

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: PROFONDEUR INCONNUE: SURVIVAL AND
MOVEMENT UNDERWATER

Florian Rouiller, Master of Fine Arts, 2012

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With global warming threatening to transform the physical and human landscape across the planet, humans must adapt to a changed environment and possibly learn to survive in a dramatically altered landscape. Though many species, including humans, may not survive a dramatic alteration in the earth's climate, those few who do survive will be strong and possess unique abilities and adaptations. This piece explores themes of cooperation, competition, and survival in an underwater environment, where the human body must adapt to alien ways of moving.

PROFONDEUR INCONNUE:
SURVIVAL AND MOVEMENT UNDERWATER

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Dedicated to my godfather Albert Rouiller, a true artist.

Phare de la memoire extremite de roches fracassantes. L'ecume aux levres tu me repousses puis apaise te calques sur la mer.¹

¹ Rouiller, Albert. *Ex voto: Droit d'epave*. Palma de Mallorca, Spain: Casal Solleric, 1998.

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Profondeur Inconnue: Survival and Movement Underwater

Introduction

As the atmosphere of the earth gets warmer as the result of human activities, we are seeing more natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and tsunamis. Scientists say that without dramatic changes in how humans live on this planet, the future will bring even more disasters as sea level rises from increasing global water temperatures and the climate system becomes unstable. It is clear that humans will need to adapt to a very different environment if we are to survive.²

The first forms of life on earth were creatures of the water, and over millions of years, as land gradually began to emerge from the water, these creatures evolved into creatures that could survive on land. The pace of change that is now occurring on the planet is much faster than the pace of change in the planet's early history, but I am intrigued by the thought of whether humans could evolve backwards--to creatures that could survive underwater—if they were forced to.

My thesis is an exploration of this process of adaptation, and what would happen if humans were forced to live underwater. How would the body adapt to survival in this alien environment? How would it respond to the pressure, the currents, the unfamiliar dangers and challenges? Would the body struggle harder to overcome these forces, or surrender to them? Would humans form relationships to help them survive, or would they retreat into solitude? What could humans learn and adapt from the multitude of sea creatures and their different strategies for movement and survival? And finally, do

² United States Environmental Protection Agency. "Climate Change – Health and Environmental Effects – Adaptation," Accessed April 11, 2012 at <http://epa.gov/climatechange/effects/adaptation.html>.

humans, who are so adaptable, have any hope for survival in the face of the massive change we are bringing upon the planet?

My thesis explores an extreme of the change we are facing, and takes as its starting point the idea of universal and world-changing sea-level rise, occurring at some point in the near future, as a result of global warming. The survivors of this great disaster are somehow adapted in ways that allow them to survive. They have some sort of physical adaptations—like the abilities to breathe and move effortlessly underwater—that allowed them to survive when most other humans did not.

My dancers are the only humans who have survived this great disaster. They are making their way in this unknown world, at an unknown depth, exploring potentials of human movement and survival that are still unknown.

Origins and inspiration

The inspiration for my thesis came from my godfather, who became a well-known sculptor before his death in 2000. Albert Rouiller spent much of his adult life living on the Spanish island of Majorca, where he often went out on his boat and explored the surrounding ocean. He became



Figure 1 : Sculpture bois, 1994 from Rouiller, 1998

friendly with the local fishermen, and listened to their stories of the sea. He was very inspired by all he heard about shipwrecks, and this became a central theme in his art until his death.

His sculptures were most often of wood, and their broken lines coming out from a central spine suggest not only a shipwreck but also a human skeleton. I have carried his book, called *Ex voto: Droit d'epave*³ with images of his sculptures with me since I immigrated from Switzerland, and these images have brought me comfort by reminding me of the amazing person my godfather was. At the same time they have also haunted me and made me want to explore, as an artist, the same images of the ocean and shipwrecks that were such an artistic inspiration to my godfather.

As a dancer and choreographer, I have always been drawn to fierce, challenging movement that utilizes the full technical range of the dancer. I have less interest in telling a story, and more interest in exploring new frontiers of movement. In the case of my thesis, I was thinking about movement inspired by my godfather and my memories of him, movement that draws inspiration from shipwrecks and the ocean. I thought about movements that bodies make as they interact with currents and waves. I thought of conscious, obvious movements that a swimmer makes with his legs, but also of more subtle movement like a stingray undulating along the sea floor, or like a jellyfish drifting along with the underwater current. Thinking of all the different forms of movement that are seen in underwater creatures, I started to draw inspiration also from my experience in contemporary and modern dance as well as in ballet. I saw the thesis as an opportunity to

³ Rouiller, Albert.

challenge myself technically and expand my movement vocabulary by utilizing aspects of all these different styles.

The title of my piece, *Profondeur Inconnue*, translates literally as “unknown depth.” The title is in my native language of French to establish a connection with my roots as a person and an artist in Geneva, Switzerland, and also with my godfather, who never spoke English. I feel that this title also conveys a sense of mystery and a sense of the alien, foreign, and dangerous world I am representing in my piece.

In my choreography and in my artistic expression in general, I am always drawn to dark themes. My first experiences as a dancer in Geneva and then at the John Cranko School of Ballet in Stuttgart, Germany, were very tough and rigorous. The environment was competitive and the instructors were often harsh and demanding, and I learned from the start that in order to succeed in ballet I would need to be very serious and very determined. I believe this intensity, this sense of severity, has informed my artistic choices ever since and has drawn me to themes of darkness and struggle.

My immersion in this theme was made even more natural, in some ways, by my experience at the University of Maryland. While my early ballet training was physically demanding and technically rigorous, my experience at the university has been demanding on a whole new level. Having never been a student in any academic environment in the United States—or anywhere since graduating 20 years ago from the John Cranko School—all of a sudden I needed to perform in a very competitive academic environment. Although proving myself as a dancer is not new to me, combining my skills as a dancer with academic skills—especially English writing—has been very new and very stressful. The stress of this new standard of performance has been a strong factor in my life for

these past three years, and manifested itself powerfully when I threw my back out my very first semester at the University.

I do believe that this stress also gave me a drive to succeed in this piece like I had never succeeded before. I had a sense of wanting to take on this new challenge, and overcome the difficulties of writing in English and doing everything that was required of me as a student, but even more to succeed in a depth of choreography and technical dance that was new to me and to succeed in pushing my own boundaries beyond what I thought I was capable of.

At the university, I was frequently challenged to go beyond my comfort zone in dance, to go beyond my balletic background. Although dancing in other forms beyond ballet was not new to me, as some of my first dance employers in the United States were Merce Cunningham, a pioneer of modern dance, and Alonzo King, a contemporary choreographer, this challenge did create in me a drive to prove myself capable as a choreographer and as a dancer. This drive was, I believe, a creative force in this piece. I believe it also compelled me to create around a dark theme, as the darkness and the theme of struggle in my piece captured for me the internal struggle of feeling so pressured in so many ways.

Choreographic development

At the beginning of the process of developing my thesis in the fall of 2010, in a course with Adrienne Clancy, I began to work on a choreography that took place underwater in an unknown, foreign world. At first I had a powerful image of using a plastic bag or a piece of netting for the dancers to interact with, as if entangled. I

experimented with this with several dancers entangled with each other and with a net, but discovered that creating a powerful image with this prop was a lot more difficult than I had thought it would be. I then realized I didn't need to rely on props to create a strong starting image that would create an underwater atmosphere. I realized that I could achieve my vision through the choreography itself.

Initially, I choreographed very much based on my own style of movement. I developed phrases that I felt were fierce and visually compelling. I drew from my background in modern dance, with inspiration especially from several choreographers such as Jacopo Godani, who inspired me with his movement vocabulary. Godani breaks classical ballet forms, and his movements are very fluid and undulating. There is a sense of being underwater, with dancers like sea creatures. Another inspiring choreographer was Alonzo King, based in San Francisco, who I worked with in 1993 and 1999. In 1999, I danced a piece called "Map" with King; my solo had balletic movement as a foundation but with a sense of twisting and asymmetry. In general, King's dancers are always going to extremes in their dancing, twisting and off balance.

In the beginning of my choreographic process, especially for the trio, I was working very much in formation, in the style of a formal ballet piece. With my training and background in ballet, it was very natural for me to work this way and it simply did not occur to me to choreograph in any other way. Gradually, I realized that this formal, symmetric, formation style was not well suited to the sort of chaos that beings in an unfamiliar underwater world would be experiencing. I began having my dancers face in different directions, and focus on circular, spiraling, chaotic

movements. I worked on dividing the space differently for my dancers, and kept my focus on the idea of a tsunami, or any overwhelming, natural event and what that might do to creatures within it. I thought of the sense of losing control, being off-balance, being overwhelmed by chaos—all ways of feeling that are very foreign to the controlled, even feeling of most ballet choreographies.

My original focus was very much on the movement, and on making it technically correct. My orientation to dance had always been focused simply on what the body is capable of and what looks good, and I had had much less experience with choreographing based on capturing a feeling or developing a theme. Gradually I realized that choreography is about much more than just the technical movements, and that, at its most powerful, it does hold together around a story. I began thinking more about the reasoning behind the movements and the story they told—the story of a strange, alien, underwater world and how the creatures in it arrived there—rather than just the choreographic elements. I saw that with the choreography, I could create beautiful movements that were not just striking in themselves, but also established the mood of the underwater environment.

As I got away from choreographing based on what I knew from other choreographers who had been influential to me throughout my career, I began to draw inspiration from actual sea creatures, from books and videos about the ocean. As I thought about choreographing movements that would bring the audience into an underwater world, I started watching videos of schools of fish swimming, of octopus and squid propelling themselves backward, of sea anemones expanding and contracting. I got inspiration from the undulating, flowing movements of jellyfish,

anemones, and schools of fish moving together and I started to explore those movements in my choreography.⁴ I also started to explore images of diverse forms of sea life in books,⁵ and this gave me ideas for the types of creatures that could inspire my choreography.

Watching all these different forms of movement gave me the idea of dividing the piece into sections, which would allow me to explore different species and different forms of movement in each section, while also breaking down the choreographic process. I began to work on a solo, two duets and a trio, and I thought that this would represent a variety of scenes and a sense of the diversity of life that you would find underwater. It would also allow me to explore the variety of relationships that exist between creatures—creatures that are solitary, form partnerships, or live in groups—which I thought would be a fascinating theme in my exploration of survival.

The first part of my thesis that started to become very clear to me in terms of an underwater experience was my duet. I initially saw that the duet was very similar to what two crabs might do as they entangle with each other, possibly fighting, or possibly making love. In some places, the image that inspired us was of one eight-legged creature like an octopus, as we very much moved together as one through a large part of this section.

⁴ Fothergill, Alastair (Exec. Producer). *The blue planet: Seas of life: Seasonal seas/ coral seas*. [Motion picture]. England: BBC, 2001; and Fothergill, Alastair & Byatt, Andy. (Directors). *Deep blue*. [Motion picture]. France: Bac Films, 2005.

⁵ American Museum of Natural History. *Ocean: The World's Last Wilderness Revealed*. New York; DK Publishing, 2006.

Certain central images and ideas dominated each section of the choreography as I worked it through with my dancers. With my trio, the images that inspired me were of squids and anemones—creatures that open and close and have an undulating sort of movement. The trio is the first thing the audience sees, and so the feeling is of exploring and discovering this new environment and each other. There is interaction and connection, and then there is also disconnection as the dancers give in to the powerful forces of the ocean that push them apart. The connection and disconnection are a struggle that the dancers have to contend with in this new world.

The next section of the piece is the duet with me and another dancer. We enter the scene tangled together, both of us walking slowly and with my partner supporting me. The themes explored in this duet are themes of support, relationship, and balance between two creatures. We are two creatures struggling against a challenging environment together, and we are made stronger by our intimacy and mutual support. There is a theme of balance as we exchange roles of supporter and supported throughout the section. We are demonstrating a form of survival that depends on cooperation between two beings.

In the duet with two women, two creatures are reconnecting after being driven apart by the forces of the environment. The section explores an interaction that is competitive, rather than supportive, and a situation in which survival may depend on conquering and disposing of a competitor. In the end, only one creature may survive the confrontation.

In the solo, the soloist has triumphed over other creatures and is the sole survivor. Her solo embodies the freedom of surviving alone as she no longer has to

struggle against competitors, or support the weight of others who might rely on her to help them survive. There is still the difficulty of living in this alien environment, but soloist is one of those strong and fiercely independent creatures who may survive for at least some time all alone.

In each section, my dancers embodied elements from both the human world of relationships and human emotions, and the alien world of species surviving underwater. Ultimately, I was happy with my dancers' ability to capture a sense of both human and non-human, and to keep alive the inspiration for this piece: the knowledge that we all evolved from underwater creatures and that we may be required to evolve again once our world has changed dramatically.

At one point in the fall of 2011, I realized something that changed greatly the way I worked with my dancers. For the first few months of working on choreography, I had been just giving my dancers movements without explaining to them what they were supposed to be doing or the story behind their movements. At one point my dancers complained to me that I was just asking them to produce all these movements, to dance and continue dancing without having any sense of why they were dancing. I realized that the movement could become much more powerful if I told them more about the story, and gave them the chance to add their own interpretation to the movement based on their understanding of the story. I also began giving them their individual parts to do as a warm up, rather than the generic warm up we had been doing, and this seemed to deepen their relationship to their parts.

The Dancers

As I became more clear about the choreography, I met dancers who were willing to commit to the process and who had the technical skill to withstand it. I had an audition in the spring of 2011 and also spoke with some dancers that I was interested in individually. Through this process I found Candace Scarborough, Gabriella Meiterman, Emma Hébert and Patricia Mullaney-Loss. I also spoke with Julia Smith, who also has a strong balletic and technical background, and she agreed to be in a duet with me. With the exception of Emma, these are the dancers who committed to my Thesis.

I found that all of these dancers brought certain qualities to my piece. Julia and I had danced in the same company and performed some pieces together in the past. Although we never partnered together, I knew that she had a lot of experience and maturity and I had great confidence in her partnering ability. She seemed a natural fit for a partnering section with me.

The trust and confidence that Julia and I have was, I believe, very important in our partnership and in our creation of the partnering section together. The fact that we had danced together before, and that we are both older, more mature dancers and trust each other fully, allowed us to work together in a way that felt very supportive, flowing, and intimate. With her balletic background that is similar in some ways to mine, I felt that Julia and I were on the same page with respect to movement quality and understood each other.

This feeling of flow and intimacy with Julia allowed us to develop some elements of the choreography and to explore ideas that were very new. While we

began with our shared experience in balletic partnering, and worked with lifts that were familiar to us from that framework, we gradually expanded into forms of movement—including sideways lifts, places where Julia supported my weight, and unusual ways of balancing weight and supporting each other—that were very much outside of what was familiar to either one of us. The trust and sense of intimacy and familiarity between us as dancers allowed us to explore the central theme of how interaction between beings, and mutual support, may allow survival in the face of challenging circumstances. Each time we rehearsed together, we were able to open new doors choreographically in terms of unusual ways of lifting, supporting, and partnering with each other.

Candace is another very strong dancer who I felt lucky to have in my piece. I had seen Candace in some of the classes I took at the University and had seen how quickly she picked up choreography from a variety of choreographers. I had also seen her fluidity and her energy, and knew she was a hard worker. As soon as I began working with her on the choreography for my piece, I saw that she adapted quickly to my movement style and to the movement vocabulary I gave her. Although I believe it was very new to her, she seemed immediately comfortable with the undulating, fluid, watery sorts of movement I asked her to learn.

As I watched her in early rehearsals, I realized Candace was a perfect dancer for the solo in my piece, which was technically challenging and energetically demanding. Candace put so much passion into her dancing; her fierceness and her energy brought a presence to her solo and to the entire piece that I felt embodied the idea that for some creatures, survival is only possible alone. Candace danced in

almost every scene of my piece and she had the strength to carry all of them. Candace was the dancer who survived the unknown depths on her own and persevered through her own strength and determination.

Gabriella came to my audition, and there was also something in her dancing that inspired me. I saw her energy and punch, and I saw that she could pick up movements quickly. Gabriella seemed a perfect dancer to pair with Candace in some way, as they are both very energetic and are almost the same height and build. I saw the possibility of creating a duet for these two women that would explore the ferocity and intensity that they both brought to their dancing. Gabriella brought a feeling of attacking the movement that was well suited to the theme of struggle and survival, and the movements of her upper body in particular were very well articulated.

Gabriella was the youngest of all my dancers. At first her dancing was very centered and symmetric. While from the beginning I saw that her dancing was very athletic, I saw that her role in the piece would be improved if she could make her movement more flowing and less symmetrical. I began working with her to find a greater sense of curving in her upper body, to find ways of torqueing and contracting her body to make her movement more off-balance. I was impressed with her ability to incorporate this major change in her movement, to the point that in our last few rehearsals leading up to the show she appeared to be a different dancer who had grown tremendously.

I knew Patricia when I first came to the University and saw immediately that she is the type of dancer I would like to work with. In addition to being very bright and a very hard worker, Patricia has a very fluid quality to her movement that is

softer than the way Gabriella and Candace move. This made her perfect for capturing the underwater environment and the sense of being overpowered by waves, and also made a wonderful contrast to the other dancers. It was a pleasure to choreograph softer, more subtle movements on her and to watch her bring those movements to life in the trio as she moved against Gabriella and Candace.

Patricia also enriched the piece by bringing in her own improvisation and innovation at the end of her part in the trio. She brought some ideas about how she could interact with the set that ended up being very powerful, like ways of supporting herself on the netting, becoming entangled in it but allowing herself to rest on it. This contribution was different from how I had envisioned this section, but ended up being a perfect element with the right sensation of surrender to the environment.

Overall, I feel that my dancers brought to life the imagery that I had for this piece. When I developed choreographic phrases, they were able to execute them while adding their own character to the movements. They had an ability to improvise and were able to add many of their own movements to expand and embellish the phrases I brought.

This process of choreographing with my dancers was a new experience for me. I began with very specific movements that I had fully choreographed myself, and at the beginning I was not allowing much space for my dancers to add their own personality. Once I let go of planning and choreographing every moment of my piece, and asked my dancers to deeply express themselves throughout each movement of the choreography, I found that the process was much more fluid. My dancers felt more

empowered and enjoyed the process more, and were able to support and help me more in creating the various sections.

Music

As a classically trained ballet dancer, classical music has formed the backdrop for most of my dancing. I saw this thesis, with its alien mood and atmosphere, as an opportunity to explore new forms of music as well. I envisioned creating a dark, watery atmosphere by using alternative music and possibly exploring dark ambient styles using aquatic, watery sounds.

In the beginning of my choreographic process I found clips of avant garde contemporary composers that I found to be intense, dark and fluid, and that helped me to set the atmosphere in my piece. I found Emanuel Pimenta, a Brazilian composer who created a score for Merce Cunningham. I also found inspiration from looking at some of my favorite choreographers like Patrick Delcroix, a European choreographer from Netherland Dance Theater, to see what composers inspired them. I found the music of Aphex Twin, which has a very watery feeling and inspired me to create fluid and flowing movements.

While I found music that was intense, dark and fluid and that helped me to set the atmosphere in my piece, I saw that pre-recorded music had limitations in terms of doing original choreography. I felt that my choreography was exploring a very new world and I never found recorded music that captured quite the sensation that I was creating in my piece. I felt that to capture this sensation, of an underwater environment with a very dark,

sometimes heavy feeling, I would have to create original music or work with a composer who was capable of doing so.

David Yates, an undergraduate student who danced in my piece during the early part of the process, offered to help compose original music. David began by composing music that was primarily keyboard but with a strong bass and a strong beat. I liked this music but realized that it would shift the feeling away from an underwater atmosphere and make it too much like a club dance scene. I also realized my movements and choreography are energetic already, so I needed music that has a more atmospheric quality to not distract from the fierce quality of the movement.

I created some music myself on Garage Band, using some watery textures and sounds and taking away the strong, driving techno beat. I used these more ambient samples to rehearse with my dancers several times, and found that for the most part the music needed a bit more definition but the basic sound was right. I used this as a sample to show David what I was aiming for, and with this basic idea he was able to begin creating music that had all the elements my piece needed. The score, which David created using SoundCloud, used sounds of waves crashing, of whales and animals that sounded like seagulls, combined with grinding noises that created a feeling of pressure and collision. The effect was very much a feeling of being underwater, and a sense of darkness, uncertainty, and danger.

For the performance, David played the cues for the transitions in the piece live. This was a risk and a source of anxiety before the show, as there is always an element of uncertainty with live performance. It also meant that my dancers were never able to rehearse with exactly the score that they would be performing with. The end result,

however, was a score that was perfectly timed and had a vitality and spontaneity that were well suited to the theme of surviving in the midst of powerful natural forces. I felt that this risk was one that paid off.

Set

My Godfather's sculptures were the inspiration for my piece, and my original conception was to have one of them represented on stage somehow with the dancers dancing inside it and interacting with it. I thought of this piece being a shipwreck, or the leftover foundations of a building, or anything else you might find in the sea.

As I progressed further in my choreography, I realized that, while it was an inspiration for the idea of my thesis, the sculpture was not necessary as an element of the set. Once I talked to the set and costume design people, I realized there were other ways of creating an underwater environment—and that the sculpture would be difficult to create and would limit the space on stage.

My costume and set designers had the idea of creating an underwater environment by having gauze and netlike fabric hanging down from the ceiling, tangled in a way to suggest seaweed and netting that you might find underwater. There was white gauze fabric hanging down from the ceiling, tangled with netlike fabric and torn up, with strings hanging down, so it had a look of wildness and decay that I liked.

I had hoped that the netting would be able to support my dancers' weight so that they could hang off it at a certain point in the choreography. I had choreographed

sections that I felt conveyed the sense of the dancers being overpowered by their environment, where they hung on the netting as if they were looking to the environment for strength that they did not have. Just before my thesis, though, when it became clear that the netting was not going to be able to support the dancers' weight, I was able to change the choreography just slightly so the dancers were still interacting with the netting, but supported their own weight.

In addition to these issues with the netting, another problem with the set was the large panels that Valerie Durham, who shared the evening with me, was using for her piece. I didn't originally envision a set that included these panels, but I ended up using them to good effect as exit and entry points for my dancers between the different sections of my piece.

Lighting

When I first started thinking about doing a piece about an underwater theme, I envisioned my dancers dancing in real water. But given the difficulties of rehearsing and performing with real water, I realized that lighting could be used to create a very watery feeling and that it would be far easier logistically.

When I started to think about lighting effects for my piece, I was inspired by the choreographer Paul Lightfoot from the Netherland Dance Theatre. His lighting, designed by Tom Bevoort, gives a sense of a sandy surface which I thought was suggestive of an underwater world. I had the idea of creating different textures and atmospheres with lighting that would change for the different scenes in my piece. I thought of having a sandy lighting effect spilling down on my dancers, and using greenish-blue lighting to

create a sense of water swirling around the dancers, the audience and the set. Having the light projected on the audience as well as the dancers I thought would bring the audience into this unknown world, and make them feel they are a part of it.

As it turned out, the lighting effects that were used at the performance were not what I originally envisioned. There was no sandy effect of lighting, but there was a use of haze to create a watery sort of sensation. This was a surprise to me, as I had not heard about the haze until the week of tech rehearsals and had heard no indication that the sandy lighting would not be used. I did feel that the end effect was powerful and that the haze was a complement to the underwater atmosphere, even though it was not what I had imagined.

Costumes

When I was first thinking about costumes that would give a sense of underwater life, I remembered the piece *Contained Infinity* that I danced here in DC with the dance company City Dance Ensemble. The piece was choreographed by Harumi Terayama, and the costume design was very original. Both men and women were wearing pants and long sleeved shirts that were a mix of grayish, bluish, and orange colors, which reminded me of coral reefs. Over the shirt and pants were pieces of fabric and netting that were tangled and revealed parts of the fabric below. This strange mixture of fabric, with torn and twisted layers of different textures of fabric and color, gave a feeling that the performers were some kind of alien from another world.

Another piece that gave me some inspiration for the costumes was the contemporary version of *Swan Lake* choreographed by the Finnish choreographer Jorma Uotinen. Uotinen designed the costumes himself, and had the women wear short one-piece white dresses. The dresses were unfinished and ragged on the bottom, giving the effect of fabric that had been washed and tattered by the sea. The way the fabric moved with the dancers' movement also made me think of seaweed.

I envisioned neutral colors for my costumes, with the material looking like it was washed out by the sea. I had inspiration from a couple of sources. I watched the movie *Waterworld*, in which the actors were wearing costumes that were made from some kind of fishermen's net and fabric that looked like it was found at sea. They were tattered and looked like they had been put together from whatever people could find. I also went to the Smithsonian museum and saw some amazing dresses, made by local artist Jooseal Lee. The dresses were made of several layers of fabric in sea-like grays and corals. Again, the hemline was tattered and looked like it may have been washed or worn away by the elements.

I told Laree, my costume designer, of my ideas based on these sources and she came up with some very interesting images. Laree's idea was to have the costumes made from the same netting and gauze as the set to create continuity and a sense that the dancers have become a part of their environment. This idea also appealed to me, as I thought it would add to the overall atmosphere of a completely different world where my dancers are adapting to an alien environment and becoming part of it in order to survive.

Profondeur Inconnue: The Performance

The performance was the evenings of March 8 and 9, 2012. Despite some small last-minute changes, I felt that we were well-rehearsed and prepared at the time of the performance.

As the audience enters into the theater, they come upon a scene of the netting hanging over the stage with bluish light creating an underwater scene. There is music playing that includes the sounds of water and waves crashing.

After some moments of sitting and listening to the watery music and taking in the scene, the audience sees three dancers crawl onto the stage from different points offstage. There is a sense that a current is pushing them onstage and they are being compelled by an unseen force. They are trying to stand up, but they are struggling against a force that is stronger than they are. There is a sense that they are responding to some great force from above as well as behind them, so they are compelled to look upward as if they are feeling the great force of a tsunami coming down on them from above.

After the dancers look up, the lights go black and there is a loud crashing wave as if a tsunami is crashing down on the dancers. When the lights come up again the dancers are spiraling across the stage, chaotically, in different directions. They spiral around the stage several times, until they collapse on the floor.

When they reawaken after this collapse, the dancers begin to explore their environment and to notice each other. As they slowly get up, they see one another and there is a sense that they are connecting with each other for the first time. There is a section where they are connecting, then disconnecting, then reconnecting as they

struggle to survive in a challenging environment. The sense is of being pushed together, then apart, then together again by a powerful force of currents that are beyond their control. As the dancers explore this new environment and learn how to function in the middle of these forces, they also explore interaction with each other as well as functioning alone as they learn how to survive.

The dancers finally recreate the spiraling of the early part of this section, as they get washed out to the edges of the scene by a powerful spiraling current. Candace is propelled to the edge of the stage and ends crawling and rolling off the stage behind one of the panels. Gabriella gets pushed behind the netting on stage right, where she suspends part of her weight on two pieces of fabric hanging down. Patricia rolls over to stage left and tries to support herself on a piece of fabric hanging there, but ends up falling on the stage with her leg wrapped in the netting. The sense is of a creature or person who has died of exhaustion after a long struggle.

With Gabriella and Patricia still on stage, but on the darkened edges, Julia and I come on stage. Our movement is slow and somewhat heavy, as we are supporting each other and struggling against the water as we move. Our whole duet has a sense of intimacy and calmness, following the chaos of the trio. It is as if after the energy brought by the tsunami and the disaster that resulted in struggle and death, Julia and I are coming out only after the chaos has died down, and are making our way in this calmer environment. There is a sense of cooperation and supporting each other, of intimacy, as we hold each other up, carry each other, and work to survive together. Over the course of the duet, there is a sense of increased heaviness as we get

exhausted with the struggle of survival, and finally Julia rests on me as I drag her off stage.

After we are off stage, Gabriela begins to move again as if she is coming to consciousness after blacking out. She is tangled in the net but then she struggles free and then gets washed out into the darkness at the back of the stage. She is propelled over to stage left, where she meets Candace, who has come back on stage. These two dancers connect by joining their heads as they come back towards the center, and then they continue to move with their heads attached. Their heads then detach as they remain attached by their arms. They fall down to the floor with their arms still attached, and then their arms get disconnected as they hit the floor and their feet connect. There is a sense of two creatures trying to increase their chances of survival by connecting, and trying to maintain that connection despite forces that pull them apart. These two dancers are continuing the connection that the trio had in the first section, but they must continue without Patricia who has died.

Finally there is a sense that Gabriella is growing weaker and weaker while Candace is still strong. As Gabriella loses all strength, Candace pushes Gabriella who then rolls off stage. Candace follows Gabriella off stage briefly and then somersaults back on stage as if she is getting pushed by a current. She is on the floor, then she starts as if she is suddenly waking up, then she slowly stands as if she is fighting to get back on her feet. She then does a solo that captures the sense of being pushed in spirals by a current as she struggles to stay up. Candace then gets pushed to the floor by the currents, and Julia and I enter once again from stage right. Julia is on my back and we are moving slowly as if exhausted, like a large, slowly moving two-headed

sea creature. Candace gets up again and moves as if pushed diagonally toward stage right, as Julia and I collapse as if disintegrating. The piece ends with all three of us on the floor, exhausted from the constant struggle of simply surviving in this world.

Feedback

Overall the feedback I received has been positive. In speaking to audience members after both performances, and to students and faculty at the university as I saw them in the days after the performances, I heard from people who saw the piece that they had the feeling of being pulled into an alien environment, of being sucked in and under the influence of powerful waves and water pressure themselves. This was exactly the sense I was hoping to create.

People I spoke to complimented the quality of the dancers, and remarked on their strength and power. In particular, several people complimented the quality of Gabriella's dancing and noticed how strong her movement was. People who had known her noticed how much she had grown in the process of working on this piece.

The sections of my piece that people felt were most powerful were my duet with Julia and the duet with Candace and Gabriella. People noticed the maturity and the newness of the movement, and especially the unusual lifts and partnering in my duet with Julia. In this section, it seemed like the risks Julia and I took in terms of exploring unusual movements paid off.

As I noted above, I felt that the music turned out incredibly well and was another place where I felt that risks that I took in the process paid off in the end. Most people I talked to also loved the music and felt drawn into the environment by the

power and volume of the crashing score. A few people felt the music was too loud, but to me this volume was crucial to creating the atmosphere of almost overwhelming intensity and force.

Next steps

I received feedback after my piece that I should do the piece again, in another venue with different music, and a set that includes more underwater elements beyond just netting suspended from the ceiling. I can imagine a more convincing underwater scene including rocks, aquatic plants, and the lighting I had envisioned from the start, as well as netting that would support the dancers' weight and so allow more interaction with it.

I am beginning to speak to some of the people I have danced with in the past about the possibility of collaborating with them to do the piece again. I am thinking of ways to do a show with some other companies, perhaps even using their dancers or other dancers and developing the choreography even more.

Conclusion

Choreographing, planning, and performing in a piece that was entirely my own ended up being an incredible experience, especially since it was the first time I had ever choreographed a full-length piece or worked so deeply with a composer, costume designer, set designer, and all the others who helped bring my piece together. I learned how difficult choreography is, especially when I am in the piece I am choreographing. I learned how challenging, yet rewarding it can be to explore new,

unfamiliar forms of movement as well as themes that are unfamiliar to me. I believe that the central theme of my thesis, of a dark struggle for survival in a hostile environment, served me well in my desire to explore unusual movements.

Most importantly, however, I learned that I am capable of choreographing a full-length piece, which is something I was not certain of before. I found the process of developing and executing this thesis to be extremely rewarding, and the confidence I gained as a choreographer and a performer will serve me well going forward in my career as a professional dancer.

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