

THE USE OF THEMES DERIVED FROM
PLAYS BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS
AS A BASIS FOR AN ORIGINAL DANCE PRODUCTION

by

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A THESIS

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Health and
Physical Education for Women
Sam Houston State University

In Partial Fullfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

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August, 1970

ABSTRACT

Hueske, Gretchen M., The Use of Themes Derived from Plays by Tennessee Williams as a Basis for an Original Dance Production. Master of Arts (Physical Education), August, 1970, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to study the plays of Tennessee Williams in order to identify the basic recurring themes throughout the plays, and then to explore each of these themes in relation to their choreographic possibilities. The findings of the investigator are evidenced in the present written form and were projected into an extended dance production choreographed, designed, and staged in concert. The study was based exclusively on Tennessee Williams' full-length plays.

Methods

The investigator read all of the full-length plays of the well-known playwright, Tennessee Williams, and reviewed others of his works such as short stories, one-act plays, and poems. From the themes found in Williams' Plays, five recurring themes were identified and used as basis for choreography.

The findings were organized into the prescribed thesis form and include the following relevant information concerning the presentation of the dance: (1) selection

of the themes (2) selection of the personnel (3) selection of music (4) development of choreography (5) selection of costume (6) staging and lighting of the dance work.

Summary and Evaluation

This study was concerned with the use of themes recurrent in Tennessee Williams plays as basis for choreography. The written substantiation presented was limited to the following areas: (1) extended plays of Tennessee Williams (2) the appropriateness for choreography of recurring themes of Tennessee Williams (3) mixing of various art mediums.

The investigation resulted in an extended dance production choreographed by the investigator. The description of the dance was limited to: (1) selection of themes (2) selection of personnel (3) selection of music (4) development of choreography (5) selection of costume (6) staging and lighting of the dance work.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer wishes to express appreciation for the guidance and continuous help of Dr. Mary Ella Montague, thesis chairman, Mr. Wilson Barrilleaux and Dr. Donald Stallings, committee members.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to James Lamb for his advice on the musical selections and their arrangements and thanks to Linda Jackson for her enthusiastic and competent work in lighting the production.

A special thanks for the wise and useful comments of the dancers and the faculty in the Department of Health and Physical Education for Women.

My appreciation for the support and encouragement received from my husband, Eddie.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century, literature has been a source of stimulation for many choreographers. On February 28, 1947, Martha Graham made use of mythological characters from Sophocles' dramas in dance compositions such as "Cave of the Heart" and "Errand into Maze." Jose Limon was inspired by Shakespeare's drama Othello for his dance, "The Moors Pavane," preformed on August 12, 1949. Themes and characters from William Faulkner's novel, As I Lay Dying, were used by Valerie Bettis for a group composition, presented on December 19, 1948. "Tales and Traditions of Martha's Vineyard" was choreographed by Dorothy Madden for her doctoral dissertation.

The choreographer in this study became interested in the plays of Tennessee Williams as a possible basis for an extended dance work, since his dramatic situations were filled with action. Valerie Bettis supports the works of Tennessee Williams as a basis for choreography:

Williams doesn't write plays that are all tied up with plot and incident. He writes about people and their emotions and their inter-relationships. Emotionally his characters are larger than life. And that makes them just perfect for non-verbal expression of dance.¹

¹Doris Herring, "Valerie Bettis Choreographs Streetcar Named Desire", "Dance Magazine, XXIV (December, 1952), p. 21.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was to study the plays of Tennessee Williams in order to identify the basic recurring themes throughout the plays, and then to explore each of these themes in relation to their choreographic possibilities. The findings of the investigator were evidenced in the present written form and were projected into an extended dance production choreographed, designed and staged in concert. The study was based exclusively on Tennessee Williams' full-length plays.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study was concerned with the use of certain themes which recur in the plays of Tennessee Williams. The written substantiation presented in this report was limited to the following areas: (1) extended plays of Tennessee Williams (2) the appropriateness for choreography of recurring themes used by Williams (3) mixing of various art mediums.

The study was concluded by the presentation of an extended dance production choreographed by the investigator. The written description of the dance production was limited to the following points: (1) selection of themes (2) selection of personnel (3) selection of music (4) development of choreography (5) selection of costumes (6) staging and lighting of the dance work.

METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

The investigator read all of the full-length plays of the well-known playwright, Tennessee Williams, and reviewed others of his works such as short stories, one-act plays, and poems. From the themes found in Williams' plays, recurring themes were identified and used as a basis for choreography.

The findings were organized into the prescribed thesis form and include the following relevant information concerning the presentation of the dance: (1) selection of themes (2) selection of personnel (3) selection of music (4) development of choreography (5) selection of costumes (6) staging and lighting of the dance work.

RELATED STUDIES

The review of related literature was directed to the investigation of Tennessee Williams' works, critical reviews, theses which used literary works and themes as bases for choreography, and prominent choreographers who used literature as a basis for dance. The results of this investigation were presented in the second chapter of the present study.

CHAPTER II

LITERARY THEMES USED AS A BASIS FOR CHOREOGRAPHY

When choosing literary themes as a basis for choreography one must remember that not all literature can be translated into dance. Language can give us facts, situations, relationships, and states of being which are very difficult for the art of movement alone to tell.¹ Conversely, a character and behavior delineation which takes an author pages to complete might be done in seconds by the dancer.² Literature which suggests action may be danceable, but there are pitfalls. Intensely emotional situations may contain action possibilities, but they may demand word rather than movement symbols for purposes of communication.³ If a choreographer can detach the dance from the literary form (be it play, poem, novel, short story, or biography) and create a form which will exist aesthetically in its own right, then the form can stand alone as an art form, and need not be compared to the literary form from which it is derived.⁴

¹Doris Humphrey, The Art of Making Dances (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959), p. 37.

²Ibid., p. 37.

³Ibid., p. 39.

⁴Norma Stahl, "Converting Literature into Dance," Dance Magazine, XXVIII (March, 1953), p. 17.

When creating the dance the choreographer must disclose a new insight, and the material must be reorganized so that the dance can stand alone. Norma Stahl, with reference to mixing the art mediums, believes that "The creative artist in any medium must work out a unity between form and content. As the writer finds his so must the choreographer."⁵

Choreographers have always been interested in experimenting with new and varied themes for their dances. This desire for variety has led to their study of and selection from literary sources. Using literary themes involves the mixing of the art mediums, but dancers have been wise in choosing that which involves action and that which enhances the dance in its own autonomous form. Poetry, novels, and plays are filled with inspiring themes for dance. "Faces of Woman" by Jandley was a solo dance, performed February 12, 1950, using themes from Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," a poem which emphasizes truth, the spring and summer of life, darkness or emergence, or the cycle of life.⁶ Similarly, literary themes

⁵Ibid., p. 48.

⁶Nik Krevitsky, "Reviews of the Month," Dance Observer, XVII (March, 1950), p. 44.

were used as stimuli for "Thoughts and Remeberance," a group work choreographed by Emy St. Just, presented on June 27, 1954. The work was based on Shakespeare's Hamlet as seen through Ophelia's eyes.⁷ "Cressida," a solo in three parts, also derived from Shakespeare, was done in sections which show progression from child to girl to woman.⁸ In August, 1953, Doris Humphrey choreographed "Ruins and Visions," basing the work on themes from Stephen Spender's poem "The Fates." The dance was partly realistic, partly imaginal as it wove the story of a mother's tragically possessive love for and ultimate loss of her son in a destructive war.⁹

Martha Graham used Euripides' drama, Medea, as the basis for her dance entitled "Cave of the Heart," in April 1946. This group composition was based on the drama, but transcends that story and develops into a "dance of possessive and destroying love."¹⁰ Mythological themes were used again by Martha Graham when

⁷L.G., "Reviews of the Month," Dance Observer, XXI (August-September, 1954), p. 105.

⁸Ibid., p. 105.

⁹Selma Jean Cohen, "Doris Humphrey's Ruins and Visions--A Translation from Poetry to Dance," Dance Observer, XXI (December, 1953), p. 148.

¹⁰Robert Sabin, "Reviews of the Month," Dance Observer, XIII (June-July, 1946), p. 73.

she choreographed "Night Journey," based on the drama Oedipus Rex. The dance begins when Jocasta hangs herself and looks back over the tragedy of her marriage to her son.

Having read and admired Greek poems by Odysseus Elytis, Alice Condidina was inspired to base her choreography on the poems. "It is Worthy," performed on May 27, 1968, derives from wartime experiences and culminates in a celebration of liberty. Except for brief narrated sections, the words were sung on tape by a chorus in a musical setting.¹¹

"The Exiles," by Jose Limon, performed August 18, 1950, was based upon a passage from Milton's epic poem, Paradise Lost. The composition suggests an allegorical treatment of the awakening of two human beings to maturity.¹²

Martha Graham again used themes from Greek tragedy when she choreographed "Clytemnestra," an epic vision of the guilt-haunted, titanic figures of Greek tragedy. Miss Graham turned to a witty but also penetrating and subtle study of love between man and woman.¹³

¹¹Jack Anderson, "Reviews," Dance Magazine, XLII (July, 1968), p. 70.

¹²Anon., "Reviews," Dance Magazine, XXIV (October, 1950), p. 34.

¹³Robert Sabin, "Reviews of the Month," Dance Magazine, XXV (May, 1958), p. 70.

In the realm of the novel, William Henry Hudson's Green Mansions inspired Patricia Newman to choreograph a group dance by the same title on April 11, 1948. Both the dance and the novel recount the experiences of a young man who enters a tropical jungle and finds a beautiful bird woman. The choreography, designed in five parts, is a literal interpretation of the novel.¹⁴ A group composition was choreographed by Valerie Bettis when she was inspired by the thematic qualities found in William Faulkner's novel As I Lay Dying. Her composition, presented on December 19, 1948, is based upon themes and characters from the novel, and although the choreographer did not follow exactly the sequential narration of Faulkner's story, she explored deeply many thematic elements and characterizations of the literary text. In the novel, Faulkner concentrates on the death scene and burial of the central character, Addie Bruncen, whereas Bettis shifts the emphasis, through the use of flashbacks, to past events in the dying woman's life. The choreographer presents a psychological interpretation of the characters, and according to John Martin, Bettis "elicits a group of people in their involved relation-

¹⁴Nik Krevitsky, "Reviews of the Month," Dance Observer, XV (May, 1948), p. 57.

ships to each other, a way of life, and a great deal of bare and unsentimentalized human tragedy."¹⁵

The use of Tennessee Williams' dramas as bases for dance works has been frequent and widespread. On March 19, 1951 Muriel Manning presented a duet, "This Property is Condemned," based upon Tennessee Williams' one-act play by the same title. The dance was narrative and like the play was based on brief representations of a conversation between "a shiftless male and a dissolute female."¹⁶ Their movement was a literal translation of the words they spoke.¹⁷ Another major choreographic work, "Blue Roses," a Limon adaptation of The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams, was presented August 15, 1957. Mr. Limon's approach to the choreography was one of "great tenderness and subdued sensitivity."¹⁸ The choreography was divided into three sections, "Son's Wonderlust," "The Daughter's Secret, Magic World," and "Daughter and Son."¹⁹

¹⁵John Martin, "The Dance: Bravo," New York Times, January 16, 1948.

¹⁶L.W., "Reviews of the Month," Dance Observer, XIX (May, 1952), p. 74.

¹⁷Nancy Smith, "Modern Dances Based Upon Literary Themes, 1926-1959" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Texas Women's University, Denton, Texas, 1960) p. 112.

¹⁸Louis Horst, "Connecticut College," Dance Observer, XXIX (August-September, 1957), p. 102.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 102.

At Sam Houston State University the creative thesis is an important part of the graduate dance program. In 1965, Wilson Barrilleaux based his choreography for a dance on James Thurber's "The Last Flower".²⁰ The choreography was divided into sections depicting war and jealousy, using a flower as a pivotal point. The use of literary themes was inherent in a 1968 thesis work by Rosiland Lively. She chose the novels of William Faulkner as a basis for her dance, selecting works which dealt with emotional interplay among the characters. The dance production was based on a character, Rosa Codfield, in William Faulkner's novel Absalom, Absalom!²¹

The present investigator chose the playwright, Tennessee Williams as a writer whose themes seemed danceable. Each of Williams' plays, short stories, and poems has interrelationship to the other works in the whole canon, but any student of Tennessee Williams knows that a study can hardly be exhaustive, because the echoes of repetitions are frequent.²²

²⁰Wilson Barrilleaux, "The Use of Satiric Literature as a Basis for Choreographic Themes Illustrated in an Original Dance Production" (unpublished Master thesis, Sam Houston State College, Huntsville, Texas, 1965).

²¹Rosiland Calvert Lively, "The Use of Themes Derived from Novels by William Faulkner as a Basis for an Original Dance Production" (unpublished Masters thesis, Sam Houston State College, Huntsville, Texas, 1968) p. 4.

²²Signi Falk, Tennessee Williams (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1961), Preface.

The present investigator read and evaluated the plays for their innate choreographic potentialities and thematic development. From ten plays by Mr. Williams, five themes were chosen that significant in all the plays. These five basic themes are (1) loneliness (2) clash between the cultures (3) clash of the sexual relationship (4) evil, hatred, and bigotry (5) destruction. These themes were chosen because of their action possibilities, their recurrence in Williams' plays, and their choreographic appeal to the present investigator. Their sequence was arranged for the contrast afforded among the various sections.

The first theme selected, a theme used extensively in Williams' plays, is loneliness. One of the more famous plays, The Glass Menagerie, depicts loneliness through the character of Laura.²³ Crippled and pitiful, Laura hides her loneliness in a menagerie of glass figurines. With an overbearing, middle-aged, southern belle for a mother and a dreamer for a brother, Laura is pushed into situations such as going to a secretarial school and entertaining her brother's acquaintance (to please her mother). All such "forced" situations end in disaster. Each incident pushes Laura further into her shell of loneliness.

²³Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie, (New York: New Directions, 1949). (All subsequent references are to this edition.)

Loneliness is also a dominant theme in Summer and Smoke. Alma Winemiller, daughter of a minister in the puritan tradition and of a peevish mother, is a lady more at home in eighteenth-century France than in twentieth-century Mississippi, where she could be accused of snobbishness and affectation.²⁵ Alma is secretly in love with Dr. John Buchanan, her rowdy, boisterous next-door neighbor, who is interested in women, not ladies. Her love might be returned if she could throw away some of her strict, puritan attitudes. Johnny wants the anatomy of love and she the soul of it. Neither will give in, so their love goes unexplored. Alma draws the curtains of her room and hides until her loneliness is so overwhelming that she runs from her fantasy world to the first arms that will have her.

The Night of the Iguana,²⁶ another story of puritanical repressions, portrays the deterioration of a thirty-year-old spinster of a southern aristocratic family whose relatives include, over-sexed drunkards, poets, sexual degenerates, and gifted artists, as well as old maids, both male and female, who are proper as well as squeamish. Hannah is a lonely woman, never

²⁵Signi Falk, Tennessee Williams (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1961), p. 91.

²⁶Tennessee Williams, The Night of the Iguana (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1964). (All subsequent references are to this edition.)

having known true love, and having shared only the companionship of her ninety-five-year old grandfather.

Another theme with which Tennessee Williams is often preoccupied is sex, or the clash inherent in the sexual relationship. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), beautiful Maggie is rejected by her alcoholic husband because of her accusations that he and his best friend are homosexual.²⁷ The play is almost wholly concerned with Maggie's fight to get Brick to the bedroom. Cunningly she announces to the family that she is pregnant. This announcement is for her satisfaction, seeing Brick give in to her, and for the inheritance. Big Daddy, her father-in-law, is also preoccupied with sex, as he constantly speaks of the women he will have when he is up and on his feet. Such lines as "...I realize now I never had enough, I'm going to have a ball, a ball! Hell, I slept with Big Mama till, let's see, five years ago, till I was 60 and she was 58, and never even liked her, never did! (p. 70)" are common of Big Daddy's language.

Blanche Dubois, another decaying southern aristocrat, is the pitiful protagonist of A Streetcar Named

²⁷Tennessee Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1955), p. 42. (All subsequent references are to this edition.)

Desire (1947).²⁸ She is typical of Tennessee Williams' southern gentlewomen who fight to show a prudish or "proper" attitude to the public, but are really frightened, lonely people who need the strength of other people. The real sexual antagonism is between Blanche and Stanley Kowalski, her brother-in-law. (Stanley's social behavior is basically gross and anamistic. Blanche tries to hide her sex-ridden past by being the southern gentlewoman she so desperately wants to be. Blanche is not only raped by Stanley but the rape tore her from everything she wanted to be.)

Baby Doll (1956), a screenplay, is about the lustful drives of a man, Archie Lee, who married Baby Doll and promised that he would not consummate the marriage until she was twenty years old, two years from their marriage date. Baby Doll, a voluptuous, imbecelic young woman, is a torture to Archie Lee, a slovenly type who is much older than Baby Doll. The true sex act is committed, not with Baby Doll's frustrated husband, but with a Sicilian who has forced Archie out of the cotton-ginning business and now has made love to his wife. A recurring line in the play, "Does anyone ever know where to go or what to do?"²⁹ sums up the

²⁸Tennessee Williams, Streetcar Named Desire (New York: New Directions, 1947). (All subsequent references are to this edition.)

²⁹Tennessee Williams, Baby Doll (New York: New Directions, 1956), p. 139. (All subsequent references are to this edition).

theme of the play. It seems to convey the loneliness of Baby Doll and Aunt Rose Comfort, to make understandable Baby Doll's infidelity, and to illuminate the hatred that is in Archie Lee and Silva Vacarro.

In Summer and Smoke (1948) there is a definite conflict in the sexual relationship between Johnny and Alma which parallels the theme of loneliness mentioned above. The part of the play known as "the anatomy lecture" best illustrates this.

John: Now listen here to the anatomy lecture! This upper story's the brain which is hungry for something called truth and doesn't get much but keeps on feeling hungry! This middle's the belly which is hungry for food. This part down here is the sex which is hungry for love because it is sometimes lonesome. I've fed all three as I could or as much as I wanted--You've fed none--nothing. Well--maybe your belly a little--watery subsistence--But love or truth, nothing but--nothing but hand - me - down notions! attitudes!--poses! Now you can go. The anatomy lecture is over.

Alma: So that is your high conception of human desires. What you have here is not the anatomy of a beast, but a man. And I--I reject your opinion of where love is and the kind of truth you believe the brain to be seeking!--There is something not shown on the chart.

John: You mean the part that Alma is Spanish for, Soul, don't you? 30

³⁰Tennessee Williams, Summer and Smoke (New York: New Directions, 1948), p. 95. (All subsequent references are to this edition.)

Tennessee Williams has realized that in our society there is a conflict between the cultures of the South. In many of his plays conflict is a prevailing theme. In Streetcar, Stanley's culture is that of basic animal cynicism, and Blanche's that of a dying effete civilization making its last curlicued and romantic exit. In Baby Doll, Silva Vacarro is a Sicilian, but to the people in Tiger Tail County he is simply a "Wop". He battles constantly with bigoted provincial people, one of whom is Archie Lee. In Orpheus Descending (1958), Val Xavier is a representative of the sensitive artistic person who finds it impossible to survive in a world of cruelty, injustice, and harshness.³¹ His cultural conflict is with the people of the town.

The combination of evil, hatred, and bigotry is a prevailing theme in the plays Orpheus Descending, Baby Doll, Suddenly Last Summer, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. The evil and hatred in Cat are conveyed through the malice that Maggie, Mae, and Gooper work to win the inheritance of cancer-ridden Big Daddy. Brick's hate is aimed at Maggie because of her accusations of Brick's friend, accusations which led to the friend's death and to Brick's alcoholic condition. Big Daddy has hatred for Big Mama, a hatred which he has nursed all their married life.

³¹Francis Donahue, The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1964), p. 31.

Another sensitive soul who is destroyed by the forces of cruelty is Sebastian Veneable in Suddenly Last Summer (1958). His fatal flaws, homosexuality and sensitivity lead to his complete destruction at the hands of a band of street urchins. Catherine vividly explains this destruction in the lines, "...torn or cut parts of him away with their hands or knives or maybe those jagged tin cans they made music with, they had torn bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little black mouths of theirs..."³² In the allegorical Camino Real (1953), Kilroy, an individual who carries within him an image of the ideal world, is forced to live in a world of a very different nature. He is a sensitive person, and the evil of life is on every block of the Camino Real.

Even though Baby Doll is considered a comedy, the play has strong overtones of hatred and bigotry. Baby Doll hates Archie Lee because he is a fat, slovenly old man who cannot make enough money to keep furniture in their old, run-down house. Archie Lee hates Silva Vacarro because he has built a better cotton gin and has taken away all Archie's business, which means that Archie has no money to keep the favors of Baby Doll.

³²Tennessee Williams, Suddenly Last Summer (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 87.

Silva Vacarro hates Archie Lee for burning his cotton gin. The whole of Tiger Tail County is bigoted toward Silva Vacarro. They come to his party, but laugh and rejoice when his cotton gin burns.

Forces of evil, hatred, and bigotry are dominant in the play Orpheus Descending. Val Xavier, a sensitive romantic is persecuted by the town for the rape of a lying woman and for the death of his female employer, Myra. He is framed by Myra's sickly husband, Jabe. Val and Myra are guilty of adultery and Jabe knows it. Jabe has killed Myra's father, sneeringly referred to as the "Wop" by his racist neighbors, because he had served "niggers".³³ It is nothing to kill Myra, too, over her passions for the hired help. Jabe hollers to the townspeople that Val has killed his wife, and the townsmen immediately drag the innocent Val off to hang him for murder and rape. Since hanging is not enough to sate their lust for cruelty, the mob burns Val to death with a blow torch -- a dramatic flourish that out-does those of the bloodiest Elizabethan tragedies.³⁴

It is thus evident that in the plays of Tennessee Williams loneliness, the conflict between cultures, the clash of the sexual relationship, and evil, hatred, and bigotry are forces that result in the destruction

³³Nancy Tischler, Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan (New York: The Citadel Press, 1961), p. 239.

³⁴Ibid., p. 239.

or deterioration of some person or some ideal. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof Brick falls to the wiles of Maggie. In last lines of the play Maggie explains very appropriately as she turns out the rose silk lamp, "Oh, you weak people, you weak, beautiful people! -- who give up. -- What you want is someone to take hold of you. - gently, gently, with love! And I do love you, Brick, I do (p. 158). Poor, lonely, delicate Laura in The Glass Menagerie is destroyed by an inferiority complex that thrives on loneliness. The destruction of Blanche Dubois in Streetcar may be attributed to the clash between her cultural ideals and those of Stella and Stanley. Elia Kazan expresses the power of the play as "...a message from the dark interior. This little, twisted, pathetic, confused bit of light and culture puts out a cry. It is snuffed out by the crude forces of violence, and this cry is the play."³⁵

Clash between the cultures or destruction of the sensitive and romantic by the insensitive and unromantic is evident in Oropeus Descending when Val Xavier, a representative of a sensitive artistic type, finds it impossible to survive in a world of cruelty, injustice, and harshness. Sex and hatred destroy Archie Lee in Baby Doll. His voluptuous wife is untouchable; Silva Vacarro takes away Archie's business by building

³⁵Tischler, p. 137.

a better cotton gin and then takes his wife, all of which is more than Archie Lee can cope with.

As choreography was developed to illustrate these themes, each section was worked to lead to the destruction of one central character. All of Williams' plays show the destruction of someone, a destruction either brought on by the character himself or by various acts of fate. The final divisions of the dance production entitled "Dance Suite" are

- I. "Nobody ever gets to know nobody."³⁶
- II. "Physical beauty is passing." (Streetcar, p. 149.)
- III. "Love and affection! - in a world that is lonely and cold!" 37
- IV. "I'm not good. I don't know why people have to pretend to be good, nobody's good." (Cat, p. 20.)
- V. "Don't! Pity! Your! Self!" 38
- VI. "Nobody ever gets to know nobody." (Orpheus Descending, p. 63.)

³⁶Tennessee Williams, Orpheus Descending (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 63. (All subsequent references are made to this edition.)

³⁷Tennessee Williams, The Rose Tattoo (New York: Knickerbocker Press, Inc., 1950), p. 87. (All subsequent references are made to this edition.)

³⁸Tennessee Williams, Camino Real (New York: Dramatics Play Service, Inc., 1953), p. 92. (All subsequent references are made to this edition.)

CHAPTER III

DEVELOPING THE CHOREOGRAPHY

The present study culminated in the presentation of an extended dance production choreographed by the investigator. The written description of the production itself is limited to (1) selection of themes (2) selection of personnel (3) selection of music (4) development of the choreography (5) selection of costume (6) staging and lighting of the dance work.

Selection of Themes

When the choreographer chooses to compose a dance based on a literary theme, he may select a phrase or key paragraph as thematic source material. Another option is simply to use his perception of the over-all work as an underlying basis for the dance. In the latter he is free to delete or expand the original idea until the dance, his work of art, as Miss Langer says, "...expresses a concept of life, emotion, or reality"¹ for him.

A study of the extended plays written by Tennessee Williams revealed several major recurring themes. The dance revolves around a central character who has the characteristics of Tennessee Williams loose southern

¹Susanne K. Langer, Problems of Art (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1957), p. 26.

women. She is a montage of characteristics such as Maggie's sex appeal in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Baby Doll's ostentatiousness in Baby Doll, or the independent brashness of Maxine in The Night of the Iguana. For brevity and simplicity, she will be noted as Maggie throughout the text. The other dancers play an integral part in her life and are very much like characters that would be found in a Tennessee Williams play. They are Maggie's husband, her lover, some townswomen, and friends.

For each dance section, descriptive words and phrases were selected and used as program notes to aid the audience in comprehending the dance. Such a procedure is supported by Humphrey, who suggests the selection of "...words that are clues to characters and situations in a drama..."² The phrases selected for each section are:

- I. "Nobody ever gets to know nobody." (Orpheus Descending, p. 63)
- II. "Physical beauty is passing." (Streetcar, p. 149)
- III. "Love and affection in a world that is lonely and cold!" (The Rose Tatoo, p. 87)
- IV. "I'm not good. I don't know why people have to pretend to be good, nobody's good." (Cat, p. 20)
- V. "Don't! Pity! Your! Self!" (Camino Real, p. 92)
- VI. "Nobody ever gets to know nobody." (Orpheus Descending, p. 63)

²Doris Humphrey, The Art of Making Dances (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), p. 39.

In all of Tennessee Williams plays there is the overtone of loneliness. At times such a theme may not be dominant because of other more salient themes. The choreographer chose the theme of loneliness to open the dance production. The dancers and their respective roles are also established in the opening section. A short solo section establishes Maggie's character as the forward, brash, impudent person that she is. Then the dancers enter and the choreography attempts to show that Maggie could be dreaming as the people from her life appear. She is as if alone in a world of faces and people. The program notation for this section is entitled "Nobody ever gets to know nobody" (Orpheus, p. 63).

The humor inherent in such Williams plays as Baby Doll and Period of Adjustment is reflected in the second section, which used the theme, clash between the cultures. The brazenness of Maggie is ridiculed by two townswomen whose gestures indicate disgust and shock at what they see. A third woman is alternately attracted and repelled by Maggie's coarseness. Choreography for this dancer is designed to show the pull she feels between the austere, no nonsense decorum of the two townswomen and the gamboling licentiousness of Maggie. The program notation for this section is "Physical beauty is passing" (Streetcar, p. 149).

In the third section of the dance, the conflict in

the sexual relationship is illustrated through choreography for Maggie, Husband, and Lover. Husband and Maggie clash because of her failure to react as a wife should. She leads him on with sultry undulations of her body and then spurns him with abstracted movements of hitting and scratching. He is totally repulsed by these actions and turns from her. The Lover enters with a swagger and finds Maggie all ready to "play". Her contemptuous coyness irritates Lover and he and the Husband exit down left, leaving Maggie down and left of center. The descriptive phrase for this section is "Love and affection! -- in a world that is lonely and cold!" (The Rose Tattoo, p. 87).

In the fourth section, the women in the town come to dispose of their malice. Maggie has now been rejected by the men in her life and will suffer through what hatred the bigoted women have for her and that of the one friend she thought she had. The movements of the townswomen are aggressive and spiteful. The floor pattern is designed in circles around Maggie to accent the feeling of suffocation.

The last section is a restatement of the first, but Maggie at this point is going out of her way to be noticed. People shun her. Maggie tries desperately to pull herself out of her frustration and dilemma, but

finds that she cannot do it alone. Again the section is called "Nobody ever gets to know nobody." (Orpheus Descending, p. 63).

Selection of Personnel

The dancers selected for performance in the dance production were members of the performing arts group at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. Six dancers were used in various parts of the productions, the criteria established for the selection of the personnel being: (1) previous dance experience (2) technical proficiency (3) sex of the dancer (4) physical characteristics (5) acting ability and ability to project to a large audience (6) dependability. Physical characteristics of the dancers were not dominant factors in their selection, but the choreographer tried to select dancers whose statures and appearances were in keeping with the dramatic aura of the roles to be assigned them.

Selection of Music

It was important to choose music that was evocative of the place and the decades in which Williams' characters are supposed to have acted and interacted. A variety of music was chosen that would be appropriate to the era and the emotional overtones of each section.

Section I. As the curtains open in this section a clarinet was heard wailing "St. Louis Blues" as performed by Pete Fountain (L.P. "The Blues," Pete Fountain, Coral Records, Inc.). This piece was chosen because of its connotations of southern jazz and the atmospheric qualities of the orchestration that enhances the seductive, brazen characteristics of Maggie. In various parts of the dance, i.e., when Maggie's personality was dominant this Pete Fountain arrangement was heard. Electronic music in "Visage V" composed by Ferrari (L.P. "Images Fantastiques," Mercury Records Production, Inc.) was heard when the other dancers entered. Its eerie, scratchy tones contribute to the indifference and aloofness conveyed by the group. When Friend imitates Maggie's movement, there was a fade-in and fade-out of the "St. Louis Blues" theme.

Section II. Since this section was humorous, satirical, and light, the recording of "Little Liza Jane" by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band (L.P. "Sweet Emma and her Preservation Hall Jazz Band," Jass, Inc.), an old New Orleans jazz group, was chosen. The lyrics and lively rhythm augmented the light overtones of the dance.

Section III. "Mean Disposition" was performed by Muddy Waters (L.P. "Fathers and Sons," Chess Records Inc.) for this section. The combination of the electric guitar,

harmonica, and "blue" piano, a jazzy seductive arrangement, accompanied the section concerned with clash of the sexual relationship. The tension which characterized the dance movement was apparent in the music.

Section IV. In this section, emphasizing the forces of evil, hatred, and bigotry, the music was again electronic. Its qualities were persuasive, loud, and dissonant. The choreography and the music combines to produce a pounding effect as Maggie's destruction progresses. The same electronic music was used for Sections I and VI.

Section V. This section, dealing with Maggie's final self-degradation, seemed to need music which was soft, fluid, and rhythmically intrinsic. The choreographer chose a piano rendition of "Blues" played by James Eturbi (Decca Records, Inc.). The record was an old, scratched and worn RPM 78 which added flavor to the destruction theme because of the recording's own clearly-audible defects.

Section VI. Since this section was a restatement of the first, the same electronic music was heard. As the curtains begin to close, "St. Louis Blues" faded in and rose in volume until the curtains were completely closed.

Development of the Choreography

Movements for the choreography were created through

improvisations, abstractions of stylized gestures, and intellectual visualizations.

Section I. The music begins, the curtains open to a blank stage. Maggie enters from the upper stage right corner in a modified reaching, sultry walk that takes her to center stage. This part of the dance is an introduction to the type of character Maggie will be throughout the production. The movements are undulating and seductive with a hint of playfulness. She seems to take evident pleasure in the way she moves. Attention is focused on her hips.

The other five dancers enter from upstage right in a processional line in a basic walk. Walking directly across the stage to up left, they come to Maggie, circle her, then resume a position in a broken line on the stage. Maggie keeps her focus on the audience and pays no attention to the other dancers. At this time the others introduce themselves to the audience as they relate to Maggie in ways commensurate with their respective roles. The dancer who is to play her friend imitates Maggie's movements but quickly changes her mind when the two townswomen begin to glare at her. The townswomen move in a very restrained manner and gesticulate with their hands to suggest gossiping. Maggie moves upstage towards her husband; they rendezvous in a moment of compassion which ends when Maggie makes a

gesture as if striking him in the stomach. Her lover then crosses to her and encircles her with his arms, but is also pushed away. The townswomen are enjoying these vicissitudes greatly throughout the performance. It is obvious that Maggie satisfies their appetite for more delicious gossip. The dancers exit in different parts of the stage, keeping in their established characters as they leave. Maggie remains at center stage.

Section II. In this section moods have changed, the changes being indicated by the rhythm and character of the music. It is Maggie's turn to flaunt herself publicly before Friend and the townswomen. The music underscores the humorous overtones of this section. Maggie's movements are much like those in the first section, but she has jived them to meet the rhythmic pattern of the music. Friend enters from stage left with a gesture of the arms that indicates a fluttering heart. Her movements are contrived to indicate a neurotic nature. Maggie moves stage left toward Friend. With a wink and a kick to the audience, Maggie begins to play with Friend, inviting her to have some fun too. The townswomen enter with mincing steps and watch with much obvious bewilderment. Friend is a little apprehensive of what is happening, but she tries to imitate Maggie's sultry, hippy movements. The situation is pitiful. Maggie moves across stage with a jazzy walk

and leg-lift step that is impossible for Friend to imitate. Meanwhile the townswomen are circling the center stage area high on their toes, back arched, and derriere protruding. Lips are pursed, elbows bent and jutting from the back. This movement is used to typify the scorn and puritanical attitude that is so typical of the southern bigots in Tennessee Williams' plays. The same movement is repeated in Sections IV and VI.

The four women are now in a straight line in center stage and move in a jig step to the down stage center area. The movement is as strained as the behavior of enemies at a social tea party. Maggie, at extreme stage left, starts an interweaving movement with the arms and hips. Friend gives a somewhat inaccurate imitation of what she has seen Maggie doing, and the townswomen pick up this movement, transforming it in a manner characteristic of their puritan attitudes. Maggie slides in front of the women and then twists to her knees. Friend sidles up to her and gives her a shy and bewildered pat on the head. The brazen Maggie turns on her knees and arches her back while giving her shoulders a burlesque-style shake. The horrified townswomen shake admonitory fingers and fists and run frantically up center where they vibrate in paroxysms of disgust. Maggie stands up, veils her attitude by bringing her hands over her face and then proceeds to stand in front of each woman mocking what

she is doing. The women, as if hypnotized, are lead by Maggie to downstage right in elongated triplets as they step in short, quick triplets. Maggie stops abruptly and gives her shoulders another grinding shake as the women tumble over one another. The brazen Maggie now walks boldly off and slides to her knees downstage center, proceeding to lick her fingers in a gesture of delight in what she has done. The women also fall to their knees and then to their stomachs, hiding their faces. Friend waves her feet frantically, portraying her neuroticism and possible the dilemma of her on-the-fence attitude. Maggie for one last triumphant moment walks back to the group and steps contemptuously over each one. The women turn over to be on their backs and then perform a chest lift. Maggie shakes her derriere at them, then waves derisively and exits stage right. The townswomen numbly pull themselves to center stage and stand with hunched shoulders, then tiptoe quickly off stage left. Friend suffers a moment of indecision. With the townswomen gone she decides to give it one big try. She repeats imitatively many of the hip and arm gestures of Maggie, licks her fingers, jumps in the air, and excitedly runs off at stage right.

Section III. The seductive music for section three suggests the theme of clash in the sexual relationship as

Husband enters from the corner, stage left, with a slow back walk. He stops after a few steps and holds himself immobile as if anticipating what is to come. Maggie enters now from the stage right corner and crosses the stage to Husband. The left leg leads her movement and then she slides her right leg to the left leg, turns and walks with her back to him, carressing her hips with both hands. She repeats the movement until she is sure he has seen enough. Husband comes to her, grabs her by the head and pulls her to his chest; then they rub bodies. His hand begins to caress her body, but she darts away with a scratch to his neck. He falls to his knees in pain. Husband had thought there were other levels of communication than the physical, but it becomes apparent through Maggie's attitude and action toward him that she apparently wanted only the physical. She taunts him enticingly, but at the moment of surrender she rejects him violently. In disgust he abandons her. A second male enters, representing a lover. Maggie also taunts him. He becomes interested in her, but she also rejects him at a crucial moment. After a final gesture of rejection and disgust toward Maggie, the men exit.

Section IV. Maggie is sprawled on her stomach on the floor, then squats disgustedly. The three townswomen enter with long, menacing steps and circle Maggie.

The women's bodies seem to vibrate from inner tension. This tension is reflected in the movements which pull them back and forth across the stage, movements always directed hissingly in Maggie's direction. Maggie remains on the floor, occasionally glancing at them, reaching out, or turning her face to her hands. She is accepting the punishment. The women delight in this surrender and are unmerciful. They each circle around Maggie, taunting her. They exit with derrieres extended as far as possible, moving in mincing steps. Maggie follows to center stage, falls to her knees, then to hands and knees, and finally lies supine on the floor. Her destruction is inevitable. She has scorned the women and they will have their revenge.

Section V. As the "blue" piano music fades in, Maggie is seen crumpled to the floor. When she hears the music she slowly begins to react. First the arm comes up, reaching for what is not there. Next, the head appears. She pushes herself to a sitting position, every movement heavily laborious. Even when she tries to break away from her "chains" of guilt, the movement still indicates defeatism. Maggie now clenches her fist, grabs it with the other hand and swings it about her head and shoulders as if trying to stand. Failing, she turns to stage right and bobs her head between her legs several times as if she were sobbing. On the

third sob she hits the floor with her fists and throws her head back. She rises in a twisting motion to her knees, but falls flat on her face, breaking her fall with her hands. The legs are flexed at the knees with feet in the air. There is a long pause before Maggie begins pushing herself back up to her knees. A rising jazzy tempo in the music brings her to life. From her knees she rises to a standing position, and staggers backwards as if losing her balance. She rubs her body with the palms of her hands as if doing so gives her some reassurance. Her movements are still lolling and defeated. Her head pivots around and around on its axis and motivates the rest of her body to move. Her body and arms move as if she were vomiting and releasing the tension that is there. Her body sags to the floor. A moment of rebellion follows, and she tries to fling everything away. The movement is like that of trying to throw clinging gum from the hands. Her left leg moves up her right leg in small jerks, then stretches to the side. Walking quickly stage left she stops, lifting the right knee and hugging her body, fists are clenched. She releases her body and turns slowly around, face looking up to the ceiling, fist in her mouth, turning she sinks to the floor on her back, arms and legs sticking extended in the air. Thumb comes down to

her mouth, legs crumple to her chest, and with thumb in mouth she falls to her side facing the audience. Maggie has accepted defeat. The movement suggests she has retreated back to the womb.

Section VI. This section is a restatement of the first section save for the fact that Maggie importunes and is ignored by the group. Husband enters first from downstage left. Maggie runs to him but he stares through her. Friend enters next from upstage right. Following Friend is one townswoman from downstage left. Each is indifferent to Maggie whose desperate movements are in distinct contrast to her defiant attitude at the beginning. The dancers move in a semi-circle around Maggie who grovels on the floor. Simultaneously they turn their backs to her while she reaches skyward in supplication as the curtain closes.

Selection of Costumes

The dance was concerned with choreography for six persons who depicted a wide range of emotions. The choreographer decided the costumes should be simple in design and color. They should be comfortable, light, and easy to move in, but they should relate to the period and the dramatic idea of the dance. The costumes were designed to reflect the general mode of fashion in the

late forties.³ The costume worn by Maggie was a hot pink, glittery, tight skirt with a slit up the left side. The slit was used not only to enhance her sexiness but also to give her legs freedom of movement. A hot pink scoop neck leotard formed the blouse.

The two severe, self-righteous women needed costumes which emphasized their puritanical characteristics. Their costumes were dresses of midi length with a tight bodice and full skirt. The material was light jersey. The full skirt facilitated their movements. The color for one was a dull purple and for the other a dull blue. For the second section, each donned something which added a touch of humor. One wore a large brimmed, ornate hat, and the other a small hat which had an over-sized, artificial, turquoise flower. Each wore an artificial corsage. Friend wore a headpiece which was flexible enough to flare and flounce.

The men's costumes were in the style of the forties and fifties. The pants had pleats and cuffs. Husband wore a long-sleeved white shirt. In the third section the sleeves were rolled up to give a more virile appearance. Lover wore a short-sleeved, turtle neck knit shirt. All dancers were in bare feet.

³Peggy Von Praagh and Peter Brinson, The Choreographic Art (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1963), p. 168.

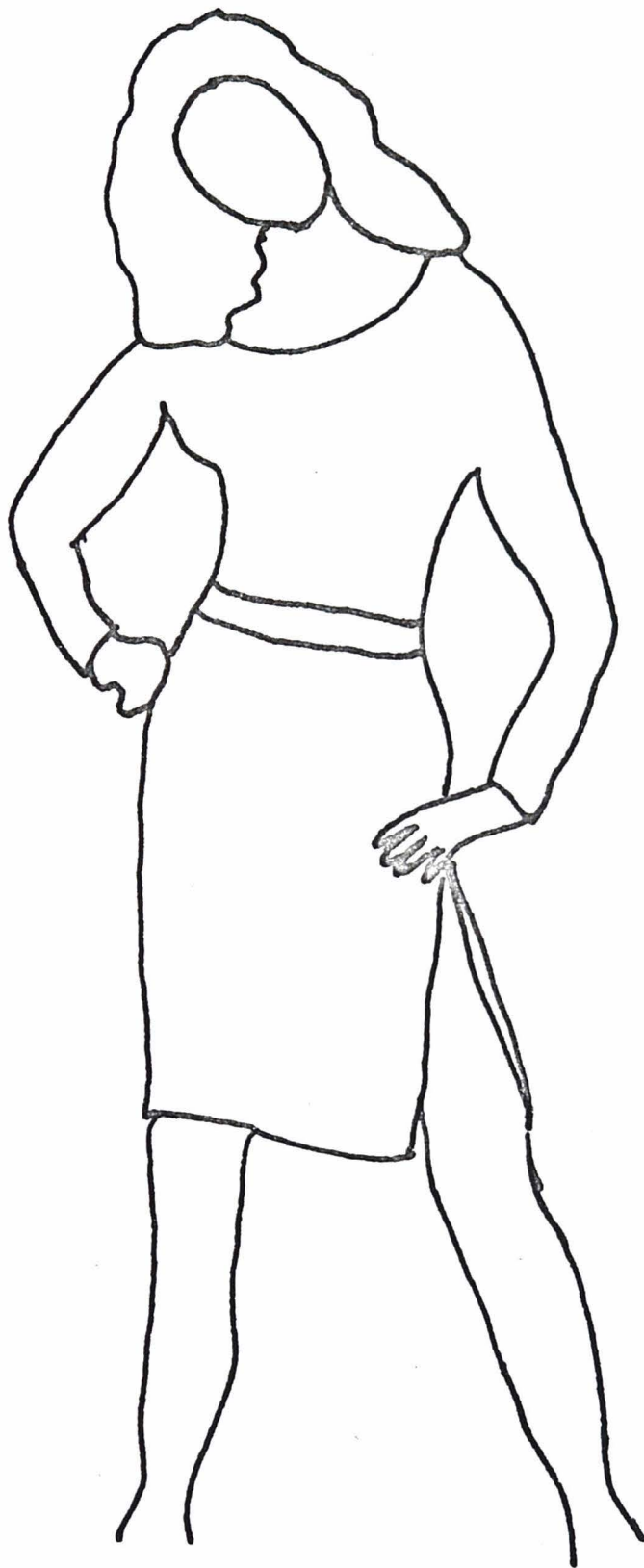


Figure I. Costume Worn by Maggie

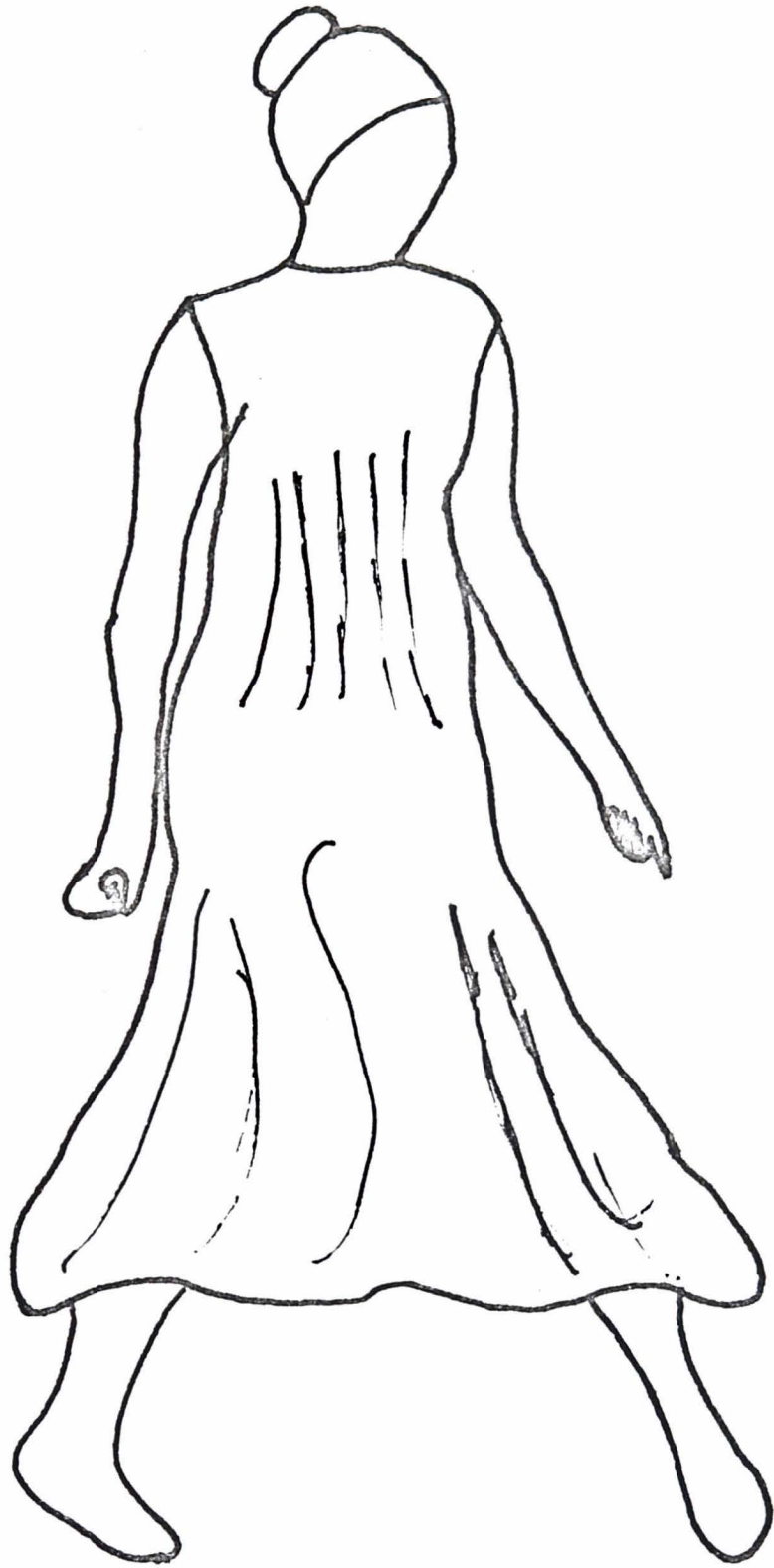


Figure II. Costume Worn by Townswomen

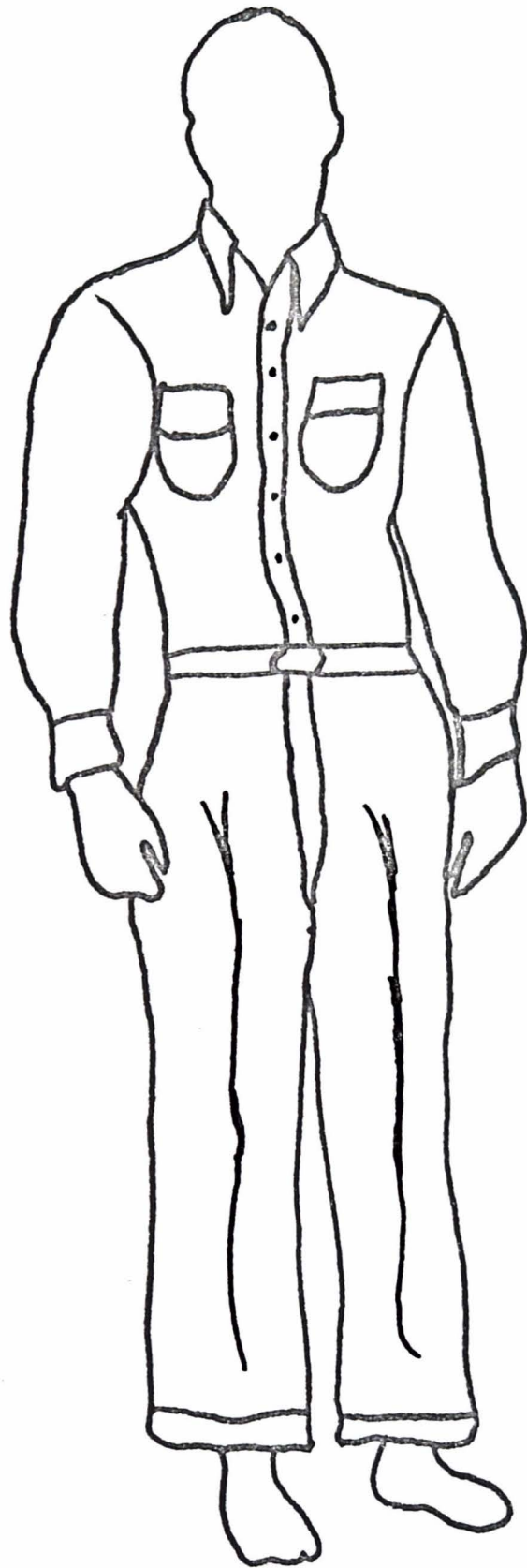


Figure III. Costume Worn by Husband

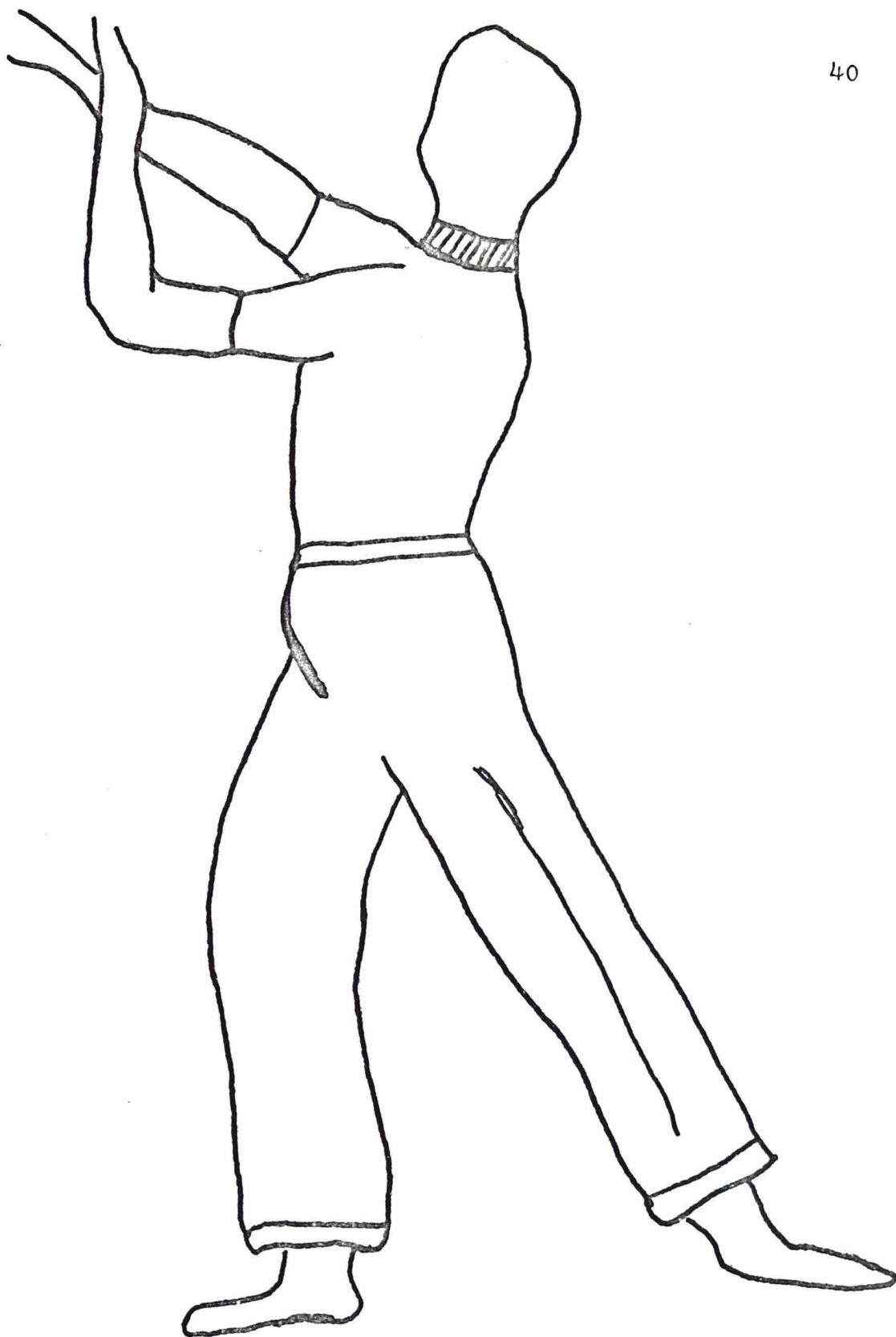


Figure IV. Costume Worn by Lover

Staging and Lighting of the Dance

The purpose of the present dance production was to communicate to the audience various themes that are recurrent in the plays of Tennessee Williams. For this reason the stage setting was to be kept simple and unobtrusive so as to avoid detracting in any way from the dance. The back drop was a white scrim that covered the entire cyclorama.

The lighting was an integral part of the production. Miss Linda Jackson, technical theatre student of Sam Houston State University Drama Department, co-ordinated the lights for the production. The investigator discussed with Miss Jackson the themes and qualities inherent in each section of the dance and the choreographic concept of the entire work.

Together, the light designer and choreographer chose a background of magenta for the opening of the dance. When Maggie entered she was silhouetted against the magenta. The bright color of lavender reflected her hot pink costume. When the others entered, dim blue lights were focused on her from the front. This created shadows on the back wall which helped to enhance the effect of reverie. When the group exited, a follow spot was focused on Maggie. The shadows were removed and the background was changed to lavender.

In section two, the lights came up to bright and the follow spot was removed. The mood was gay and playful. Amber, lavender, blue and pink gels were used on the lights which illumned the downstage area creating an ordinary daytime atmosphere.

After the husband and Maggie entered in section three, the lights were brought up and red footlights came on to give a more intense, harsh effect. This seemed to be in keeping with the mood of antagonism which characterized the choreography for this section.

In the fourth section blue and pink were brought up and other lights were dimmed. The footlights were predominately blue and the background was white. Shadows of the dancers were thrown against the scrim.

The lights were lowered in section five. Maggie was a shadow in the downstage area. The background was magenta and the footlights were blue with a little red to heighten the gloom.

The theme of the last section was the same as the first, so the lights were similar. Much of the front lighting was taken out and a lavender follow spot was put on Maggie. The background changed from magenta to lavender and the footlights were pure blue. The lights became pure blue as the dancers formed a semi-circle about Maggie. As the curtain closed, the lights went out save for the follow spot on Maggie.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

The purposes of this study were to read and to examine the plays of Tennessee Williams, to determine the basic recurring themes throughout his plays, and to explore each of them in relations to their choreographic possibilities. The findings of this investigation were evidenced in written form and were projected into an extended dance production choreographed, designed, staged and presented in concert by the investigator.

Because man is an experiencing animal, his choreography stems from experiences. The choreographer must take from life the experiences that have meaning for him. John Dewey states that "...because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in a germ."¹

In the twentieth century, numerous choreographers have found choreographic meaning in literature. Some of them have used literary themes literally; others have elected to do a characterization; others have been stimulated by the psychological impact of the literature and still others have developed choreography from the themes of a certain literary work.

¹John Dewey, Art as an Experience (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), p. 19.

The present investigator found that Tennessee Williams' plays were rich in themes suitable for dance, and that other choreographers had used his plays for choreography. The plays contained characters, emotions, moods, and themes which lent themselves to interpretation in an abstract medium such as dance and therefore contain potential for dance.

The dance production was described in detail and included the following points: (1) selection of themes (2) selection of personnel (3) selection of music (4) development of choreography (5) selection of costume (6) staging and lighting of the dance work.

An extended dance production was choreographed and presented as partial evidence of the findings of the present study. The dance production was based upon the recurring themes of the plays of Tennessee Williams. Ten plays of Tennessee Williams were read and from these ten plays it was found there were certain recurring themes. Five of these themes were chosen because of their adaptability to dance. They were (1) loneliness (2) clash between the cultures (3) conflict of the sexual relationship (4) evil, hatred, and bigotry (5) destruction.

The selection of the personnel for the production was refined to members of the Sam Houston Performing Dance Group. Six dancers were selected, using the criteria of (1) previous dance experience (2) technical

proficiency (3) sex of the dancer (4) physical characteristics (5) acting ability and ability to project to a large audience (6) dependability.

The dance form for this specific production was created through improvisations, abstraction of stylized gesture, and intellectual visualization. The choreography included characterizations of personalities taken from the plays.

The choreographer designed and created every aspect of the dance production, which included the selection of the music. It was important to select music that would lend itself to the era and locale which Tennessee Williams writes about. Therefore, the music was a collage of southern jazz pieces.

The costumes, like the music, were designed to enhance the themes selected from Williams' plays. They were simple and easy to move in, but each costume was self-explanatory and appropriate for the character who wore it.

The lighting of the dance was an integral part of the dance production. It brought to life the mood and emotion of the choreography. The coordination of lighting patterns in relation to the movements of the dancers complemented the total choreographic form.

When a choreographer is moved to create and elects to use literature as a basis for choreography, then it

must be remembered that he should find his own way to represent his art medium. A new insight must be disclosed, a new form developed, and the material reorganized so that it will exist aesthetically in its own right. When these criteria are met, the choreographer has experienced or has been impressed; he has choreographed or expressed. He has undergone some of the pain and some of the wonder which come from participation in the art of creating.

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