

Kathryn Sauma

Distinction in Dance

And I at Being is Where This, You Are.

Adviser: Beryl Miller

The Ohio State University

If basic communication is an exchange of language, particularly verbal and physical, how can speech enhance movement to illuminate the essence of “being” in an abstract form? How does one establish a methodology in pairing choreographic research pertaining to the present moment with the unique combination of people and personalities in the process in order to derive meaning from the performance? In my theory of improvisation, I emphasize a heightened awareness of the emotional self and the atmosphere of the surrounding environment. I then base teaching, directing, and choreographing on these ideas to draw attention to the state of existence and occurrence in the space through metaphysical and metaphorical explanation. The nature of the work is heavily inspired by Surrealist approaches to art as a vector of inhibiting the mind and the subconscious and uniting fantasy with realistic, daily exchanges.¹ A development from this process is the question: How far can a performer push their own and a viewer’s comfort and understanding of reality while playing on familiar relationships or situations through metaphor or the imagination? Last Spring I designed and performed a solo in Berlin, Germany in which I developed an approach to improvisation based on the interplay of metaphysics and metaphor as revealed through a fluid alternation of spoken text and movement. Text depicts metaphysical descriptions of present situations as experienced by the dancer, whereas abstract movement creates a metaphorical environment and visual portrayal of the relationship and symbolism supporting the text. References to the Dada movement are all over Berlin from museum exhibits to street art and during the seven months living there I had spent a lot of time looking into Surrealist art by Salvador Dali, Joan Miro, Man Ray and Yves Tanguy. Upon returning to The Ohio

¹ See Andre Breton’s *The Surrealist Manifesto*, 1924.

State University for my senior year I have become increasingly intrigued by the boundaries of theater and the roles of performer and audience in experiencing live art that intermixes choreography and structured improvisation, with movement and text, by accessing the uninhibited mind of each individual dancer's subconscious and conscious state of existence.

Is there a line separating reality from the imaginative generating of art and, if so, when do performers cease to feel it? Embarking on my quest to answer these questions, I selected a company of seven undergraduate dancers and began working in August 2013 at The Ohio State University to create a ten minute dance work entitled "And I at Being is Where This, You Are," that performed in BalletMet's performance space in February 2014. I had held an audition a year prior and worked with two of twenty, or so, dancers who attended. After my visit to Berlin my inspiration for making had changed and I saw five new freshmen dancers in a department audition that caught my eye. It was their diligence in processing new information, modest confidence, and integration of their personal expression that caught my attention. I didn't find the format of the earlier audition conducive to understanding how people would work in my process and I decided working with younger and fresher minds, I could more easily teach and mold a style of my own. Luckily, after a few rehearsals with the whole group I knew we had a team to work with. Multiple bodies, minds, and voices introduce a new layer of individual approach and the necessary steps to working together in the process with a goal of integrating the space of performer and audience. Contrary to a solo, the group work would have to find a similar mode of thinking and work together to create a train of thought. An objective in making the piece is to use choreography as a constant

environment in which improvisation can live and keep live performance work relevant to the present experience in the given moment, pertaining to the people in the room. I was interested in setting choreography from crafted improvisational situations because the tone and weight of a moment could be revisited and built upon for furthering improvisation of spoken word in order to reveal the experience of the dancer during the performance in real time to the audience.

Planning choreography before entering the process felt detached, but I had social, political, and philosophical queries that I chose to reflect on. Seeing as I was working with other young adults, I became interested in their experience of similar topics. The resulting focuses of conversation, written exploration, and movement context stemmed from the connotation and denotation of “loneliness,” “individual,” “community,” “perception of self- of others- of others perceiving oneself,” “sharing and listening” and “convention.” Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* became our jumping off point for discussing the process of talking and sharing thoughts surrounding community, the individual, freedom, prayer, religion, and self-knowledge. I found the excerpts to be a complex dichotomy of what a person in society generally may experience and beautiful prose that only a highly aware intellectual would take time in constructing. One passage we referred to was “On Talking”:

You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts;

And when you can no longer dwell in the solitude of your heart you live in your lips, and sound is a diversion and a pastime.

And in much of your talking, thinking is half murdered.

For thought is a bird of space, that in a cage of words may indeed unfold its wings but cannot fly.

With this in mind, we discussed metaphor, symbolism, and our personal connections between philosophies and the mundane. I always hoped the dancers were drawing parallels to be used for our use of text in the piece. Secondly, I used *The Subterraneans* by Jack Kerouac as a reference for stream of consciousness and tapping into the subconscious. I felt the experience of his writing is best understood as a whole, so I just personally referred to his candidness, sometimes erring on crassness, when encouraging a state of mind and approach to improvising with spoken word. To begin our solo and text work, I had the project members write stream of consciousness passages at home on a topic we were exploring in preparation for the next rehearsal. I tried to emulate Kerouac's ability to write freely in one sitting and still keep his subject matter objective enough to create a grander scope of story, yet subjective in a way that was introspective and analytical. Thirdly, to understand the differing facets of loneliness a person could feel I remembered back to John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*. Steinbeck creates many lonely characters with interlacing stories that have varied attitudes towards dealing with a darkened emotional struggle. Variance from good to evil changed the texture of the solitary worldview and I wanted to color the solos in my work, ranging from a questioning innocence to a sardonic disregard for a fellow being. Sarton's translucent telling of solitary existence in a remote home reminded me of the choice to detach from society and turn to the inner workings of the soul and mind. Lonely indeed, but the strength one can find when removing any dependence of another soul is something that I can easily understate as a valid approach to life. These reference

points fed our conversation, improvisations, and our own understanding of ourselves next to one another in the process. Our approach to working together with trust began to change the shape of our dancing and my composing.

An undeniable truth was that everyone had a different approach to conversation and sharing ideas because personal experience shapes individual understanding and processing of any given topic. As a director wishing to move ahead and encourage improvisation of spoken word, I paid close attention to each dancer's tendencies, comfort level, and ability to hear the emphasis of someone else's input. It was difficult to encourage everyone to listen to each other and the tendency for some was to constantly talk, or even talk over, other people. As a result I noticed that some people never really spoke up. In turn I could not help but hold a conversation discussing how we were conversing together after each session. Eventually the project members began commenting on similar observations during our conversations, which I still believe to be a teaching tool of noticing and processing the current happenings of a situation and environment to inform the style of improvised text we came to develop together. What is important to note is that this process of listening, synthesizing, reflecting, and sharing in response is the same process one partakes in during an ensemble improvisation. I always wanted to emphasize paying attention to the choice of words and the delivery in tone and volume. As these concepts became clearer to the dancers, their improvised compositions began to conceive of a train of thought, a trajectory of experience that all could add to, and they developed the ability to think and feel internally while expressing outwardly. I did not want solely an expression of emotions, but rather the exploration of poetry in composing words whether they were harmonious and whimsical, or harsh and abrupt.

Initially I lead sessions by dancing and guiding the project members with descriptive and metaphorical words while reading the room in order to build on what they were experiencing and to awaken new aspects of working. For instance if I saw an internal focus I could bring attention to it or I could encourage contrast, “Feel your focus reach out, see something in front of you and become interested in it.” I could then decide to encourage a play between the two states, or move forward and pick another use of focus such as allowing it to lead or follow movement. In consequence, that could call attention to noticing who is in the room, then what or who is not in the room, and the building would continue. Though a progression of the given state of being was what I was tuning into, the overlap of each session would reference the internal/external focus, spatial patterns, creating musicality with the body/attention to dynamics, interest/boredom, being what you see/imagine what you can be, and I always encouraged slowing down to find comfort in exploration rather than momentum. This was my strategy to train a hyperawareness to detail and presence while dancing and composing. I would become slightly frustrated when I could tell dancers were not engaging with the work. This made me realize that perhaps not all were ready to work so in depth with improvisation and I wondered if they wanted to be present in the project if this was the research I was interested in. I would try to attend to a distant mind by calling attention to something I did not see them working with. Eventually I realized I had to keep working with what I was interested in and hope that they were getting something out of it, but it became apparent who was or was not fully engaging in the work when we began constructing the piece. On the other hand, when I noticed very different approaches to the same task I would show versions I wanted to keep working with. I became entrenched

with proximity of focus in space or along the body, having the eyes mimicking the work of a camera lens. This felt as though an internal drive to see and notice the outside world could also be supported by the sensation of feeling what you are seeing, remembering to bring the external world closer to the skin and touch in a literal and figurative manner. Another goal became figuring out which exercises invited a desire to explore physical ranges and simultaneously remain very interested in the smaller stories in movement that might feel less defined by shape. By allotting time to each state, a building of textural quality in the movement occurred and a trust in smaller ideas began to arise in our ensemble improvisational work, defining a movement vocabulary available to pull from in improvisation.

A connection that I urged to make clear through our work together was the personal growth in each dancer. Conceptually I was at a point in my life when I simply could not stray from the intrigue of solitude and independence. The pressures we can feel as beings to become something, someone, larger than our acquaintance with ourselves is draining and I was convinced to understand who allows this mind-set to exist. Introspection taught me to recognize the affects of external pressures. This is where my investigation of solo work within a group effort stemmed from and the presentation of my ideas through dance was my attempt to proactively live a life I decided to be a true form of existence. This constant action of feeling inside and looking outwards created the circular inertia of existence I was trying to capture and teach in improvisation. This paralleled my desire to create solitudinal embodiments of solo work in conjunction with developing a dedication and responsibility to the group dynamic. Whether it was by asking for stream of consciousness writing from the dancers or requesting that they took

time to improvise solely for the purpose of connecting to their subconscious, I worked to keep their emotional selves connected to their thoughts and creations. As a group, we experienced utter confusion, depression, fear, and loneliness in ways that some people hadn't shared with themselves or others. More importantly, we exulted in choosing to love ourselves, to care for one another, to bring positivity to a space and we figured out our purpose as an ensemble of dancers. We were creating a world, a space, where we were free to exist in any way we deemed beautiful. Our work was becoming an ode to survival, to dreams, and to a community that spans geographically and historically.

Taking our work one step further, we worked on ensemble improvisation as a method of composing and I pulled from Angie Hauser and Chris Aiken's experimental scores from the Advanced Improvisation course at Bates Dance Festival in 2012. My favorite score for our work became the "single red poppy" solo emerging from a "field of wildflowers," or the improvising group as a whole. I found this exercise to be extremely useful in training a group to see each other and recognize the importance of everyone's choices. The red poppy does not know they are the single poppy until they feel solo material develop and the entire group must acknowledge and agree by exiting the space. The awareness of role, attention to movement, group work, and solo support was introduced in one rehearsal of practicing this score, but evolved as we broke down what each experience was in dialogue preceding a session. The dancers were surprised by how much they could sense what was developing and building, but also to the extent to which they were realizing what existed was bigger than them. By listening while creating, the dancers were able to tune into the room and support each other without holding onto what Hauser and Aiken referred to as their "dancing ego." Composing as an ensemble revealed

the ways in which the dialogues surrounding my preferred topics affected the relationships in the room and how the movers readjusted within the framework. The first exercises with speaking consisted mainly of solos talking about memories that the topic inspired them to think about and some dancers were totally unable to open up whereas others couldn't hold back. I worried about the responsibility of asking for such vulnerability and opening doors that could lead people down darker roads, but in reflective conversation the dancers thanked me for the opportunity to be heard uninterrupted. Then the solos began focusing on conveying an understanding of the present moment, what the dancer saw and noticed, while still allowing the movement to do some of the talking. Next the solos became sparsely sprinkled with text and the movement inspired when to release words from thought, but always pertained to the experience at hand. The greatest challenge was finding the balance of short descriptions that left space and gave enough of an idea to invite interpretation. Eventually the text began to create a string of realization, logic even, which was descriptive to the present moment but could have a double meaning of a larger metaphor of the imagination. This point was extremely hard to reach and not all could understand what I was referring to for a long time. The project members trusted me and came to fully trust one another, which could make it difficult to cut out aspects of improvisation in our constructing of the process. When I realized the range of ability to grasp my concept, I knew it was time to start structuring a piece in order to create a constant environment for the improvisation to be inspired by.

The creation of phrase material came from improvising and setting choreography in rehearsals together as a group and was usually inspired by a spatial structure from

“found” photographs in a book I bought in the Saatchi Gallery in London, England. The photos were so quirky and always had a group of people in old, odd outfits doing something similar with a personal character. From these spatial structures and movement ideas, I created movement from improvisation and would watch the dancers to see what they picked up on and assessed how well the movement was suiting their bodies. This process was inspired by my experience in Bebe Miller’s rehearsal process for “Dirt” at The Ohio State University in which she referred to this strategy as “catching.” By working on choreography that was stemming from my body and tendencies I was able to further grasp the individual nuances of each dancer by seeing their approach to the movement. The style of dancing I was interested in was very detail oriented, particular, and very physically demanding. The amount of time it took to rehearse choreography was taking away from the larger work of improvising we had invested in. This resulted in the creation of sections that we worked on for four to five rehearsals at a time. Each section was an attempt at what I thought would be a new beginning and I always restarted because I was nervous about the inability to execute my movement. I was feeling as though I was failing to teach and communicate and kept moving back to improvisation. Later I came to realize that each section had a purpose and I just had to structure an order of events, but at this time most of the set choreography was removed or forgotten. I moved towards simpler choreography since we had less time to clean the execution of it and in so doing I was able to create a structure of composition in which improvisational scores could connect two sections and lend to solo moments. I feel as though I worked with the common strengths in the room since I was working with varying levels of experience in dance and I had not worked as long on choreography as I did improvisation

in the rehearsal process. To my surprise the first attempt at starting the piece became my closing section and though a year earlier I expected to make a technically challenging senior work, I had instead made a psychologically challenging performance piece.

The process of crafting “And I at Being is Where This, You Are” became an ebb and flow of improvising, creating anew, exploring the possibilities of what I had yet to learn about my curiosities in dance making and the reflective quality of stepping back, thinking, and returning with alterations or deeper interests in certain aspects. The crafting aspect emphasized the choices made with intention and repeatable opportunities for staging the environment and specific atmosphere. The improvised scores opened up the structure keeping the material fresh and present, creating the ability to change the internal group focus at any moment. I was heavily inspired by e.e. cummings’ poetic structure and untraditional approach to punctuation. The success of his work results in his clear understanding of poetic convention in order to design in the unfamiliar while finding a through line of what could be seen as a secret logic that is difficult to define. I used cummings’ poetry to inform my straying from what I know about dance because I have spent time analyzing what it is that I know about it. The break of each line and stanza has an internal sense and logic, but to the outside eye can seem very arbitrary at first. cummings’ use of parentheses and changing words has logic of his own and differs greatly from the traditional approach to language and poetry. There is something I find fearless about his work and unapologetic for the denial of convention that inspired me to break up our sections in the piece as I pleased. This is where I found comfort in my urges to change emotional sentiments at a snap of a finger, a change of a light, a new duet of differing atmosphere, or having a dancer enter from the audience. My enjoyment of

cumming's alternative approach to making is instilled deeply in my interest to make this work free of expectations or rules. The difficulty I faced was finding the limits and containment of the dance within the structure. There is no reason that contemporary work cannot exist without a container of the limits to which it can exist, but I was looking for my voice to remain a constant and this could at times be overshadowed by too much freedom to stray from the composition. In some ways I felt I contradicted myself, but my awareness to those moments will inform how I move forward in this work. In that vein, it became confusing as to whether or not the choreography was inspiring the dancers to improvise, or if there was too little set material for it to really stand solidly as a dance work. This was something I could not know until performing it in a theater.

Though I decided to set material and structure the improvisational work, I also left the option to break away constantly available for exploration. It was not often that the dancers would stray from what we had set because they seemed to care for the work, each other, and the overall vision too much. This was technically the most difficult convention to attempt to break. Not every convention that is realized needs to be messed with, but many of my queries did lie in what possibilities come from the recognition of pattern or habit and the redefining of them. If anyone wanted to, at anytime, they could leave the stage, enter the audience, or just sit down; they could do anything. However, we would work for so long to put order, detail, and craft into every moment and quality of movement, text, or situation and I believe this to be the thing that everyone clung to: hard work and the effort allotted to define the work as something we knew as company. I soon learned that the effort I was interested in was not breaking convention in general, but to push myself to work in ways that don't relate to me in a way that feels too common,

regular, or familiar and therefore boring and tried. I could easily have moved toward conventions I recognized and explored new ways within them and do believe this to be a consequence that was beyond my understanding or interest at the time.

The people dedicating their time, creativity and diligence to this work inspired my decisions surrounding small group and duet pairings along with learning curves that dictated the order of events as it created an emotional trajectory. Developing the language to design, form and solidify the embodiment of the work became a necessary focus. For instance, as I stood watching the piece after we finally structured an official order, I felt confused and then calm, overwhelmed and pissed, joy and then immediate tears. I can't describe how this happened, but as I sensed the quality of a moment that the dancers were living in I wanted to push to the extreme of that feeling. The range of physical effort and dynamic did not need to be extreme in energy exerted, they just had to be true to what the experience really was and that is how I began to define "extreme" in our process. I also constantly encouraged the dancers to "find themselves" and to "be themselves" inside of the work and improvisation. The connotation of what I thought was a positive and simple request became our biggest hurdle. How, with such specificity in direction and choreography, could the dancers believe to be themselves and then I'd request for them to do something else? To them what they were doing could feel so real and true to their being, but did not read as genuine to me as the outside eye. I couldn't deny that my wording was wrong, but how else could I pinpoint my desire? I realized the "self" I was looking for was a very specific part of each person and I wanted to draw out those aspects. Writing and conversation, once again, fed our mutual understanding of what the work was asking for and allowed for eight people to find agreement in execution. One

dancer, revealed a sardonically sarcastic humor that lacked any fear of interaction with the audience. His approach was so down to earth that I couldn't feel a change from him talking to me to then performing for an audience. His freedom to move opened up possibilities of dancing in ways that seemed so unfamiliar and untraditional to the steps we learn in classes. I deemed this an internal feeling that he was able to accept, embody and explore without hesitation or apology for his oddity. This is an example of the aspect of his "self" I wanted to coach and hold on to.

In bringing the piece into a theater, a whole new atmosphere and level of performance became very evident. I knew this would happen based on the handful of rehearsal showings throughout the year with outside visitors, but BalletMet's performance space could have lent to many more playful moments. It became apparent how much more choreographic work could have fed the piece and kept a defined edge to what the dancers could play inside of. The kind of work that is the improvisation of movement and text pertaining to the present moment at hand needs practice, experience in performance and to be done in multiple venues to fully comprehend how to direct a work for that given space and situation. Thoughtfully constructing a dance with depth and fluidity of developed content consisted of choreographing a piece as an experience of its own and establishing an improvisational technique that could shift into any space and environment. For my senior project I worked the two forces together, but upon reflecting I have come back to question what the improvisational aspect is alone in order to truly understand what the choreography can do for it. Allowing permission to live in the moment during the piece through improvisation elongated the work as the dancers became more comfortable in their vocalized personalities. The excitement of having an

audience, of speaking, and finding humor in story or dance raised an unforeseen issue of the dance's container. How long did each section actually last in feeling and quality? Who moved things along when it felt too long? Which dancers delivered similarly to rehearsal and who came out of their shell in the prospect of performance? Was there a certain amount of holding text back in expression in order to keep the subtlety of metaphor? Many changes occurred in the performance of the work and only now could I return and really know what needs to be structured in order to keep a choreographed voice intact. For the amount of work that went into this piece I still can't believe the outcome's success in reaching audience members, but I also feel a need to find a way of making work such as this a more decisive structure for the dancers to execute my vision and still feel the ability to present themselves in their improvisational experience. The next endeavor in this work will be to develop structured improvisational text and I believe this to be possible through articulating the purpose of a moment and a situational focus in a time of using text. This has been a start to a whole realm of research that has taught me how to approach new questions in dance with skills that have proven to be successful. I have confidence in my furthering of this process of experimentation and discovery as it changes in each new creative process to come.