they were swaying in a doowop style. What I discovered was that in order for the dancers to unearth authenticity, they had to lose that external 'performance' shell and dig deeper inside themselves. Once we began to dig, we started to find a unifying, authentic thread and the dance began to make more sense.

During this experimental period, I asked one couple to recall a time in their lives when they were extremely afraid or in perilous danger. Upon recalling this memory, I

had them walk in the dark, following closely behind one another and sensing each other's

proximity. After sensing each other, I asked them to improvise while staying in as close

proximity as possible without touching. What I wanted to capture was an unsettled

feeling, like when the hair on the back of the neck stands up, to see if any interesting

movement gems would spring forth. What I got was a lot of careful, boring walking in a

dim studio, and rightly so! In the words of Stanislavsky,

> A physical action is easier to grasp than a psychological attitude; it is more
> accessible than an elusive inner feeling. It is easier to capture, is more concrete,
> and is more readily perceived. A physical action is connected with all other
> elements. Truly there is no physical action without a will towards it, a
> direction, a use of the imagination. (Litvinoff, 1972, p. 3)

I had given them a psychological frame of mind, but not enough of a springboard for

physical movement beyond tiptoeing and slow arm lifting. It is very comical in

retrospect, but needed to take place in order for me to try other avenues of creative

exploration.

Taking another direction, I gave my couple a specific, strictly physical task. One

dancer was told to cling to the other at all costs. For whatever reason, she had to be held

by this other dancer and her counterpart was told to remove the clingy dancer at all costs.

There was a lot of running, chasing, jumping and clinging that ensued, which was much

more interesting than cautious foot falls. Later, I asked them to think of themselves as

winter coats, being put on or taken off. One dancer was given the task to desperately put

on the coat (which was the other dancer) to avoid freezing to death, while the other

was burning up and needed to remove the sweltering garment. I tried this scenario with

three couples and strangely, each duet had a completely different quality, flavor and

intention. I video recorded each pair dancing this scenario about four times and began to

extract what was most captivating to my choreographic eye.

After viewing the multiple recordings, I identified one couple's seeming intent and amplified it. Giving the dancers a concrete persona or character to embody, I told one dancer, 'It looks like you are an insect caught in a net.' I said to the other, 'You *are* the net, resistant and pliable like a rubber band, yet always snapping back to capture your prey.' When the duet started looking too violent for my taste, I offered another layer of guidance, 'He's trying to help you, offering his arms as support, but you aren't quite able to accept his offer. For a moment you want to accept his help and then suddenly snap out of it and pull away.'

If I had continued working solely from an emotional context, we would have produced a lot of pantomime and base acting as was the case with our walking in the dark exploration. Because I was not going for melodramatics or artifice, I had to work from a physical standpoint, much like Stanislavsky, and then charge these interesting movement findings with an emotional intention. The result was a series of human interactions and life metaphors with which I was pleasantly surprised.

Though I was delighted by most of the physical interactions within my thesis piece, some were more of a challenge for the dancers to embody than others. There was one section in particular that never quite peaked and reached the state of transformation or transcendence that I was after. In this section, the entire group lifted one performer for an extended period of time. I struggled in coaching my dancers to fully inhabit the mood of this section. My goal was for her to look weightless and be entranced by a sense of wonder and amazement at her surroundings. This dancer, however, always had the slightest sense of apprehension, as did the people carrying her and I accept full blame for

this. First of all, I put someone in the air for 2 minutes straight who was not used to being lifted and secondly, I did not supply her with the appropriate cognitive imagery that worked for *her*.

I needed to find a way to better articulate this dancer's performance intent. I tried multiple images with this dancer, but nothing quite clicked: I tried instructing her to be curious about the space, as if she was seeing everything in that room for the first time. When that was difficult for her to engage with, I asked her to imagine that she was under water, floating or being buoyed up to the surface by waves, bobbing effortlessly and riding the currents. When that did not work, I tried asking her to embody the music…to BE the rich, full notes of the music resonating up and down as people carried her, but none of these images were making a connection to how she performed it. She continually looked a little stiff, a little apprehensive and a little uncomfortable, far from luxurious and trusting.

If a choreographer is faced with the dilemma of repeatedly asking for a specific performance intent and never quite reaches the desired result, perhaps the responsibility of creating an image should be turned over to the dancer. Encouraging the dancer to come up with imagery that will aid in his/her transformation gives ownership to that dancer and greater accessibility to physical embodiment. Dancers can conjure up specific, imagery based or character based persona to bring about authenticity in performance much as Stanislavsky did in acting.

Imagination is key in making these transformations. American actress and acclaimed acting instructor Stella Adler, developed her own version of the Stanislavsky system in which imagination engagement was critical to embodying a persona, stating:

Imagination refers to the actor's ability to accept new situations of life and believe in them. From your imagination come your reactions to the things that you like and dislike. If you cannot do this, you had better give up acting. Your whole life will depend on your ability to recognize that you are in a profession where your talent is built on imagination. (Giebel, 2000, p. 161)

Performers can tackle the unknown with a strong imaginary persona and provide a compelling portrayal of a choreographer's intention. Robert Carlyle is evidence that a fictitious persona can seem fully real even if one has never met this character outside one's own head. The imagination evokes one's own possible reactions to any given scenario, thus providing support and direction in decision making during the performance. To quote theater theorist Sanford Meisner, an active imagination can add greatly to one's ability to 'live truthfully under imaginary circumstances' (Giebel, 2000, p. 161).

CHAPTER V

THE IMAGINATION: IMMERSION AND PERMISSION

<u>Imaginative Play</u>

Up to a certain age, one does not limit the imaginary self. As children, we cut open refrigerator boxes and built rocket ships or submarines to visit lands far away from where we were. The imaginary world tends to highlight hidden characteristics within us that are clamoring to come out and have substance. Johan Huizinga, play and culture analyst, relates that play 'creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection' (Ackerman, 2000, p. 6-7). In the world of the imagination, we are allowed to be whatever we want to be. Typically, as we age, we begin to censor the self to appear more grown up or 'respectable.' The playful, childlike self does not always appear to fit in with social ideals of proper adult decorum. Ironically, these two worlds that are normally distinct from one another could be considered dimensions of the same inner world of an individual. In my own experience, the imaginative self is a useful key to understanding who I actually am.

> For humans, play is a refuge from ordinary life, where one is exempt from life's
> methods, customs and decrees. Play always has a sacred place---some version of a
> playground---in which it happens. This hallowed ground is usually outlined, so that
> it's clearly set off from the rest of reality…the world of play favors exuberance,
> license, abandon. Shenanigans are allowed, strategies can be tried, selves can be
> revised. (Ackerman, 2000, p. 6)

When engaged in imaginative play, I am not busy censoring myself and can

therefore unearth new sides of myself that I never knew existed. Imaginative play is

centered on the notion of immersion and permission. When performers are given

permission to fully immerse themselves in the world of the imagination, they are actually

stepping into a new dimension of reality, a new dimension of the self. Within this

alternate reality, new rules are created, old rules are released temporarily, and new

discoveries and possibilities emerge.

Both the imaginative self and the actual self are part of who we are. Humans

simply choose to reveal or conceal differing portions of this dual identity in regard to

social etiquette. If looking at the dual self in regard to performance, using the

imagination allows performers to somewhat predict what their truest reaction might be in

a given situation that they have never experienced. In order to remain versatile, a

performer should become acquainted with imaginative play. Through imaginative play,

performers give themselves permission to embody or 'try on' actions, attitudes, gestural

movement, voices, and behaviors of another. Performers can also find a sense of the

actual self within a role that he or she has never experienced through the imagination's

strong ability to convince our minds of multiple realities. According to *Deep Play*

author, Diane Ackerman,

> Play may have different strengths, not all of them mystical and soul stealing. But
> even in its least intoxicating forms, play feels satisfying, absorbing and has rules
> and a life of its own, while offering rare challenges. It gives us the opportunity to

perfect ourselves. It's organic to who and what we are, a process as instinctive as breathing. Much of human life unfolds as play. (2000, p. 12)

The world of imagination feels so real as a child. I remember going out into the apple orchards near my childhood home and picking dandelion weeds. Singing loudly, I scattered those feathery seeds into the wind, skipping and twirling with hands on hips in great fervor. Only it was not *me* picking the dandelions...it was Belle from Disney's animated classic, *Beauty and the Beast*. I was Belle. Completely immersed in this world, I took on her Delsartean body postures and recited her every line. I was an adept imitator from what I am told, but in that moment, I was not trying to imitate Belle. Instead, I knew I was going to be her. I remember fully embodying that persona and being completely swept away into another dimension that felt one hundred percent real. Similarly, I would watch behind the scenes interview footage, of various films, and then find myself looking in the bathroom mirror while answering Larry King's questions about my upcoming movies and speaking in a British accent. As Diane Ackerman states,

> Children can be extremely serious about play. Their games, though 'fun,' aren't always silly or filled with laughter. Play is an activity enjoyed for its own sake. It is our brain's favorite way of learning and maneuvering. (Ackerman, 2000, p 11)

In relation to performance methods, the dimension of imaginary play can be an active maneuver in which we are deeply living inside the contrived performance moment. While performing, we are, as Meisner puts it, 'living truthfully under imaginary circumstances' (Giebel, 2000, p. 161). Actors and dancers have the exciting opportunity to exist imaginatively within a more concrete framework of actuality, such as choreography or a plotline. Performers are allowed to tap into their creative minds, yet are tethered to their mature, actual selves. This interplay brings out a hybrid reality referred to as entertainment or performance. Something about mixing a heightened

performance reality with actuality is very seductive and fulfilling as, to reiterate, it is 'a temporary, limited perfection' (Ackerman, 2000, p. 6-7). Perhaps this fleeting 'perfection' is what is so fulfilling for me to engage in as a performer, the possibility that as an imperfect being, I can become perfect momentarily inside my own imagination.

During my first year of graduate school, I had the pleasure of working with choreographer and professor Satu Hummasti in a trio entitled, *Never Let Me Go*. Within the piece, we had multiple opportunities to engage the imagination, weaving in and out of a permeable layer; on the one side existed a heightened reality and the other, actuality of self. Scenario vignettes that incorporated playful interactions, the idea of loss, and tongue in cheek humor provided our playground. One section on the heightened reality side, which we called the 'bad dance' section, was exactly that. Our goal was to create monologue prefaced solos that were made up of the most contrived, overused dance movements we could think of. My solo consisted of a chaîne, double stag leap going to the floor, a series of agonizing reaches (accompanied by anguished facial expressions) and an acrobatic aerial. My monologue was equally contrived, 'this dance reminds me of relationships. The push and the pull. And sometimes...very messy break ups.'

This short 'bad' dance was completely ridiculous. As was intended by Professor Hummasti, the movement was a far cry from thought provoking artistry, and the prose equally unprovocative, yet I had to step into a heightened character, the mind frame of a bad dance soloist, and convince myself that this solo had substance! In the performance, I used my imagination to convince myself that my monologue was a stream of important words to the wise. Using shards of validity, such as how I would really act when I am

telling someone something important, paired with the farcical, (i.e., doing chaîne turns and stag leaps), I engaged in a believable satire. As a performer I faced a paradox of how to find authenticity in both irony and humor within this characterization. Although this scenario was complete mockery, I fully engaged my imagination to believe in what I was doing and saying. I became this heightened, ostentatious and over the top character. In turn, as evidenced by the eruptions of laughter, the audience believed that *I believed* that my bad dance was good.

As another example of finding authenticity in heightened characterization, I had the opportunity to work with a fellow graduate student on a 'mockumentary' film documenting the differences and similarities between the modern dance and ballet departments of the University of Utah. The film followed two promising students from each department. I was cast as the neurotic modern dancer obsessed with 'feeling deeply.' Talking to my body parts, convinced that the world needed my art to open their eyes and see the world, I was, yet again, saying ridiculous lines, and infusing them with a serious reverence. In this role, I believe I was able to convince people that I was a weird modern dancer with a fetish for ninja moves and an affinity for letting the 'external become the internal' and other esoteric sayings.

At one moment in the film, my character is recounting her time spent at the university and how grateful she was to learn how to use her voice in dance; the film then cuts to my character screaming at the top of her lungs, while lunging in the studio and falling flat to the ground. In another scene, the character is rolling on the floor with her classmates, doing an improvisation exercise with intense concentration. From what I am told, this particular character was believable because I, as performer, was giving weight

to the emotions, ideas and thoughts that this character would potentially be harboring. I embodied stereotypes of modern dancers and amplified them to transform into this character. I used my imagination, exaggeration and indeed some personal experiences as a modern dancer, to step inside this outlandish persona of the character.

These experiences illustrate that along with the imagination comes physical and mental porosity. When a performer is dilated, as Barba says, he or she is poised and ready for whatever will happen. Within this framework, performers can be permeable to spontaneity much like a musician is when composing. As Meisner says, 'a composer doesn't write down what he thinks would be effective; he works from his heart. It is not intellectual but emotional and impulsive' (Giebel, 2000, p. 161). Performers can do a great deal of preparation for a performance, but perhaps more attention could be given to the flow and impulse of the performance moment itself. How does one simply remain open and receptive to find authenticity on stage?

One possibility of how to remain receptive could be found within Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of 'attention as psychic energy' (1990, p. 30). When a dancer is within the performance terrain, all senses are open, waiting to be a conductive pathway for choreographic intention. Dancers are given substantially complex movement phrases, patterns, directions, qualitative specifications and performance intentions. Amidst all this, one can hone in on a responsiveness of the body and mind, or porousness, to make choices. In the performance moment of decision making, one is required to act instantaneously. Of this split second decision making, Csikszentmihalyi states that we can be fully observant:

> While forming such a judgment seems to be a lightning fast reaction, it does
> take place in real time. And it does not happen automatically: there is a distinct

process that makes such reactions possible, a process called attention...Attention is like energy in that without it no work can be done, and in doing work it is dissipated...We create ourselves by how we invest this energy...And it is energy under our control...hence, attention is our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience. (1990, p. 31, 33)

In considering physicality and attentive decision making, I am reminded of a choreographic process in which I had to take a multidirectional, travelling phrase and form it into a forward facing, stationary solo. As intended by the choreographer, the solo became unrecognizable from the original material. Using dilated responsiveness, I negotiated what movements could stay and altered others to face forward. With only 5 minutes to create the solo, I found that physical motion quickened my cognitive senses in decision making and vice versa. Though my mind was making conscious, attentive choices, my body followed momentous physical impulses. I found that one can experience something similar to Jean Dobie Giebel's description of impulsive drama.

The choice of an action, or beat shift, results in a release of tension when this information is received and the selection made. The action pursued in turn creates a new tension, propelling the drama forward. This method of analysis correlates with Langer's definition of rhythm in music, as a 'setting up of a new tension by the resolution of former ones,' and consequently determines the rhythm of performance. (2000, p. 165)

Because the choreographer later encouraged me to keep finding new things inside the solo each time I performed it, I noticed subtle variations and new impulses arise. Every time I performed it, the base structure was the same, but the delivery was slightly different, which kept it asymmetrically alive and explorative for me. Meisner claimed that through repetition, one could access his or her 'inner impulses' or the source of 'organic creativity' (Geibel, 2000, p. 166). This statement resonates with me in relationship to this solo. I feel like I experienced the very thing Meisner is talking about.

As a performer, hopefully one will have the opportunity to explore a wide range of

roles, requirements and tasks. Sometimes the choreography is intentionally over the top,

laced with flashy artifice; sometimes it is quietly nuanced and subtle. Whatever the

material, it can be performed as believable and real if one is willing to believe it in the

moment and follow its impulses. Stanislavsky states:

> Look at the part as a whole. Let the audience follow the logic of your struggle,
> get them interested in what happens to you, so that they can't take their eyes off
> you, so that they're not only afraid to applaud, but even to make the slightest
> move that would prevent them from seeing all the subtleties of your behavior.
> That is real acting. It doesn't entertain, it strikes deep into the heart of an
> audience. (Toporkov, 2004, p. 36)

The same is true with real dancing. As a dancer is completely engaged in the realities of

a performance environment, being sensitive to impulse, the audience will hopefully be

inclined to follow that same wavelength of impulses and accept the event as

'a temporary, limited perfection' (Ackerman, 2000, p. 6-7). Through activating the

imagination and a full investment in the performance moment, dilated performers provide

audiences with permission to be equally immersed.

CHAPTER VI

AMPLIFICATION AND PERFORMANCE IDENTITY

The Amplified Self

There is something daunting, yet magical about the preparation for performance. It can be a mixture of quickened breathing, visiting the bathroom more than once, and a general case of excited nerves. For me, as the dance begins, I experience a shift. Though I thought I had sufficiently prepared myself by thinking through the dance and doing some of the phrase material, once I hear the drawing back of the curtain, a reverence occurs, and my senses are sharpened, like a pupil dilating in the dark. I am heightened, amplified.

Dancers in general can experience this as a 'letting go' of the intense outer shell and acknowledge that there are imminent events about to unfold. By this particular point, one knows the dance, one knows his/her intention and has been rehearsing the material for months. As the music and motion begin, it is appropriate to simply trust what he or she knows and be present. To quote Giebel, 'the skills of watching, listening, and waiting for the impulse to act are essential...they create what (Susanne) Langer refers to

as 'the constant illusion of an imminent future'' (2000, p. 165).

In the performing arts, many times we seek to engage with something bigger than ourselves in hopes of gaining new perspectives. The method of how we do so is not as black and white as I once thought. One does not have to choose between imagination or lived reality to give a compelling performance or make an authentic choreographic work. One can be true to the self and/or engage the imagination to find a sense of authenticity.

Referring again to *Never Let Me Go*, two distinct identities were being amplified throughout the piece, a characterized persona and the real me. The lovely and unique thing about performing this piece was that the performance nerves fell away instantaneously before the dance ever started, yet I always felt amplified and ready to accept the energy of the audience. We were directed to dance playfully prior to the curtain being drawn and as it parted, we were to sing a Velvet Underground song as if singing in the shower. Postcurtain draw, we continued to sing at the tops of our lungs, jumping and bouncing around, being silly and free, the way one supposedly dances when no one is watching. Though we were at ease, we were also amplified. It was our aim to be vibrant, conductive, and interactive with the exciting energy surrounding us.

As choreographic steps materialized, we were still very much ourselves as it was the springboard for this particular dance. The steps never stifled us nor dominated because we were grounded in the process of just being ourselves. To be clear, I do not think one should always make dances portraying the actual self, as being in opposition to the self can produce interesting exchanges of energy and add to our collection of performance skills. As *Never Let Me Go* unfolded, I had ample opportunities to transform into an alternate persona by engaging my own imagination and lived

experiences.

Imagination and Transformation

Gripping shows, like Cirque du Soleil and others, offer audiences fantastical transformations. To give performance a distinction from the ordinary, performers can embody the extraordinary and undergo a type of transformation in identity. As Schechner speaks of television news being theatricalized for the TV eye, performers can likewise theatricalize or heighten motion for an audience (1988, p. 123). This heightening or theatricalization of motion helps to crystalize one's performance identity.

Performers in all cultures, such as the Tsembaga tribesmen of New Guinea mentioned in Chapter I, undergo a very apparent physical transformation with costuming and makeup. Beyond this, mental transformations also occur in connection with a specific intention assigned to the designated steps or spoken lines (Toporkov, 2004, p. 18). Again, although performance can parallel everyday life, it is indeed a mixture of representations. The choreographic steps are a representation of an idea, which then require a transformation in identity to make that representation authentic.

What I admire about Stanislavsky's performance philosophy is that it does not matter whether one is performing something true to life or imaginary, what matters is that the performance feels real in the moment. Stanislavsky's methods help actors to engage with something lived and experienced for the time being, never overdone. If, for instance, the performer has never been a banker but is portraying one, then he or she had better become one for a few hours! The performer could organize his or her desk as a banker does before the scene opens, dusting things off and making calculations

(Toporkov, 2000, p. 18). It is becoming what you are intending to portray. It is stage peacocking. A performer unearths a layer of the self, which is most appropriate for the heightened performance event at hand. If it is not believable, a performer then digs and digs, unpeeling layers until he/she can make it real. Upon giving proper weight and amplification to a performance identity, the performer can sweep the audience into the plotline.

Transformations in identity and role are also achieved as performers identify what *intention* is absolutely essential to the work. Upon identifying that intention, artistic choices in regard to external gestures, movement and their metaphoric and symbolic significance become apparent (Schechner, 1988, p. 124). Another performance opportunity and challenge I had as a graduate student, was to perform in Twyla Tharp's *Sweet Fields*. It was a struggle to find my artistry within the piece. At the time, I was not sure how to approach performing the choreography because it was unfamiliar territory and in my former mind set about authenticity, I was not able to understand how to make my performance feel like the movement was part of me.

The following is an excerpt from my thesis proposal and illustrates my point:

> Not only did I take on a technique that was not at home in my body, but I was never given personal imagery or self significance in relation to the movement. My arms had to be just so, my feet fixed a certain way in space, but with no particular reason of why. It was a piece about line and simple beauty, but it was very difficult to cultivate a sense of myself in that piece. My performance quality felt largely 'put on' and I was trying to please the person setting the choreography. Results? The performative experience in that piece never felt quite genuine...I did not live as myself on stage come performance time.

In retrospect, I have reassessed the experience and now realize how myopic I was being. My perceived intention of the piece and the actual intention of the piece were not the same! Evidently, Tharp wanted to capture the spirit of the Quaker people for their

simplicity and the beauty within that spiritual value system. According to Tharp the

dance contained:

> Geometry as a key to Godliness. Simple, distinct patterns keep recurring, as basic
> geometric material evolves while one theme grows out of another. These themes,
> which get rendered in half and doubletime recurrences, include diagonals, spirals,
> straight lines and circles. Five of its six men lead off the 10 part 'score' of 18th and
> 19th century American, religious hymns. The suite's five women perform the
> second hymn, and so on. (1996)

It seems that is was not Tharp's intention to have each performer cultivate a sense

of him/her self within the work. It was not necessarily a piece about individuality. The

intention was more about pattern, shape, and line in relation to the music. My own biases

were holding me back from feeling 'genuine' because I was fixated on a false intention

that I was unable to get beyond. What I have discovered through this thesis process is

that a performer can feel genuine when portraying the true *identity of the work* rather than

worrying about portraying *his/herself in the work*. Again, knowing one's performance

identity within a piece makes authentic embodiment possible.

Interestingly enough, as I reflect about my experience in *Sweet Fields*, I recognize

that some of me lived inside that piece after all, as I did my best to embody the

movement vocabulary. The lightness of the footwork, the lifted upper body, the

bouncing and shaking while keeping my eyes wide and bright made it so that I wanted to

lightly laugh at times. Characteristics of the movement brought out my joy and sense of

humor, adding a touch of me to what I was doing. Embodiment of a specified movement

vocabulary contains the power to invite one's actual self to participate and more

importantly, it clarifies a dancer's identity and intention within a dance.

Intention, performance identity, and a sequence of events are what allow

choreography to crackle with life. This 'crackle,' is more eloquently stated in the words

of dramaturgist E. Katherine Kerr as a breakthrough: 'a breakthrough correlates to the

release of dramatic tension, which exists between the theatrical present moment and the

impending future' (Giebel, 2000, p. 164). In other words, the anticipation of what

performers must accomplish chronologically in a dance and the need to experience each

moment as it is happening, produces a tension teaming with potential happenings. This

impending tension produces a lively and receptive performance body, allowing each

moment to have resonance for its designated time. The most exciting moment for me as

a performer is when I can stop time and am granted some degree of free play inside the

movement. Spontaneity within this practice provides a curious, interactive dialogue

between artist and motion.

Returning to Physical Embodiment

Recently, I performed in a work that required concerted attention to the movement

vocabulary as having its own life force, thus reinforcing my identity within the piece.

My choreographer and mentor, Stephen Koester, challenged me to scrutinize the essence

of a given movement phrase and then exaggerate it. Although it seemed quite a basic

practice, doing so was almost as if I was examining the movement under

a microscope to decipher its personality. For performers in general, the better a

performer knows the personality of his/her movement, the more fully one can embody it.

Attaching visual imagery to the material will stimulate instantaneous responses and aid in

further embodying the material. In this approach, one can grapple with genuine, in the

moment decision making, thus authentically capturing a specific mood chosen by the

choreographer. Such imagery could include being zapped by high voltage, being goosed

in the backside or frantically not knowing where to step; any of these particular images could help a dancer to capture a mood of immediacy or confusion. Working from a physical standpoint, or fulfilling a task as mentioned previously, again gives dancers an opportunity to express the natural essence of the movement, rather than forcing an extraneous emotion. In the words of Vasili Toporkov, longtime actor for the Moscow Art Theatre (and pupil of Stanislavsky):

> The shift from the search for inner feelings to the fulfillment of tasks is one of Stanislavski's greatest discoveries...he freed the actor and stopped him from torturing himself by his concern with emotion. He stopped him being in love with his own feelings and showed him the right, the natural way to uncover genuine human emotions, that are directed towards fulfilling his tasks, and which actively stimulate other actors. (2004, p. 27)

Fulfilling a task, first and foremost, will uncover the genuine energy needed for a scene or dance and is more convincing than trying to mimic or pretend a feeling without actual embodiment. Performers do not, or indeed should not, try to pantomime or act out an emotion in dance, as the movement could become oversaturated with melodramatics. It has been my observation that sometimes when dancers start in an emotional place first, there is a great danger of becoming too emotionally self indulgent, never finding a physically embodied movement exploration.

Within my thesis work, *The Rolling Main*, there was one particular dancer that always seemed to cast a spell on me as I watched her. What was so gripping about her dancing was the way she truthfully embodied the movement. I cannot pretend to take any credit for that, I invited her to work with me because she already had the kind of honest, stage presence that I intended to research. I find that quality so intriguing and wanted to delve into understanding it. This particular dancer reeled everyone in as she exuded complete sincerity and clarity behind every movement. Her face, her body, everything in

her countenance was electrified, yet subtle, never overdone or strained. I gave her some direction throughout the creative process of course, but I found myself rarely coaching her on her performance intent and it was because she intuitively *embodied* the driving pulse of the movement. Like a peacock splaying his feathers, she was destined to fulfill the mission of this work. This dancer found the reality of doing the movement authentically and with clear intention. This certainly is not always the case but because this dancer was so present and clear, it was a striking example of what I was seeking to understand in myself.

As Meisner puts it 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (Giebel, 2000, p. 162). This notion applies to dance movement interactions between two or more performers. Movement is more convincing when actual weight is shared among bodies or the touch is indubitably tactile, not the mere illusion or hint of a touch. To create meaningful interactions between dancers, it is important to revisit the basics: physical embodiment.

Embodiment is a matter of experiencing energy fully with the physical body and the dilated self. Fulfilling a task and paying attention to what that task feels like is where embodiment happens. Using this energy as a propeller, the dancer can then be a conduit for spontaneous impulse and experience/do rather than pretentiously act. Recognizing the physical characteristics that encase a particular movement, (the swing, the thrash, or the flight of it), gives a performer a visceral understanding. If the movement is felt at the anatomical level, extraneous, disconnected pretending becomes unnecessary and inconceivable. Something about the movement itself will speak for thematic integrity and reinforce a dancer's performance identity.

From a pedagogical perspective, another way to cultivate physical embodiment in dancers is to provide stakes in the midst of a creative, problem solving situation. This is a tool I use often with my students in technique classes. By stakes I mean creating an equation with specific physical tasks and consequences if the tasks are not fulfilled. For example, an instructor could ask the students to travel across the floor in a large group, their bodies intertwining, exploring one another's positive and negative spaces. As the dancers weave in and out of each other while travelling across the floor, another stipulation could be introduced to keep at least one person completely airborne, (lifted by the others), at all times. If a dancer is not in the air at all times, the rules are broken and they must start over. Raising the stakes a little generates a clearer group focus. Dancers know they must trust one another and be alert in this situation. Aware of each other, and conscious of what they are doing individually to support the group goal, all are honoring the equation and stakes. With everyone fully involved, they are in no way pretending to lift one another. They are physically and mentally committed, fully embodying the experience.

When creating a stakes oriented exercise, whether in class or choreography, it is important to provide specific enough limitations or provisions so that the dancers have enough information with which to work. For the 'coat duets' created for *The Rolling Main*, I gave very specific instructions to my dancers along with states of mind to enrich the material. One person had to desperately cling to the other, while the other had to desperately tear the other person off. As we ran this experiment several times, one particular couple was exhausted. Running, chasing, lunging, grabbing, climbing, hanging, pulling; there was no question as to whether their interactions were real. Amidst

the specified movement score, they were fully embodying the task. Out of this exercise,

a beautiful duet was born that possessed real tactility, full weight sharing, and frictional

contact that captured a struggle as well as submission.

Cognitive Connection to Physical Embodiment

Though my preference as choreographer is to start with physical action, involving

the mind at an emotional or cognitive level adds another useful layer to embodiment in

performance. When creating my thesis piece, the goal was for the dancers to incorporate

some type of cognitive awareness or emotional thought tied to their movement. Physical

motion alone would not have reached the deep level of mental and physical performance

dilation that was important to me. Neuropharmacologist and AIDS researcher, Candace

Pert, claims that our body/mind connection is fed via proteins called neuropeptides:

> Our emotional states or moods are produced by the various neuropeptide ligands
> [substances that selectively bind with receptors on the surface of a cell] and what
> we experience as an emotion or feeling is also a mechanism for activating a
> particular neuronal circuit---which generates a behavior involving the whole
> creature. (Giebel, 2000, p. 163)

Because emotional and cognitive states of the mind are linked to neuronal circuits,

they have influence on our physical movements in some way. Applying cognition or

emotion to physical movement is perhaps what allows the dancer to engage with impulse

in the first place. As the physical and cognitive connection generates impulse, an

asymmetrical breeding ground for authenticity can be present; thought and physical

motion being complimentary opposites. Creating 'steps' or choreography with this in

mind means that I have to find a way for my performers to push the physical limits while

engaging the imagination simultaneously. Utilizing an emotional or cognitive response

to that physicality creates an unpredictable exploration in which the dancer never quite knows what will happen. Dancers are reacting to the situation rather than acting out the situation.

After creating the 'coat duet' with the exhausted couple, I had each of them do the duet as a 'memory solo.' Removing his/her counterpart forced each dancer to somehow embody the movement vocabulary from his/her own cognitive memory. How does one embody movement from a memory? It is a matter of recall and implementation: recalling the memory and then implementing supportive movement subtexts. These subtexts could come in the form of descriptive language, meditation or both. Wrapping colorful adjectives around the movement, especially pertaining to the five senses, is very effective when excavating a memory through meditation. For example, one could recall the feeling of prickly cacti brushing up against one's side. The sense of touch is recalled and the adjective of 'prickly' implemented to create a series of jagged, jutting rib motions. Or more pleasantly, the feeling of a warm embrace could be recalled and the sense of touch takes on a new adjective like, 'cushioned' to produce more easeful, luxurious motion.

From a practical standpoint in my own dancing, I have subconsciously employed some of these supportive movement subtexts while taking ballet class. Something one must understand about me is that I am not from a substantial ballet background. I grew up as a competitive gymnast and discovered dance years later in college. To say the least, I am not extremely confident in my ballet skills at this point, but there are fleeting moments of high self-esteem when I conjure up 'the velvet cape' and an adoring public urging me on. The velvet cape is my imaginary ballet confidence helper and presence

booster. If I can imagine that I am wearing this silky, velvet cape, I feel lighter and something changes in my posture, nodding to royalty. If I get caught up worrying about steps and being able to do them fast enough, using the cape somehow reinforces an ability to physically relax and do what I can.

Likewise, when I am tired or tight before a performance, sometimes it helps to do a little transportative meditating. My 'happy place' is Italy, lying on the rocky shores of Riomaggiore. I recall the warmth of slate grey boulders and an overhead sun, which then melts the knots in my muscles. I like to implement this type of memory tracing with my students when they have difficulty accessing a certain movement principle. For example, if mobility is missing from the thoracic spine, I have students do a movement phrase, whatever it may be, with a partner's hand placed atop the thoracic spine. Then I will ask them to do the exercise a second time without the partner and remember exactly what the partner's hand felt like. Embodiment of that proprioceptive memory is evident the second time they do the phrase and they successfully find more movement in the area we were tracing.

By employing this technique in performance, a dancer can 'memory trace,' recalling what it felt like before to have physical contact with his/her partner. In the instance of my own work, the 'memory solos' from *The Rolling Main* were created using previous duet material as a building block. By removing one person from the equation, each dancer had to strongly channel the sensorial experience they once had together.

One dancer's reproduction of the duet showcased a very grounded, weighted solo, as it was her job in the duet to cling to and hang on the other. The other dancer's solo was more haptically perceptive (having to do with touch) and occupied many different

spaces on stage (where he was previously being chased in the duet). Both dancers

remembered physical qualities through cognitive recall and implementation. In doing so,

they were able to fully embody the experience even when physical stimuli were no longer

present.

Through the process of creating my thesis work and in my own experience as a

performer, I have discovered that being open and ready for opportunities in the moment

is paramount. A dancer can experience an amplification of self as he/she takes part in a

physical and cognitive interplay. Honoring performance identity and finding physical

embodiment through memory tracing or otherwise also lends authenticity to the

performance moment. An opening up of the senses, or dilation, is absolutely

indispensable in allowing all facets of a performer to be present. This fully dilated,

permeable approach makes it possible for performers to engage with impulse, truthfully

reacting and doing rather than pretending.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this process, I found myself asking 'how can a performer capture authenticity, bottle it, and reproduce it? What are the specific elements that make a performance feel real, and unquestionably genuine?' Authenticity offers an opportunity for audiences to believe in what they are witnessing. If the performer does not fully inhabit what he/she is doing in the performance moment, onlookers sense a lack of authenticity, leading to insecurity and/or ambiguity in the audience experience. The allure of authenticity lies in its unapologetic honesty.

Something about the performance must feel unadulterated and unpretentious. Through this thesis process I have found that any performance can be genuinely authentic if it is performed with a fully committed, clear intention. At times, a choreographer will ask one to expose elements of the true self, and at other times demand one to exude the complete opposite of the self. In either case, the performance can be authentic as one physically and cognitively embodies the performance identity, or what is most essential to the choreographic intention.

Before, I thought I had to be my actual self on stage, or else the performance was not authentic; on the contrary, losing myself momentarily to engage with a new, imaginary experience is also a valid form of authenticity. This paradigm shift has been the major personal breakthrough in my performance research and practices. Creating an imaginary persona, accessing new dimensions of myself through stage peacocking or paying strict attention to the physical characteristics of movement allow me to genuinely embody an authentic performance identity. Knowing this relieves the pressure to be myself in every given role and helps me to know how to coach my own dancers in inhabiting a performance identity.

Working from a physical standpoint has become crucial for me as choreographer in establishing the main premise from which to build. Once I can establish the physical components that make up the identity of the work, I can then coach dancers to exaggerate those physical elements and unearth a psychological response to them. If beginning a physical process in an emotional state, genuinely embodying the motion becomes much more difficult.

Within *The Rolling Main*, I was not certain what I wanted the dance to be about, if it was about anything. As my dancers and I exaggerated physical experiences through task based games and improvisations, a theme of carrying each other evolved. I saw images of people wanting desperately to be carried, people not being able to carry on alone, people carrying old memories that they wished to be rid of and the reluctance for being carried by another. Starting from a physical place and later adding emotional depth radically changed how my dancers approached performing it. Through my choreographic

experiments, I was reminded that without finding authenticity on a physical level first, performers run the risk of falling victim to mimicry and can generate over acted, melodramatic self indulgence on stage.

Though preparation is invaluable, the actual performance moment itself holds a different energy than the studio. If we, as performers, physically and cognitively engage with this living energy, we will find that performance is an amplified moment of possible transcendence. For me, there are personal performance stakes at hand in which I have either given it 'my all' or I have not. When I have not, I feel disappointed. I strive to engage with a lived experience on stage, and encourage my dancers to do the same, giving them permission to be transformed or otherwise 'in it.'

Being a performer, choreographer, and teacher on a mission to experience something real, I try to honor the performance moment as a continuation of whatever work has been started in the studio, yet notice that it is separate and open to new information as it happens. I aspire to encourage my dancers to be dilated vessels for creative energy, playing off the unique components that arise from a body in motion: riding the momentum, following impulse, losing the self momentarily, and split second decision making. In the performance moment, we need to rely on the fact that we have prepared physically and mentally, and then allow all that background information to carry us through these unexpected performance happenings, 'living truthfully under imaginary circumstances' (Giebel, 2000, p. 161).

If all performance is a kind of representation, it is my aim to earnestly hide that fact from the audience and my dancers, removing anything that feels forced or haphazard. If

one is clear with his/her intent, the performance feels authentic, which then allows the audience to accept the situation as truth in the context of the performance. The key to grappling with authenticity is for a performer to believe in the moment at hand as Stanislavsky encouraged his actors to do. There comes a point when one must stop thinking so ardently about choreographed steps and instead be permeable, allowing the experience of performance to flow through his/her dilated self.

Creating work and doing research requires a similar permeability. While making my thesis work and writing this document, I was so preoccupied with deadlines that I hurriedly pushed together several disjointed sections and proclaimed to my committee that I was 'done!' Multiple revisions later, I have found that my dance and written thesis are nothing like the first 'finished' products that I tried to force into being. Embracing the messiness of process and not being so quick to 'finish,' is an authentic unfolding of creation in and of itself. I am learning to accept the creative journey as it transpires.

Evaluating my career as a dance educator, I am seeing that the creative process is never finished. Whether writing a research document, teaching, performing or making choreographic work, I may never be one hundred per cent satisfied with the final results. I do not intend to settle for mediocre work, but rather I am acknowledging that there is authenticity within imperfection. Knowing that the work of an artist is an ongoing, messy process pushes me through the crippling stages of self doubt and periods of 'artist's block.'

Porosity as a creator, teacher and artist will allow me to think forward and accept new ideologies as they come, evolving with the innovations of my field. I hope to always

be open to new ideas, approaches and ways of viewing art. For the past year, I have been entrenched in the idea of using the imagination and immersion to obtain authenticity. Perhaps in the future, I will leave this notion all together and seek reality in directness and stripping away the imagination. Perhaps not. Either way, my mind frame will be similar—open, porous, and permeable, listening to what the next step wants to be and which feather will make for the most authentic display.

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