

Project Overview

A general description of the intention, initial goals, process, and results of the project.

My practicum project, *Thinking With the Body*, began as an intimate solo dance improvisation exploration. It centered on two main objectives: opening up my relationship with improvisational dance (a very foreign concept to this highly codified ballerina) and exploring film work with particular focus upon self-recording and editing. Through this exploration, I hoped to build a movement vocabulary for my final portfolio project. Included in the process was the tangible acquisition of more advanced editing skills, and the intangible vanquishing of the unbearable fear I carry around about not knowing; not knowing how to do something nor how to be creative without a specific task at hand. All of these tasks and hopes and dreams were tethered to the real possibility that working with footage of myself would trigger self-abuse and hatred, derailing the project and my own stability.

My initial plan was straightforward. I would do a short improvisation each day, which I would film with a smartphone. These videos would be edited into a final film at the end of the practicum, which I initially planned to last for two months. I intended to learn a new editing software: DaVinci, which many dance film makers use. I discovered almost immediately that I needed guidance in both of these endeavors. I immediately signed up for Goddard Alumni Cara Hagan's Screendance class. I also took as many online improv classes as I could find; from Hubbard St. Dance, from a former student, Savea Kagan, from Freeskwel and others. I also joined an artists' collective, Collectus. In addition to periodic check-ins, I took two workshops: a choreography workshop and an accountability group. These classes and group study opportunities gave me guidelines and structure, something I found that I desperately craved. Due to the Covid pandemic, there were a great deal more dance offerings available online. The relative anonymity of online classes was actually a support, giving me a freedom to try something new without the fear of judgement.

The first half of the practicum, in terms of dance improvisation, went according to plan. I gradually became slightly more comfortable with the process and discovered that I love improvisational dance classes. I was able to take the inspiration from those classes and then channel ideas, thoughts, physical impulses, and memories into movement. I discovered a movement vocabulary that would repeat and which I was able to expand upon. I played, both in improvisation and in set choreography, with the use of spoken word. I started to listen to impulse.

I found that I needed more than just the videos to document my process. I started to draw. While there was no specific goal nor primary focus for the practicum in this practice, it grew out of my need to both document the work and find new ways of moving and seeing. I began making visual representations, sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical, of the theme of the improvisation. I did quite a bit of sketching and pastel work in my earlier years, but had not picked up a pencil or piece of chalk in probably a decade. During the first half of my practicum, I made drawing a priority. I was able to sit in on a few of [Sharon Siskin](#)'s figure drawing classes. I played with watercolor, pencil and charcoal and tried to simply see. As I moved into the second half of the practicum and the new film, this practice fell off a bit, however I believe that it was valuable in helping me observe, without judgement, bits and pieces of the world as they relate to movement.

Finally, though not officially a part of the practicum, I embarked upon a new poetry writing practice. I believe that the freedom of improvisational practice and my deepening research in regard to my own choreographic voice impelled me to start writing. I was able to incorporate a few of my own poems into the improvisation practices.

The second half of the practicum took a turn, or perhaps a leap from the original intent. I heard a piece of music and knew that I had to create a ballet to it. It appeared as a fully formed piece in my head. I knew the storyline, the setting, the costume, and the dancer instantly. I also knew that the movement that I had been exploring over the course of the practicum to date was the basis for the movement vocabulary for the piece. Following this impulse was a direct result of the work that I had been doing to listen to music, follow inspiration and hear my own inner dialogue.

Moving the internal improvisational practice into an external choreographic process was seamless and proved the initial premise of the practicum; My extremely personal improvisational movement could be used as vocabulary for choreography set upon a different dancer. I could take a specific set of emotions or reactions or internal blockages, use those as a prompt for an improvisation session, harvest the movement and then adjust it for another body.

Though the decision and the choice to do so was seamless, pivoting to create a ballet on another dancer, with outside videographers and an outside editor, changed the parameters of the practicum. It transformed from a very personal project that did not need to culminate in a finished product to one in which money, time and other artists' expertise was invested. The outcome became very important.

The film is a moment of escape; from the strict rules of ballet, from gender expectations and weight expectations, from the abuses and rigidity of the dance studio. It is a moment of oscillating between life and another choice, a physical representation of the internal madness that everyone who is unable to conform to the stifling construct of the industry embodies.

Is any of this perceptible to the viewer? The specifics do not matter, the sense of unease, madness and unsure footing does. While the specifics are not essential to the viewer, I felt strongly that the collaborators that I brought into the process had to understand the origin of the work. This had to be viscerally felt and shared by the dancer. My dancer, videographers and editor all shared this experience.

It is very important to me that my crew and collaborators create a new industry simply by taking part in it. If we want an equitable world, we have to create with equity at the forefront. My work is centered on creating equity in dance. Therefore, the background and identities of those I work with is elemental to the process. My dancer, Grace Horrocks, is a queer cis gender woman who grew up in the ballet world unsure of how she could possibly fit in. She tried for many years to find her way, but eventually got quite sick and quit. She found her way back to ballet through my open classes a couple of years ago. I see in her, though I do not identify as queer, a soul mate or soul sister or maybe even daughter. We are very connected and I knew immediately that she was the dancer for this film.

In addition to Grace, Sam (Samantha) Chavez and Ramone Garcia, my editor and videographers identify as both queer and BIPOC. Finally, I am a GenX female, also part of an underrepresented population in both film and dance.

We had a very quick rehearsal process. Because the movement was mostly generated in my kitchen improv sessions, our studio time was efficient and focused upon moving my idiosyncratic movement to Grace's body. As a choreographer, it is essential that movement feel organic to the dancer, so if adjustments need to be made, I make them. We set the ballet in three rehearsals, then invited Sam and Ramone for a camera blocking rehearsal.

The music was the only sticking point in the process. I had to use this piece of music; every part of my being insisted upon it. When I started working, I assumed the friend who had posted the piece online was also the composer. I was mistaken. It took several attempts to connect before the composer responded to my request for the rights. He eventually gave me the green light. I am incredibly grateful for his generosity. Boris Karpuk is the wonderful pianist. The brilliant composer is Frederico Paterlini.

The final element was the location. I knew that I wanted to shoot on the edge of a cliff. My friend Selim and I took a day to location scout in Malibu and found a gorgeous spot that would look like the dancer was on the edge of the world. Mother Nature threw us a curve ball and gave us an incredibly foggy shoot day, but we pivoted in the moment, and I think the result is even better than a clear day would have been.

If I had stayed with my second primary goal of the practicum, film editing, I would have then been alone. That was my original intent. I had hoped to train myself to edit my own work, with a high level of professionalism. The success of this foray into editing was decidedly mixed. I did make an initial jump in my skill set at the top of the practicum. I had no skills to speak of and taught myself to use a basic editing program. I learned how to make simple edits, add, and change sound, put in title cards, and create transitions. I was able to do color correction and other basic lighting and audio clarifications. And then I plateaued. I did not grow exponentially in my technical editing skills. However, I did experience a profound increase in my understanding of dance film making and a deepening trust of my vision as an editor and choreographer. I developed a deep understanding of the multitude of ways that these skills interact. I confirmed that I personally need to collaborate on this portion of filmmaking. I want to work with brilliant editors. I crave the back and forth. This is not an abdication of responsibility but an acknowledgment that certain technical skills take a long time to master. I have a very clear

vision. To successfully achieve it, I need to work with an expert. The vision and storytelling outweigh my egoist need to “do it all.” Because of all of this, Sam and I worked together, over the course of 8 different versions, to perfect the film.

Floating Falling Flying...a short dance film, is the culmination of both parts of the practicum. I took my improvisational process and used it to create a movement vocabulary that was concise and repeatable, that could tell a story, and was danceable by another body. I used all of the editing expertise that I gained to partner with a skilled technician to create a final product that looked and felt and expressed exactly what I set out to create. I made a film that I love. The process, while at times fraught, did not plunge me into the depths of self-abuse that I feared it could. I believe that the practicum was highly successful, and I will build upon the work over my final two semesters at Goddard.

Documentation

Provide relevant materials documenting the project’s process and results. Examples of possible documentation include written description, photographs, video, brief journal excerpts, participant and sponsor comments, materials produced during the project, press coverage etc.

- [Busy, screendance film class final](#)

-[improv compilations](#)

-[drawings](#)

-[Floating Falling Flying...a short dance film](#)

-[Film Festival Laurels](#)

Evaluation

Considered in relation to the project’s originally stated goals and subsequent developments, evaluation is expected to include feedback from community collaborators, participants and others who have been impacted by the project, as well as student interpretation of information received. Examples of evaluation materials include written

evaluation forms, questionnaires, acknowledgements, follow-up letters, or unsolicited comments from collaborators, participants, or sponsors, demographic information, etc.

In relation to the project's originally stated goals, this practicum was a success. I created a solo improvisation practice, filmed it, created short compilations, and learned much more about film editing than I knew at the start. I completed a short project for the film class. I began with the improvisations and then expanded the project well beyond the original parameters. Rather than remain in that very intimate setting, I was able to extrapolate the work and immediately implement it into choreography set on other dancers. This final project was completed with my ethical and demographic demands in place and was a positive and successful experience for everyone involved. All collaborators were paid market rate for their time, Covid compliance restrictions were observed at all times, I completed it \$100 under budget and the film is currently embarking upon the festival circuit. To date (July 2021), it has been honored with a Best Female Director win from the Vesuvius Film Festival in Italy and is a finalist at The Toronto Independent Film Festival of Cift. I expect, from the feedback that it has received to date, for this list to grow exponentially.

-comments from Grace:

Rehearsing for and dancing in the film "Floating, Falling, Flying...a dance film" was both physically and emotionally demanding- the first time dancing in a full studio space since pre-pandemic times, while also taking on the story behind the film, became breeding ground for a vulnerable yet healing space. Nancy is an extremely collaborative choreographer and teacher, coming fully prepared with a vision but always providing and re-establishing a consensual space when it came to the emotional demands of the movement, as well as allowing flexibility with the movement she had in mind based on how it worked on my body. After just a few rehearsals, I feel that we found a sturdy balance between staying true to her ideas and creating something that made sense for my body, and my story. The film itself feels like only a fraction of what we went through; the process as a whole was a very important and rewarding one to complete.

-comments from Sam:

I had an amazing time working on Floating Falling Flying. From the start Nancy had a clear beautiful vision that came even clearer to me throughout the process. Filming day when I got to

actually be at the location after seeing the choreography in rehearsal really made things click and from then on it just kept getting clearer. When it came to editing it all made sense when the layering came, this was after various drafts and even within those first couple drafts I knew something wasn't right yet. Once Nancy told me to really run with the opacity and layering I felt like we made it. It felt like the seed of an idea had completely blossomed and it was so rewarding to see all the work in the end. The space was structured and collaborative and I can not wait for the next project!

Critical Reflection

Assessment of what was learned through the practicum experience, including identification of and critical engagement with issues involved in or arising from the project; and analysis of how the student sees the project will affect their practice, either by enhancing it or by helping better understand the contexts of the work they aspire to do."

The greatest lesson of the practicum project was one of trust. Trust that after almost 40 years of identifying as a dancer and almost ten as a choreographer, my instincts, movement, and physical voice all have value and clarity. The process of moving from an intimate, private space of improvisation and taking the movement and safety of that work into a rehearsal space was astonishing for me. I know that many choreographers work this way, but I have always found my movement in the dancers that I am setting work on. I have never tried to feel it internally. I rarely dance my own work. In the few instances that I have, I found the internal strife to be overwhelming. The practicum has given me the freedom to try to dance my own work and I will allow, at least the idea of it, into my final project.

Embedded in this learning is a new respect for the process of letting trauma, rage, pain expunge through the body rather than solely through intellectual or psychological work. I have intellectually understood the concept of working through trauma with the body, but this was the first time that I directly addressed my own trauma in my own choreography. It was the first time that I transferred my trauma to another body through choreography.

I also found a new sort of self-compassion in honoring the fear, the PTSD, the psychological weight of working with cameras and seeing my body go through life in a way. I'm not at my dancing prime, though not as far away from it as I often believe or judge myself to be. There is great value for a choreographer, for a director, and most importantly, for an educator, to recognize how very painful much of our work can be. The scrutiny that dancers have to go through from the outside world is exponentially harder when it comes from the self. I did not succeed in lessening the emotions, but I did find some compassion for my soul in having to endure it.

The second most valuable lesson was one of letting go. I do not have to do every job. I can work with an editor on important pieces and projects. The collaboration is more important than my ego or need to do it all. I already wear many hats in most productions. I work as director, choreographer, stylist (wardrobe and art direction), casting director and producer. I do not need to be the person in charge of editing and allowing that space frees me up for so much more. I do not have to limit my vision to my technical skill set but can hire someone to be brilliant in relationship with me and with the work.

Unlike many other practicum projects within the MFAIA program at Goddard, this one turned inward. It focused on my experiences and my work. However, it did fully engage with the Goddard praxis of reflection, theory and action. I believe that the lessons learned can be applied to much larger projects. In applying the lessons of openness and compassion to my industry at large, I can continue to move towards bringing more equity, inclusion, and representation to the fore.

In regard to my personal practice, I have fully embraced improvisation as a tool and means towards self-expression, in both dance and other aspects of my creative output. The freedom

that it has allowed me, both in choreography and in a nascent poetry practice is invaluable and I am eternally grateful to this project for opening up my mind and spirit to such abundance.