

ABSTRACT

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The noble crane pervades in April Gruber's MFA concert *Birds of a Feather*. Drawing movement from the majestic creature's aerial rituals and organic rhythms, the evening provides a bird's eye view of life's transient nature and the foundational roots that call us homeward. The concert features Gruber's performance in her own choreography, entitled *Nestling*, as well as Dawn Springer's work *Dreams of Flight*.

Birds of a Feather

By

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Preface

This document depicts the evolution of *Birds of a Feather*, an evening length performance comprised of two works: *Nestling*, which I both performed and choreographed and *Dreams of Flight* a solo created by Dawn Springer which I performed. These works are the product of a fourteen month investigation of the majestic crane, its symbolism and the paradox of weight and weightlessness.

The following program information serves as logistical support for further discussion of *Birds of a Feather*.

Birds of a Feather was performed October 22 and 23, 2009 in the Dance Theatre at University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. Undergraduate dance majors Alexandra Daniello, Jessica Goldberg, Lauren Knudsen, and Rachel Jordan Wolfe participated in the performance of *Nestling*.

Native Japanese dancer and choreographer Saki Kawakita shared cultural insight and her home country's native fan dancing to develop *Nestling* into its culturally sensitive presentation.

Dawn Springer, the University of Maryland's Department of Dance Guest Artist, served as the choreographer for *Dreams of Flight*. She was also vital in guiding me through the creation and performance process of *Birds of a Feather*.

Paul Jackson served as the evening's Technical Director. Erin Glasspatrick served as the Stage Manager.

Vannia Ibarquen is a fellow MFA candidate with whom I shared the evening.

Acknowledgements

To **Mom** and **Dad** for your unconditional love and support. There will never be words to fully express my awe and gratitude for all you did to make me the woman I am today. You taught me how to work hard and follow my dreams – this moment is possible because of you. You are simply amazing and I am so honored to be your daughter. I love you more than you will ever know.

To **Alyssa**, my little sister, whose childhood shyness caused Mom to enroll you into dance classes. I vividly remember attending your first performance and realizing *that's* what I want to do! Thank you for allowing me to follow your lead. I love you and am so proud to share this passion with you.

To **Halen**, my sweet little one...

To **Lox**, for keeping me focused and grounded.

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Chapter 1: Building Blocks

The steps to create an origami crane are as follows:

Orient a perfectly square piece of paper so that it is a diamond shape in front of you. Fold two opposing corners together and crease. With the open side facing you, bring the right and left corners together and crease. Open the top flap and insert your hand into the fold. Crease the paper into a diamond shape on both the top and bottom. Fold both sides of the top layer into the middle so that the edge meets the center fold. Repeat on the bottom layer. Fold the top point of this diamond shape down and crease where the paper meets the top of the two smaller creases. Lift the open corner of the top layer over the top point crease. Bring the sides into the middle so that the edges of the paper meet in the center. Repeat on the other side. Fold the side points of the top layer into the middle so that the edges meet at the center fold. Repeat on the bottom layer, as well. Open the right side flap and bend the bottom point up. Crease the paper. Do the same on the left and fold down the tip of the bottom point on this side only. The result of this formulaic and precise process is the richly symbolic origami crane (O'Brien and Needham 26-27, 32).

As I build hundreds of origami cranes, I am immersed in Japanese culture. I follow ancient tradition by sending a thought, a wish, a blessing into the universe with each fold. Each step has a rhythm and its repetition causes me to reflect on my creative process. With each crane I fold, I reflect on my personal

history and recognize that the key to my artistry lies within the foundational roots that I call home.

As I sit surrounded by nearly one thousand paper origami cranes each crafted by hand, I make one last wish. With that and an exhale, the music begins and the lights brighten. Nearly fourteen months of creative thinking, research, and rehearsals culminate in this moment. I am terrified, but calm. I am vulnerable, yet strong. It is time for me to spread my wings and fly.

The following investigation will examine the multifaceted choreographic and performance journey I experienced throughout the development of my evening length MFA performance entitled *Birds of a Feather*. Bringing to light its inspiration, research, collaborations, methodologies, challenges, and execution, I will discuss the intimate details that lead to the creation and evolution of this performance.

Chapter 2: Research

Dance is the lens through which I view the world. It is my vehicle for comprehension, inspiration, and expression. This approach was articulated during a weeklong intensive residency with acclaimed choreographer Tere O'Connor in the fall of 2008. Under O'Connor's direction, I identified that my foundational interest in dance is that as an architect of space. Through the execution and arrangement of movement, I find truth and peace – a place I call home within my body.

Carving and sculpting space with movement allows me to lay the foundation for my artistry. This becomes the geographical, emotional, and spiritual root of my expression. Building a dance in this manner provides the nutrients from which I am nurtured as a person, artist, and dancer. From there, my craft can flourish.

In order to excavate this creative resource, I read architect Gaston Bachelard's book Poetics of Space at Tere O'Connor's suggestion. Here, I discovered that my domestic connection to movement is instinctual in both humans and animals. Birds, in particular, share a deeply embodied sense of home. The winged creature's reverence and respect for domesticity is best captured in a quote by Michelet which states:

On the inside...the instrument that prescribes a circular form for the nest is nothing else but the body of the bird. It is by constantly turning round and round and pressing back the walls on every side, that it succeeds in forming this circle...The house is a bird's very person; it is its form and its most immediate effort, I shall even say, its suffering. The result is only obtained by constantly repeated pressure of the breast. There is not one

of these blades of grass that, in order to make it curve and hold the curve, has not been pressed on countless times by the bird's breast, its heart... (101).

The bird uses his body as a tool to assemble material and construct his territory. Armed only with external resources and his physical being, he innately constructs an intimate and personal abode (Bachelard 100-101). I recognized myself within this process. As a dancer, my body is my home. It is my internal compass from which I navigate the space around me to find my true north. When I move, I try to defy gravity, appear weightless, and dance with the fluidity and grace of a bird in flight.

Yet, a bird's instinctual relationship to home evolves throughout various stages of life. Whether in an egg, nest, or in flight, he makes residence of the territory he inhabits. Despite forces that may deconstruct his home, he constantly builds a definitive space to call his own.

Language captures this territorial quality of man and nature with colorful expressions. Edward T. Hall cites examples in his text The Hidden Dimension. He states:

The expression "free as a bird" is an encapsulated form of man's conception of this relation to nature. He sees animals as free to roam the world, while he himself is imprisoned by society. Studies of territoriality show that the reverse is closer to the truth and that animals are often imprisoned in their own territories (Hall 7-8).

Cultural norms also fold into the human relationship with space. The Japanese culture's use of *ma* is a foundation for spatial experiences (Hall 143). *Ma* is the "intervening interval" in which space is perceived and revered (70). It has an ability to transform a small space by "stretching visual space by

exaggerating kinesthetic involvement” (49). This made me question my American relationship to space and how it informs my movement.

Over dinner with Saki Kawakita, a native Japanese dancer and dear friend, I inquired about her culture’s use of *ma* and the influence of birds in her homeland. She immediately launched into the symbolism and legend of the immortal Japanese Red Crowned Crane. The ancient art of Japanese paper folding, known as origami, has a particularly powerful relationship with movement and spatial conformity (Kawakita).

She shared the story of one thousand paper cranes – a heart wrenching saga of a child dying of radiation poisoning from the Hiroshima bombing of World War II (Kawakita). The tale goes:

From the belief in a thousand – year life span came the custom of folding a thousand paper cranes to bring the folder long life and good health. A young girl reached out to the power of that belief not long after the atomic bomb devastated her homeland. Besieged by radiation sickness from the bombs, her strength zapped as she lay in a hospital, she began folding a thousand cranes. After completing only 508, she died. Her friends collected donations from children all over Japan and erected a monument in her honor at the Peace Park in Hiroshima. The statue is of a girl, and in her outstretched hands that reach to the heavens is a folded paper crane (Katz 42).

This story touched my familial roots; my grandfather defended the United States against Germany and Japan nearly seventy years ago in World War II and was a German prisoner of war. His survival, paired with the Hiroshima bombing story, and the revered crane’s symbolism drew my attention towards immortality and cultural perspectives. Origami was instantly my connection to home and a catalyst for my artistic expression.

The following day, I checked out a children's origami book from my local library. I wanted to physically understand the story Saki told me the evening before. With delicate origami paper in hand, I folded and creased as directed to reveal the crane design. The dancer within me called for neurotic and obsessive repetition of this sequence until I could execute the pattern from muscle memory. I wanted to instinctually know the pattern, feel the history it suggested, and embody the crane and its organic rhythms. I quickly made over one hundred paper cranes.

Examining the delicate wings of my origami cranes, I became curious about flight and its contrast of weight and weightlessness. The BBC documentary [The Life of Birds](#) specifically offered insight into birds as aerial acrobats. David Attenborough's narration shared an array of birds' aeronautical achievements, migration patterns, song, and partnering habits. More importantly, however, the footage offered stunning images and detail of winged creatures in flight. The depth of analysis offered encouraged me to delve deeply into the nuance of the crane. My research needed to address its movement characteristics and habitual patterns.

The crane is a symbol commonly treasured in Asian culture. Its representation in art encouraged me to visit the Smithsonian Institute's Freer and Sackler Gallery on March 14. Their specialty Asian art collection showcased cranes in several East Asian works, including a porcelain jar dated from Korea's 19th century Choson period. I was particularly captured by a hand painted image of a crane frozen in flight. The angular folds of its wings reminded me of the

origami crane's construction pattern. I was also intrigued by a silk painting by Japanese artist Okamoto Shūki (1807-1862) entitled "Auspicious Symbols: Crane, Rising Sun, and Peach." Created during the Japanese Edo period, the work showed a nesting crane with the sun rising behind him, and a fruit bearing peach tree. I was captivated by the nesting bird and the ambiance of rebirth eluded to by the rising sun and fruit bearing tree (Shūki). This further propelled my interest in the life cycle of the crane and the impact of the creature on other cultures.

An elegant nesting bird, the poetic life journey of the migratory creature has been inspiring humans since the dawn of time. Beyond its Asian reverence, the crane's influence on humanity can be traced globally from the ancient Greeks' development of the alphabet to a symbol of peace for the Hopi American Indian tribe (Matthiessen 260-261). Following its development from infancy to adulthood, I was captivated by the crane's internal compass that calls each bird to migrate and build a nest. Vladimir Flint, a Russian biologist working with International Crane Foundation to save the Siberian crane captures the magic of crane and its nest when he states, "Birds' eggs are like their shell, one of the most beautiful things on the planet. A person doesn't really know a bird until he can find its nest. Birds hide their nests so well that if you find an egg, it proves you know the bird and its habits" (Price 135).

An x-ray like sketch of a crane chick inside its egg in Alice Lindsay Price's text Cranes: The Noblest Flyers in Natural History and Cultural Lore revealed the angles and folds of a crane's gestation period (114). Similar to the Choson jar

seen at the Freer and Sackler Gallery, the angular folds mirrored the construction of an origami crane. In this image, I saw the shell itself as a domestic container of *ma* space. Its protection, confinement and fragile structure were architectural marvels of space that peaked my interest.

To support my egg and nest exploration, Anne Warren shared the March-April 2008 issue of Audubon magazine. In an article entitled *Small Miracles* by Kenn Kaufman, San Francisco photographer Sharon Beals captured impeccable images of the delicate and intimate nests of nearly twenty birds. Some nests hugged vibrantly colored eggs, while others exposed the broken shells of homes now abandoned. “These miniature marvels of architecture,” as Kaufman states, varied in shape and size, but were all comprised of an array of natural materials – twigs, feathers, mud, and pine needles (84). The origami paper used to construct my fragile cranes was a bi-product of some of the same natural resources. By integrating origami cranes into my movement sculpture, I could build a delicate home for my dance. Within this space, my artistry could come to life.

The crane’s endangered status was vital to fully understanding its habitual tendencies. Barbara Katz’s text So Cranes May Dance: A Rescue from the Brink of Extinction shared insight into the development and establishment of the International Crane Foundation (ICF), a crane conservancy in Baraboo, Wisconsin. The organization, since its inception in the early 1970s, has remained committed to the protection and restoration of an array of crane

species. Despite trials and tribulation, the ICF has successfully bred and released thousands of cranes into the wild to ensure the animal's future.

Katz's text also offered a wealth of detail on the Japanese Red Crowned Crane. Its symbolism and importance in Japanese heritage reinforced the need for cultural sensitivity. She states:

Beyond its physical beauty is the importance of the Red-crowned Crane in Japanese culture, ancient and modern. Its graceful, sometimes stylized form is on screens, scrolls, prints, ceramics, textiles, and note cards. The crane is prevalent in Japanese literature. It's the symbol of Japan Airlines. Place names on the northern island of Hokkaido, home of Japan's resident Red-crowned Cranes, honor the bird. There is the town of Maizuru, "Dancing Crane," and Tsuruimura, "The Village Where Cranes Are" (41).

"In Japanese legends the crane lives a thousand years and is a symbol of longevity to the Japanese people. It's also monogamous and thus a good luck symbol at weddings, a bird of happiness" (42).

Throughout Katz's work, she often mentioned the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center's Crane Operation in Laurel, Maryland, a sister organization to the ICF. I arranged a visit for Monday, August 24. Staff member Jane Chandler guided me through the facilities and let me spend an hour alone sitting with several Whooping and Sandhill cranes.

Cranes recognize and distinguish individuals and during our tour I was immediately tagged 'the stranger' amongst the mating pairs. The birds trumpeted their threatening call, danced, strutted, and preened in my presence. The red 'crown' on their heads (a bald patch of skin) also became larger and a deeper rouge to warn me away (Chandler). I was clearly not welcome in their home.

After a quick tour of a few mating pairs, I sat quietly outside a pen containing three one-year old Whooper males. Two of the three cranes remained at Patuxent for genetic and breeding reasons. The other was kept at the refuge due to health concerns. Here, I observed the creatures for over an hour.

Although the three male cranes I was observing never came close to me, they were clearly territorial & patrolled the far edge of their home. I studied their movements – the bobbing motion of their heads as they walked, the contraction and lengthening of the neck, the bend in their knees, piercing gestures of the beak, and the rolling ruffle of their feathers. Watching these creatures move organically clarified my project's need for ease and simplicity.

The birds' wings had just been clipped so they could not fly away (Chandler). Yet, their presence was majestic. At one point, a flock of geese flew over head in a migratory "V" formation. The cranes trumpeted in an uproar as these passers-by disturbed them. This territorial nature further sanctified the space they inhabit.

After visiting with these Whoopers for about an hour, I visited young Whooper chicks. Born in May, these birds were only a few months old, but the full height of their adult parents (Chandler). They had piercing blue eyes and, despite their size, a soft delicate chick call. They were very comfortable with humans and walked right up to me when I entered the pen. When these chicks lose all of their brown down feathers in January 2010, they will begin their

migration training with the Patuxent staff. From there, it is hoped that they can be released into the wild and find a new place to call home (Chandler).

Chapter 3: Collaborative Processes

Vannia Ibarguen

When it was clear that the thesis concerts for the 2009-2010 season were to be shared evenings, Vannia Ibarguen and I were paired. I was comfortable sharing a bill with her; our interests seemed to overlap just enough to create a varied, but thematic evening. I was confident that we could produce a successful concert.

We worked independently on our pieces throughout the spring of 2009. At the time, sharing an evening seemed like an easy task. However, as the fall semester approached and intricate details of the performance needed addressed, the art of “sharing” was tested.

One of our first co-directing undertakings concerned program order. Dawn Springer had expressed interest in using white marley for her work *Dreams of Flight*. This detail, coupled with its solo nature, made it an appropriate show opener. Vannia then recognized that the projections in her half would also work well with a white marley. Since I was unopposed to the floor color for my choreography in *Nestling*, an all white performance floor was decided.

Next, the issue of program order was up for discussion. Aware that I was performing large roles in two works, I strongly suggested *Dreams of Flight*, followed by *Through the Distance*, an intermission, and *Nestling* as a finale. Although initially agreed upon, Erin Glasspatrick approached me shortly after this decision with Vannia’s concern of being “sandwiched” in the evening. I was disappointed that Vannia would not talk to me directly about her concerns. Thus,

we set up another meeting with Erin to discuss flexibility. I offered to run my pieces back-to-back during the first showing. If this performance sequence seemed physically possible, I was open to exploring other options for the program order.

The first showing went smoothly as I performed both pieces sequentially. However, due to props and set pieces, more shuffling needed to be done to hone the evening's performance sequence. The mutually agreed upon evening eventually settled into *Nestling*, intermission, *Dreams of Flight*, and *Through the Distance*.

Taking the reins on the majority of our shared administrative responsibilities, I submitted our program information to Erin Glasspatrick and arranged for a documentary photographer to attend dress rehearsal. When the program proof returned, Vannia and I asked to change the program photo to an image that would represent both of us, not just one as the designer had previously selected. This was only fair, as it was a shared evening.

As we moved into the theatre during tech week, the dressing room quickly got crowded with our casts of dancers. The pressure Vannia and I felt was palpable. I craved my own space and desperately wanted my dancers to focus. Constant distractions and interruptions made this near impossible. I was no longer willing to share my thesis concert experience and I focused on myself from this point forward.

Student Dancers

Throughout my time at the University of Maryland, I have been integrated into the undergraduate dance community. As a peer, I have shared the studio and stage with many undergraduate students in guest artist work, advanced level technique classes, and choreography projects. However, when it came time to solidifying a cast for my thesis concert, the task was nothing short of frustrating.

The top tier of undergraduate students agreed to dance for me, but offered a plethora of excuses that would limit their participation. Others committed to work with both me and Vannia which was neither ideal, nor feasible. I was quickly flustered with the students' unprofessionalism and blasé attitude towards this opportunity to dance. Then, I realized that the answer was right in front of me.

During the spring of 2009, I served as a graduate teaching assistant for the level three modern technique class and improvisation. I watched young dancers work hard and develop daily during these classes. From this untapped pool of young dancers, I found my cast willing to work and dance hard:

Alexandra Daniello, Jessica Goldberg, Lauren Knudsen, and Rachel Jordan Wolfe. Although unseasoned performers, I recognized potential in each.

Saki Kawakita

The Japanese emphasis engulfing my choreographic influence kept me closely connected with Saki Kawakita. Trained in traditional Japanese fan dancing during her childhood, she informed me of a native dance called

Takasago which told the story of the Japanese Red Crowned Crane's annual migration from a city of the same name. Saki agreed to teach me this Japanese fan dance to further my research. I hoped it would evolve into solo material that we could construct together.

Dawn Springer

Early in the spring of 2009, I approached Dawn Spring about involvement in my thesis project. I was challenged in her technique class with its repetition, deep psychological and physiological understanding for movement, and the full bodied physicality I love to execute, but shy away from in my own choreography. Our conversations were instrumental in flushing out my thesis ideas to reveal the core of my interest and intention. Thus, she intimately understood my interest in the crane, the notion of home, and flight.

I initially hoped she could serve on my thesis committee, but her uncertain guest artist status at the University voided this option. Despite this uncertainty, I connected with her and knew she was vital to my thesis process. Our conversation advanced to her creating a solo for me that would be shown as part of the evening. We then set the last two weeks in August 2009 as residency dates to develop a dance.

Chapter 4: The Creative Process

Nestling

Chewing on the idea of spatial relationships and home, I went into the studio to embody my ideas. Set to the sounds of Andrew Bird, I hoped that the chirping birds found in his track “Yawny at the Apocalypse” would get me in the right frame of mind. The more I worked with “Yawny at the Apocalypse,” the more I found its soft and longing sounds pulling me deeper into exploration. There was also a twinge of Asian influence in this track which kept me centered and focused on my original origami movement inspiration.

I took the origami directions into the studio with me to translate its crane instructions onto my body. This process revealed a new movement language that instantaneously oozed from me. My arms were as nimble as the origami paper itself. They began to fold, reach, curl, rotate, and cross. The noble crane – a symbol of peace, hope, and longevity – revealed itself in my movement.

Curious to see how others would digest these origami building instructions, I directed an array of family and friends to visualize their hands as origami paper. Armed with a video camera and the origami crane construction details, I documented their unrehearsed responses to my verbal instructions. The folding, creasing and flipping generated was varied and fascinating. I compiled the footage into a video entitled *Helping Hands*.

Using video editing software, I condensed each person’s interpretation into a small image box. I then arranged each rendition into a migratory “V”

shape. Each pair of hands flocked from the top of the screen down. They eventually dissolved to reveal a full screen image of my hands folding origami paper into the crane shape. I set the film to music by Daniel Bernard Roumain and was intrigued by the result. It had potential to push *Nestling's* choreography further.

Armed with ample research material, group rehearsals began immediately. I used the spring of 2009 to get movement material out of my body and onto my dancers. I approached each meeting with the etiquette and professionalism with which I had been trained; I held nothing back. As a result, our first rehearsals concentrated on phrase work.

Full bodied physicality with complex partner sequences flowed from me. The teaching process was clunky, awkward, and frustrating. These young dancers were learning me and I was learning them. By the end of the semester, it wasn't pretty. We broke for the summer and I left wondering how I would bring it all together into something thesis worthy.

I spent the last half of May and the month of June rehearsing solely with Jessica Goldberg. Her technical palette and expressive quality made me want to work with her independently. Plus, my movement worked on her body and we looked good dancing together. The catalyst for our investigation was the "dance" a crane executes when selecting a mate. From this impetus, I developed a duet between us. I also addressed and inserted connecting moments into the group section of *Nestling* that would make our duet relationship logical.

As the late spring and summer months continued, Saki and I also worked together learning and perfecting *Takasago*. As Saki executed the steps, it was clear that *Takasago* was an organic expression of herself and her culture. I could see the cranes her movement so reverently spoke of. The fan fluttered like a liquid extension of her arm. I, on the other hand, looked as Japanese as McDonald's with my large American steps and expressive-less neck and limbs. I lacked the indigenous nuances and feared misrepresenting the ancient art with my technique and race. Despite my sincere interest in the material, I decided that this collaboration could not be done without Saki herself performing *Takasago*.

Our collaboration evolved into a duet from that point forward. I tried "Americanizing" *Takasago* by marinating the movement into a modern dance language I understood and could confidently express. The product was interesting movement material, but blending the cultural extremes offered no success. It did, however, produce an interesting visual contrast. Our shared presence created its own universe in the stage space. As the two pieces developed, *Nestling's* origami inspiration and Saki's performance of *Takasago* spoke directly to one another; they needed to be integrated into one thought. And with this revelation, *Takasago* became the axis around which *Nestling* rotated.

To contextualize her movement, Saki was costumed in a vibrant yellow yukata. This choice reinforced the Japanese theme *Nestling* embodied. It also isolated Saki from the group, but her black and red obi offered a connection to

the dancers dressed in black and the red origami cranes that glittered the stage floor. The piece materialized quickly after that.

The fall arrived in the blink of an eye. I knew the semester would be rigorous, so I took Pilates classes regularly over the summer, as well as danced and rehearsed several times per week. However, this was not thesis concert performance shape. Thus, I began a religious training regiment at the University gym to improve my strength and endurance. Three days per week, I executed weight-bearing and cardiovascular exercises. This not only warmed me up for the technique class I took immediately following my workout, but also provided the energy and endorphins needed to push through lengthy rehearsals and the weeks ahead.

On the first day of the fall semester, our group rehearsal chipped away at the thoughts I conjured up over the summer. Although Saki could only join us sporadically for rehearsals during these fall months, the group rehearsed rigorously twice a week. I began to find the magic of our group dynamic, a renewed investment in the project, and hope that a successful final product existed.

Rehearsals were typically held in the Dance Theatre. However, I held our October 7 rehearsal outside in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center courtyard. A wind advisory was in effect that day and I wanted the dancers to feel the wind encompass their bodies. It was the perfect opportunity to feel its gusts support the choreography as if a bird in flight.

The dancers performed the work several times in the grass. The sun shone upon their faces and the wind whipped between their fingers. The experience affirmed their commitment to the weightless material and awareness of each other. In fact, I noticed that within these silent performances, a rhythm emerged. Without music present, the dancers executed perfect timing. They were truly attuned to one another. This moment stayed with me through our last group rehearsal.

Dawn Springer mentioned throughout the evolution of *Nestling* that the sound score for the group movement section clashed. In her opinion, the movement and music fought each other in this section, rather than playing a complimentary role. Her words echoed within me as the performance deadline neared. I addressed her concern and decided to challenge my dancers during our last rehearsal; I made them run the piece several times, each with different music.

As I flipped through my Ipod, I selected random instrumental tracks. Most were cacophonous. However, as I advanced to the Kronos Quartet's rendition of String Quartet No.5:V, my jaw dropped. The choreography came alive! The dancers were instantaneously the cranes their movement was designed to embody. They danced fully and looked mature. The section suddenly looked sophisticated.

While the dancers agreed that the sound brought the section to life, they were traumatized at the idea of changing the music a week before the show. In a

leap of faith, we committed to this change for the betterment of *Nestling*. It was time for tech week.

Dreams of Flight

Over the course of the summer, Dawn Springer created the movement material for *Dreams of Flight* at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina. When we reconnected on August 18, I had no idea what to expect, but I was ready to work hard. Dawn had honed in on the idea of “home.” Her perspective on this subject took on a dancer’s point of view; she saw the body’s physical experience and movement as “home.” With an explosive vocabulary, I was challenged by her fast and fierce choreography for the next two weeks.

Like making any house a home, I immediately faced the challenge of taking ownership in her choreography. While honoring her tremendous gift of *Dreams of Flight*, I committed myself to owning her vision. I studied rehearsal videos and reviewed material constantly. I knew that with her continued guidance, anything was possible.

However, identifying home became much more complex than comfortably executing her choreography. Dawn pushed the vulnerability of performing a solo further with movement done in silence and portions of the choreography breaking the fourth wall. I danced inches away from audience members to the sound of nothing but my own breath. I was scared, yet invigorated by this challenge.

This process made me realize that I had previously identified the stage space itself as its own contained and sacred nest. It was an untouchable safe haven where I could confidently and uniquely express myself. The effort of my performance was rarely revealed; it hid behind a musical mask. Not here. This was intense - raw and real.

We launched into rehearsal twice a week until the performance. I would often run the piece several times during rehearsals for both stamina's sake and performance intention. Often, my second performance of *Dreams of Flight* was stronger than the first. This reinforced that having my head and body fully present for this work was the key to its success. My undivided focus was imperative.

Chapter 5: Marketing

Titling and Describing the Evening

In the infant stages of our shared evening, Vannia and I tried titling the comprehensive evening *Flying Away* with our own halves subtitled. As our individual works evolved, however, this idea was abandoned. The title of the concert became our two concerts put together: *Through the Distance and Birds of a Feather*.

As my work developed, it was challenging to craft an eloquent, accurate, and concise description. After several drafts, I submitted my concert description on June 4, 2009 to Center Publications for their fall season guide and September/October performance calendar. The Center also asked for promotional images that would be incorporated into print and online marketing materials.

Promotional Photographs

Knowing my own aesthetic and that of the Center's, it was important that the marketing photographs for *Birds of a Feather* be of the highest caliber. Thus, I decided to work with area photographer Carlton Wolfe. Carlton and I spent the spring months designing a photo session that embodied my interest in cranes. After watching a DVD of the piece and discussing the concert description, he

decided that the use of perspective in this shoot was imperative. We both agreed that the choreography should speak for itself, so the images moved in a more creative direction.

Our photo shoot in late June was incredibly successful as a result. We spent five hours playing with different compositional, lighting, and design perspectives that captured the essence of the concert. Carlton took photos from various angles to emphasize the idea of folding, flying, and nesting that was imperative in my work. While reviewing the proofs, however, I was concerned about how dark the images were. After Carlton's editing, though, I was satisfied with results as an accurate and creative representation of *Birds of a Feather*.

Of the hundreds of photographs we took that evening, seven images were selected for use in marketing materials and Center Publications needs. Several images were utilized in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center fall season marketing materials, website, and the September/October performance calendar. One image was also featured as a full page promotional photo in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center's 2009-2010 season guide.

Marketing Piece

Early in our planning stages, Vannia and I agreed to share an oversized marketing piece to promote the evening. This postcard, designed by a Peruvian friend of Vannia's named Fabiola Elias, contained images of each of our works

on the front and bios and headshots on the back. She artistically united two completely different modern dance pieces in a visually cohesive manner. I was thrilled and proud to market our concert in such a professional manner.

The postcard design was complete by early August and the postcards were printed and delivered by September 1. I sent postcards to family and friends, as well as dropped them off throughout campus, area book stores, coffee shops, and dance organizations to aid in the publicity of our performance. I was confident that attendance would be high.

Documentary Photographer

With the fall semester imminent, Vannia and I discussed hiring a photographer for documentary dress rehearsal images. On September 11, we hired area photographer Sean Scheidt. I sent him a DVD from the first showing to aid in his preparation for the event. He was generous with his time and artistic abilities during our October 21 dress rehearsal. The pictures, as a result, are an accurate representation and treasured memory of *Through the Distance* and *Birds of a Feather*.

Chapter 6: Feedback

From the beginning and throughout the evolution of *Birds of a Feather*, I was open and eager for feedback. Dawn Springer, Sharon Mansur, and Anne Warren attended rehearsals sporadically throughout the spring of 2009 to offer an outside opinion and refocus my process.

Blog

As the spring semester came to a close, I wanted to offer a way for my committee, dancers, and collaborators to stay abreast of developments and transformations *Birds of a Feather* would endure over the summer months. I therefore established a blog where those involved could access updates at their leisure and offer feedback. I posted videos of rehearsals, progress on marketing materials, research images, and additional information that pertained to the concert and my creative process.

My posts began weekly and then progressed to several times per week as the summer months drew to a close. I hoped that it would create a forum where viewers would offer comments on my posts and provide feedback despite our varied summer locations. While this was not often the case, I found this method to be much more effective than filling in-boxes with individual progress reports.

Peer Feedback

When I hit the ground running with my dancers at the end of August, I knew I could not do this alone. While the faculty and my committee had open invitations to rehearsals, I also asked my peers to provide feedback. My new colleague Nathan Andary jumped in and was vital to finessing *Nestling's* quality shifts.

With a CMA background, Nathan's cache of articulate language directed the quality emerging from the movement material. He captured the light and breathy ambiance I could not verbalize. The dancers were receptive to his thoughtful approach, eloquent language, and enthusiastic energy. Their commitment to the process deepened as a result and I was grateful to see his feedback quickly come to life in their bodies.

Pre-Concert Showings

The renewed energy the dancers and I developed from Nathan's contributions made me eager to share my work in the two pre-concert showings that were established by the Department's new Production Coordinator, Erin Glasspatrick. Friday, September 18 marked the first formal showing of *Birds of a Feather*.

To begin, executing Dawn's work in front of an audience was intimidating. As the opening sequence progressed, however, I found power in its repetition. I felt strong and alive as I took command of the space. While the overall timing of

the work was fast, the experience reinforced my need for breath and focus in *Dreams of Flight*.

With full costumes, hair, and origami, I also presented a comprehensive picture of what had come to be called *Nestling*. Nerves were high with a sea of professors and peers looking on. As I prepared to run my works back to back, I launched into “professional performance mode” and assumed my dancers would do the same. However, the showing that unfolded was far from it. My dancers were unseasoned performers; they did not warm up independently and panicked at the realization that all eyes were on them. To no fault of their own, their performance was sloppy, fast, and unpolished. I was instantaneously overwhelmed.

Bombarded with feedback, rhetorical questions, and images that had emerged from *Nestling*, I was over stimulated. The bulk of the feedback I received revolved around Saki’s involvement; I had to clearly identify her relationship with the other dancers. The *Helping Hands* video also needed to be omitted. I gratefully sifted through the rest of the feedback to clarify the themes and the heart of my work. I ultimately realized that the movement was no longer about me and my vocabulary. *Nestling* had to be designed for the dancers – who they were and what they could execute well. Things had to change and change fast.

By the time the second pre-concert showing arrived on October 10, the dancers and *Nestling* had turned the corner. Because of the vast number of responses garnered at the first showing and my commitment to clarifying the

work, the piece was now more succinct and refined. The feedback received at this showing was more focused and detail oriented as a result. It provided the fuel to get us through the final weeks of rehearsal.

Self Critiques

I initially implemented self critiques after the first showing. We initially watched the DVD of the first showing and the dancers combed through their performance to identify mistakes and uncertainties. We then discussed how the performance felt, and why. They responded immediately with focus and a renewed commitment to the rehearsal process. I filmed rehearsals each Wednesday from that point forward and asked the dancers to observe and critique themselves at the beginning of our Monday meetings. Self critiques were an invaluable tool which gave the dancers a pro-active role in the ownership of the dance.

Group Ritual

To manage performance nerves and energy, I also implemented a group “ritual” that would be executed at the beginning of each rehearsal from the first showing forward. I addressed core and upper body strengthening, as well as the joys of breathing and stretching. I used this regiment to focus and prepared everyone to dance. It proved effective throughout the final weeks of the process as components were altered and tweaked.

Open Showings

I further recognized that the dancers needed additional performance opportunities in order to work out the “performance jitters” that plagued *Nestling* during the first showing. Thus, I took advantage of the monthly open work-in-progress showings Dawn Springer established to share the group section of the piece. While I was not particularly interested in gaining feedback from these events, presenting the work in a semi-formal format was helpful and centering.

Chapter 7: Challenges

I was forewarned that challenges would arise throughout the thesis concert process and into the final moments of the performance. While I acknowledged the chance, everything unfolded organically and I felt quite prepared to launch into *Birds of a Feather*. Unfortunately, however, that was not the reality.

A Dancer Down

Tech week arrived and *Nestling* was scheduled to begin lighting rehearsal late Sunday evening. Dancer Rachel Wolfe arrived not feeling well. Dreading the infamous swine flu, I told her to rest. The next morning she scheduled a visit to the health center on campus. When she did not arrive for tech rehearsal that evening, I was concerned. An email from her mother informed me that she had been transported to the hospital and was being tested for appendicitis. Restructuring began immediately.

With the remaining dancers in the hallway five minutes before our scheduled run of *Nestling*, I transformed the quintet into a quartet. Changes were kept to a minimum, but roles and timing were shuffled so that Rachel's absence was not blatantly obvious. The dancers displayed professionalism, grace, and versatility in this quick transformation. I was impressed.

Luckily, Rachel's diagnosis was not appendicitis and she was back the next evening dancing, albeit cautiously. The piece could go on as scheduled; bullet dodged.

Last Minute Adjustments

By the end of Monday's run, I still was not satisfied with the ending for *Nestling*. Feedback Dawn once offered ran through my head; there was something powerful about just Saki and me in the space. The ending which involved the dancers' reappearance and interaction with Saki was unnatural. She was right; it presented a new idea, not a conclusion. So, with literally hours left in the tech process, I omitted the ending section of the work. *Nestling* would now finish with just Saki and me in the space.

When we first performed this version during Tuesday's run, I exhaled as the piece closed. I instantly knew this revision was truly meant to be the end of *Nestling* because it captured the evolutionary feeling that I aspired towards.

Lighting Design

One of the most daunting obstacles of this week was *Nestling's* lighting design. Paul Jackson and I met the week before the show to discuss our ideas for the work. We had mutual feelings on atmosphere and shifts, so I trusted his professional artistry with this aspect of the performance.

I was alone during the initial lighting design rehearsal late Sunday evening. In the moment, I realized that this was the first time I had ever really

been asked my opinion on lighting designs. Previously, I worked with smaller venues and rushed lighting rehearsals. Simply suggesting “a look” was the extent of my experience. My options suddenly seemed limitless in the Dance Theatre with its state-of-the-art equipment. I was completely overwhelmed and the magnitude of directing my own concert hit me.

By the end of the first lighting tech, I was uncertain about the design. Yet, I did not have the lighting language to articulately speak about the moods and qualities I envisioned. I simply knew what I liked and what I did not, but could not begin to explain in detail.

The next day, I asked Dawn Springer to be another set of eyes in the process. She confirmed my reservations and brought my attention to other moments in need of review. With her assistance, we made progress in a limited window of time, but the design still needed tweaking. By Tuesday evening, Sharon Mansur offered additional lighting feedback with an articulation that captured our shared aesthetic. In a meeting with Sharon, Paul, and myself, my vision was more clearly identified. A bit of time before dress rehearsal was used to address last minute concerns. Paul added the finishing touches to *Nestling's* lighting design. It was show time.

Chapter 8: The Performance

Opening night arrived in the blink of an eye. I went to the studio two and a half hours before the six o'clock call time. I was jittery and desperately needed time alone to focus, and warm myself up. It worked, but only until the dancers arrived when mayhem seemed to break loose. I was doing people's hair, answering questions, giving last minute notes and reminders, all the while trying to prepare myself to perform.

When we were called to places, I was nearly in tears. I was grateful, scared, and astounded that evening had sold out. Nothing, however, prepared me for the lightening fast pace the performance itself would undertake.

My performance of both pieces throughout both evenings is a blur. I never left performance mode from the second *Nestling* started until I changed out of my *Dreams of Flight* costume. Even as I transitioned from one piece to the next, it was orchestrated choreography to change my clothing, hair, and performance intention.

I snapped out of this mode only for a brief moment during the Thursday evening performance. As I walked out on stage during intermission to begin *Dreams of Flight*, I was startled to see the entire audience seated. What was meant to be a casual encounter as the audience meandered back to their seats from intermission instantly became a full blown performance. There was silence; no one moved and all eyes were on me.

I executed the repetitive opening phrase and ignored the crew hanging the canvas prop and the shuffling of the wings. In the silence of this ritual, I heard

Erin Glasspatrick's voice on the assistant stage manager's headset. I distinguished her saying that there was a problem with the canvas. I snapped back into reality for a brief moment, but quickly exhaled, refocused, and plowed through the silence of the space with the fiercest movement I could muster. Before I knew it, my performance in opening night was over.

Friday's performance was much calmer than the first. I was excited and relieved to have made it to this moment. I danced with my every ounce of my being that night and *Birds of a Feather* performed to an over-sold house. I did it!

Chapter 9: The Dust Settles

Conversations

Immediately following Thursday evening's show, a post performance discussion was held. While I was employed at Center administration, Cultural Participation staffer Jermaine Lewis inquired about my developing thesis concert. As I shared the essence of the evening, he was intrigued by the topics Vannia and I were examining. In his eyes, *Through the Distance/Birds of a Feather* seemed an ideal physical expression of the University's fall 2009 'Semester on Peace' initiative. Thus, he proposed that we hold a post-performance talk back to share our individual creative process. I jumped at the opportunity and the additional exposure through campus wide marketing materials.

Professor Karen Bradley moderated the discussion Thursday night. Hearing the audience's thoughts about *Birds of a Feather* offered a new point of view. The images the concert evoked within them were not necessarily what I had intended, but this forum challenged me to reveal and verbalize the intimate process that I endured. It felt a bit like cheating on a test; yet, there was no right or wrong answer. Regardless, I was simply grateful for the interest, time, and thoughtful interaction this opportunity presented.

Giving Back

After the concert's dust settled, it was important that I share a small token of my appreciation to a culture that had inspired *Birds of a Feather*. I visited the

National Japanese American Memorial in Washington, DC to offer the nearly one thousand origami cranes that were featured in *Nestling* as a gesture of gratitude.

The National Japanese American Memorial stands near Capitol Hill to honor the loyalty and patriotism of Japanese Americans who were unjustly stigmatized and interned in the United States during World War II. The memorial stands to remember how a community came to triumph against discrimination:

For the United States, the Second World War began when the Empire of Japan attacked American armed forces at Pearl Harbor in what was then the Territory of Hawaii on Sunday, December 7, 1941. A little more than two months later – in what was eventually described as acts born of wartime hysteria, racism, and weak political leadership - President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. The Order resulted in the internment of 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry into 10 relocation camps scattered through more desolate regions of the western United States.

Most of those interned were American citizens. But despite these injustices, thousands of Japanese Americans voluntarily joined the U.S. armed services forces to help win the war in Europe and the war in the Pacific. More than four decades later, the United States Government – in the historic Civil Liberties Act of 1988 approved by Congress and the President -- formally apologized for the personal justice denied by the mass internment (National Japanese American Memorial Foundation).

Standing beneath the memorial's steel cranes, I decorated the base of the statue with the red and white origami cranes I folded. In awe of a community's strength and the words that adorned the memorial, I silently offered deep thanks

to the rich and vibrant culture that fueled me during this process. With that, I closed the chapter and creative journey that was *Birds of a Feather*.

Chapter 10: Lessons Learned

As I reflect back on this accomplishment, I recognize that sharing a concert demands an open exchange. Throughout this process, Vannia and I both pushed our personal agendas. While the outcomes were not always my preference, I tried adamantly to keep my own opinions and aesthetic open for the greater good of a fluid evening. I believe this was ultimately achieved.

The multifaceted roles of directing, choreographing, and performing in *Birds of a Feather* informed me greatly about my aesthetic. The execution of each step was a representation and reflection of me. Therefore, each goal and objective was met with my personal and professional standard of excellence; nothing less would do. The time, energy, and meticulous effort this demanded was well worth the end result.

Furthermore, thorough documentation was imperative in tracking my creative journey. My research ultimately became my “home” to which I could return for additional inspiration. It continually narrowed and energized my process.

The most vital piece of information I have gained, however, is to be inclusive in my creative process until the bitter end. When the complete picture of *Nestling* revealed itself in the final moments, it was much easier to remove material rather than scrambling to include ad hoc choreography. The result was a creative statement that I am proud of and honored to have shared with the community.

Moving forward, inclusion will remain a core value in my creative process. I am confident that it will continue to offer new perspectives and reveal new meaning in my work until my choreography is ready to find its home.

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