

Honors Thesis: Developing a Choreographic Process

**Developing a Choreographic Process:
Instinctual Creation vs. Premeditated Creation**

By

Alexandra Doyle



A Thesis Submitted to the Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors Degree
with Honors in
Dance

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

May 2015

Approved By:

Professor James Clouser
School of Dance



Abstract:

This thesis is a research project undertaken in order to develop a personal process of choreography. As a dance major at a university with a heavy emphasis on choreography, I feel it is important to identify and develop my own choreographic process. I am trying to find my own voice as a choreographer, so I am testing different recognized methods of movement creation in order to develop a process. Each semester, fall and spring, I choreographed separate pieces that were driven by a different process. Fall semester I choreographed driven by instinctual creation; spring semester I choreographed driven by premeditated creation. Throughout each process, I kept detailed journals on what choreographic tools and techniques I used to develop each piece. The largest products of my research were the two dances created, so the bulk of my thesis is videos of my dances. However, I wanted to document the processes to learn which techniques worked and which didn't. To close out my time here at the university, I will choreograph a solo using the information gathered from my research.

Definition of Terms:

Instinctual Creation: Using my instinct to choreograph in the moment without prior planning. Coming to rehearsal with nothing prepared but open to use influences from the rehearsal.

Premeditated Creation: Choreographing with a plan and goal in mind. Coming to rehearsals with prepared material.

Choreographic process: The overall time spent choreographing the piece from rehearsal to stage. Each choreographer's process differs.

Choreographic tools/ devices: Different techniques used by choreographers to help generate material and/or create dynamics within a dance. Choreographic tools aid in creativity.

Fall semester: INSTINCTUAL CREATION

Overview of rehearsal process

In the fall, I choreographed a piece called *Peak Shift*. The process was driven by instinctual creation. This means that I had no plan. I created in the moment. Going into the process, I had no song, no title, and no driving inspiration. I wanted to create a dance that centered around and focused on the movement itself. I chose a cast of eighteen dancers based on who I enjoyed working with or watching dance. One night I went into one of our dance studios and turned on mainstream rap music. I developed three separate phrases: one base movement phrase, one gesture phrase, and one traveling phrase. In my first rehearsal I taught my cast those phrases, and created an additional phrase on the spot. Later, I developed one last duet phrase using only movement inspired by the movement vocabulary within the other phrases. All together there were four phrases and one duet phrase. I decided early on that I would set a limitation on myself to draw from those phrases alone to create the entire piece. I started setting the dance in silence because I did not have a song yet. In order to keep the dancers in sync, I told them to slap their thighs with their hands in order to set a steady tempo to stay together. I ended up keeping this as a motif throughout the piece even once I had a song. After playing with multiple songs, I

landed on one that I felt captured the essence of the piece that was developing: Cigarettes and Chocolate by Chet Faker. This song had no lyrics, which I thought kept the focus away from the song and directed it to the movement the dance was based around. Each rehearsal I would continue to create and build on the base I was creating. I would film each final product of the rehearsal. This allowed me to look back on what I created in the moment to then make contemplated decisions on what I could refine. This process continued until I was finished.

Link to *Peak Sift*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pd-RkNwANno>

Choreographic tool	Description	Whether I think it was successful
Limitation	I gave myself the limitation of only using 5 movement phrases throughout the piece. Using set movement vocabulary and not straying.	Yes
Facings	Having the same movement vocabulary performed in different directions	Yes
Videography in process	Videoing the product of each rehearsal to then look back on and refine	Yes
Tempo	Setting choreography to different speeds	Yes
Patterns	Creating geometrical and symmetrical shapes with the dancers I had with formations	Yes
Cannon; Roll Off	Having dancers layer movement within time	Yes

Spring semester: PREMEDITATED CREATION

Overview of rehearsal process

In the spring, I took a completely different approach. My entire process was premeditated before I began rehearsals. This means I knew exactly what I wanted. I had a plan, a title, and music. I found recordings at my grandmother's house on a cassette tape of my great grandfather singing and playing the ukulele. The recordings also included sound footage of my grandmother's family in the house during holiday season, a Christmas carol, and a radio recording of space exhibitions. This project was very specific. It was titled *Untimely Decay*. I dedicated it to my grandparents, which made it very personal and very emotionally charged. I drew inspiration from the life of my grandma Mimi, my mother's mother. There was somewhat of a storyline and characters involved. The entire piece was to be comprised of multiple sections. I chose my cast based on whom I thought would execute each section successfully and whom I thought would hold true the integrity of the piece and theme. This multi-sectioned piece made rehearsal organization a little more difficult. I still wanted there to be common threads that held together the piece as a whole, so I developed common gestures that I manipulated throughout the piece. One night I wrote out a conversation that I would typically have with my grandma focusing on her dialogue to me. I created gestures to go along with each line. These resurface in each section. I knew I wanted the first opening movement to introduce the "characters". It was set to vocal exchanges between my family members in the 60's. The second movement was a trio inspired by my mom and her siblings, the children of Mimi, and their juvenile innocence as children. It was set to a recording of Jingle Bell Rock from the radio. I wanted to utilize the sentimental value attributed to the

holiday season. The third movement was a quintet expressing the passage of time and the inevitability of aging. It was set to my great grandfather singing folk songs. The fourth movement was a duet symbolizing the relationship between my mother's parents, Mimi and Pawpaw. I focused on aspects of their relationship in order to choreograph it. It was also set to my great grandfather singing. The fifth and final movement was a solo dedicated to my grandfather and the issues he dealt with. It was set to a radio broadcast of the space exhibition Project Mercury. This project was ambitious, and I did feel I ran out of time. In hindsight, I wish I had more time.

Link to *Untimely Decay*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daKaX4ekOgU>

Choreographic tool	Description	Whether I think it was successful
Narrative	Drawing from real life experiences and having a storyline portrayed; emotional reliability	Yes- not executed always
Manipulation	Taking movement and altering it to create more movement that is similar but different	Yes- sometimes
Collaboration	Using dancers for input and inspiration	No, not for this particular project
Repetition	Having movement repeated many times	Yes
Script	Using text for inspiration; actual words to drive the movement	Yes

Final Creation:

Overall, I am happy with both pieces I created. I think *Peak Shift* was a finished product. I wouldn't change anything, which makes it feel complete in my eyes. *Untimely Decay* was such an ambitious attempt. I am so happy I challenged myself with its vast and complicated themes, but it still feels like a work in process. I do think I will return to it in the future to finish. I did not have enough time to refine it, but I think the tools I used to create it were placed correctly.

For my final solo, I am using a combination of the tools I used for each process to choreograph. I chose to dance to live music using the collaboration of my fellow artist, Bill Patterson. I asked him to create an arrangement of "Moon River" on the saxophone. The choreography will draw from an emotional place because when my choreography comes from an emotional place, I create genuine movement. However, I also want the movement to speak for itself. I don't want the dance rely on the inspiration. I will definitely work from a set movement vocabulary and use a lot of repetition. The dance will be inspired by my final senior year of college, and it will symbolize the act of moving on. It is titled *Stepping Off*.