

From Creation to Performance:
The Choreographic Process from Chicago to Saigon

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Before heading backstage to prepare for our performance with the International Choir and Orchestra of Ho Chi Minh City, our professor, Amy Wilkinson, brought all ten of us dancers together and reminded us that this experience was one of those “big moments” in our lives. The following will discuss the reasons I believe this creative process to create *Cloudburst*, one of the two pieces we performed with the choir and orchestra, is truly a “big moment.” Although the performance of *Cloudburst* could not have been brought to fruition without the accompaniment of the choir and orchestra, I will not be discussing this element in order to focus on the development of movement, the adaptations of intentions and the action of performing. Rather than analyzing the influence of live music on our movement, I will categorize the choir and orchestra as observers of the movement.

In Natalia Duong’s TED talk, *Dance as Therapy* (2003), she talks about the transition between sympathy to empathy to actions. This process describing the development of human connection directly relates to the development and change of my intentions behind the choreography of *Cloudburst*. In the following discussion, I will explore the evolution of our choreographic process from creation, motivation, to rehearsals in Chicago to our performance in Ho Chi Minh City. Alongside this I will examine the relationship of the choreographic process to Duong’s model of sympathy to empathy to action. The creation of choreography, developing intentions, and performing allows choreographers, performers and observers to gain kinaesthetic knowledge that will ultimately lead to embodying sympathy, empathy and actions in order to understand others’ emotions and experiences.

CREATION TO ADAPTATION IN THE STUDIO

The creation of our work, *Cloudburst*, began with us sharing our childhood fears and comforts with each other. We began the process by describing our fears in words and then improvising movement that communicated our experiences. Once creating the movement, we taught each other our choreographic phrases. My childhood fear was the memory of having a trombone blown straight into my face. It was a fear based on an unexpected interaction. As I taught the other dancers the choreography I created, I found myself at a loss of words and found it easier just to do it. My hesitation or inability to describe my movement through words supports Pakes' (2009) claim that 'knowing how', the ability of completing an action, does not require 'knowing that', the theory behind that action (Pakes, 2009, pp.11-12). My body knew the choreography, but it was difficult to describe the theory behind it in words to my peers. I had embodied my experience of fear through choreography. The logical flow of intention to action described by Aristotle's practical syllogism, as described by Pakes (2009) supports my process of taking the intention of describing my fear and putting it into the actions of my movement phrase (Pakes, 2009, pp.11-12). Reversing the order of the practical syllogism from intention to action to an action to an intention, as I was attempting when translating my movement through words, would go against the structure of the syllogism. However, I do not credit my inconsistency in following Aristotle's theory with my inability to communicate my choreography as clearly as I would like. More precisely, my experience was embodied in my movement and this expression of my childhood fear was a more genuine representation. This demonstrates the unique knowledge of experiences that movement can communicate to others as well to the performer. If

others could connect to this feeling, they could go beyond sympathizing with my experience when listening to my story and begin to empathize when experiencing or mirroring my movement.

Through embodying my choreography, I thought perhaps others could begin to move from sympathy to empathy. To empathize with others, one must feel invested in that person's story. Investing in the stories of others began with gaining ownership of each other's choreography. As our weekly rehearsals continued, my choreography was constantly adapted by the input of other dancers and our professor who compiled our different fears and comforts into one cohesive work of art. These adaptations demonstrate the connection of the role between choreographer and performer. One day during rehearsal Amy Wilkinson, our choreographer and professor, suggested that we exaggerate one of my movements that would lead into us pulling our shirts over our heads. I was thrilled to have the input from our choreographer because it demonstrated that she was relating in some way to my movement. Whether that be an aesthetic motivation or personal connection to the movement, I welcomed this adaptation because she was not only valuing my work, but connected to it in a way that suggested a feeling of empathy.

Natalia Duong (2013) refers to the transition between sympathy to empathy as one of feeling for others to feeling with others (Duong, 2013). Rouhiainen (2014) describes the collaboration between choreographer and performer as a type of "interactive dance making" an experience that she herself experienced as a dancer in an installation piece (Rouhiainen, 2014). Just as she depended on the audience to create movement, we depended on the contributions of others to choreograph a cohesive piece. Without the contributions of each other's choreography in building *Cloudburst*, I would have not felt as understood or supported in the beginning stages

of our process. It was the evolution of feeling sympathy by learning about each other's experiences to empathy demonstrated through the contribution of others that influenced the beginning of our creative process. As others began to interpret my movement in their own way, I felt my work and the works of others were worthy of interpretation. Through the collaboration between choreographer and performer there was a mutual ownership of the work and our experiences.

Memories of childhood fears and comforts informed the creation of our movement. Teaching each other the excerpts of our choreography, our text, led to each one of us gaining knowledge of each other's fears and comforts, that could not be described in words. Active collaboration amongst each other allowed us to take ownership of the choreography and begin the process of empathizing with each other's feelings on a more genuine level.

INTENTIONAL EMPATHY

Although our movement transformed during each rehearsal we had in Chicago, the choreography for *Cloudburst* was solidified by the time we began rehearsing in the golf course of our hotel in Vietnam. However, the intentions behind each movement changed constantly. They changed mainly in response to the environment and the images I saw each day while traveling. The changes in my intentions from place to place were indicative of me developing empathy in response to different situations.

In a blog we kept throughout the duration of our time in Vietnam, Jordan Kunkel (2015,b) contemplated if, “ [the] movement would have changed if [her] childhood fears and comforts had centered around the aftermath of the Vietnam War” (Kunkel, 2015,b). Coincidentally, while still in Chicago and rehearsing in the Fine Arts Annex of Loyola Chicago,

Amy Wilkinson posted an article about “Operation Babylift” the airlift of several Vietnamese children (Murphy, 2015). The article described how the children snuggled close together on the cargo plane, being held close to the flight attendants. “They were just darling or very scared” commented one of the flight attendants as she reminisced on being part of this historical event (Murphy 2015). Comparing my fear of a trombone to the possible childhood fear of leaving Saigon by airlift as a child, made me ponder my ability to empathize with the gravity of this experience. The fears of many of the dancers included memories such as a burglary where robbers would enter underneath a desk or a barricade of stuffed animals that would protect them. Many of these memories were based off possibilities of something happening, but for those children on the airlift their fear would have been escaping a war torn country. How could I relate my experience to such an event? However, when learning the movement of each other’s fear, there was a connecting theme of hiding, retreating, or holding something closer. Whether that be hiding behind Jordan Kunkel’s barricade of stuffed animals, retreating from a trombone, or such as in Mary O’Rourke’s movement describing the comfort she found in holding her blanket closer to herself, the same type of movements were described in how the children snuggled closer together or hid under the flight attendants. Through our movement and the description of those children’s reaction I was able to connect our experiences. Making this connection allowed me to amplify the fear that I had during my memory and use it to understand something I would never experience. Making connections between our choreography and the children’s experiences changed my intention from empathizing with the experiences that were relatable to my own experiences as a child in the United States, to empathizing with war experience that I would never witness.

When we arrived in Saigon, one of our first experiences was touring the city on the back of a motorbike. I thought I would never do this, but it was not as if I empathized with how it would feel to be a motorbike, instead I used the choreographed actions of the motorbikes to inform my movement. “Vietnamese drivers honk to inform other drivers where they are in space. Each driver has an incredibly heightened spatial awareness,” observed Kelsee Simons (2015), one of the ten dancers of our piece (Simons, 2015). Influenced by how the drivers interacted with the space around them, I set the intention behind my movement to be that same heightened awareness of the drivers. During *Cloudburst*, there is a moment where three other dancers and I line up and then quickly disperse into different directions. While rehearsing this movement I imagined us as motor bikes avoiding contact and collision one after another while being incredibly aware of our reciprocal relationship with the space. I not only could recall those moments of mere collision while moving straight towards oncoming traffic, through the choreography. Just as Fabius and Rouhiainen’s (2009) articles discuss the mutual relationship between the environment and the choreography and vice versa, our experience of heightened spatial awareness on the motorbikes influenced my intentions when rehearsing in the theatre (Fabius, 2009; Rouhiainen, 2009). The feelings that I had on the motorbike of interacting seamlessly with the space translated to how I interacted with the two other dancers and the theatre space. The intention had transformed to focus on my relationship with the space because of my experience on the motorbikes. I had embodied my experience into the choreography, so that my movement had knowledge of my time on that motorbike.

Something unique about *Cloudburst*, was that we were able to play all three roles of choreographer, performer and observer throughout the creative process and performance of one

eight minute piece. Our role as choreographer was most apparent in the beginning of the process where I previously described the creation of collaborative choreography that encouraged a transition from sympathy to empathy. However, our role as performer and observer were more intertwined. The dance required us to be in a semi-circle formation observing each other dance in the inside of the half circle, while also participating in it. The choir and orchestra made up half of the circle while the audience completed it. It was a symbolic image of the interconnectedness of performer and observer. Kelsee Simons (2015) described this changing of roles as the “switch[ing] back and forth between being the watchees and watchers” (Simons, 2015). We alternated from being inside to outside the circle, embodying experiences and observing embodied experiences.

While observing Sarah Prinz’s solo, we ,while in the formation of a half-circle, held a gesture where one hand hovered over the other while our fingers extended and folded as if feeling a sphere-like object. At this moment I was able to both embody and observe embodied experiences. Those experiences and emotions that I embodied and observed in Sarah Prinz’s solo were reminiscent of when we visited the burning monk monument and taught at the International school. In my travel journal I allude to my discomfort of taking a picture in front of the monument with the intention of remembering the moment. At the monument, Yu, our tour guide, described how the monk burned himself as a result of the persecution of Buddhists and the fact that his heart remained intact after undergoing this horrific event. Standing in the space where this event happened and taking a picture, made me feel as if I was unworthy to remember this historical event in this manner. After leaving the monument ashamed of “belittling the immensity of this moment to an iPhone picture,” I asked myself if the discomfort that I had experienced by

taking a picture of the monument could ever amount to the pain and discomfort during the real event. Realizing I would never experience this event, I still felt as if I experienced emotions that could be translated through choreography. This became my intention behind the gesture of holding the sphere. This was my way of empathizing with this historical event. Instead of holding the sphere I was holding the unburnt heart of the burning monk.

The intention behind this gesture continued to evolve throughout our time in Vietnam. In another journal entry, I recall performing in front of the children at the international school.

“The innocence in interpreting our movement and the love they had when performing or watching us perform added an element of lightness and playfulness to my movement. When we cup our hands in *Cloudburst*, the thoughts behind the movement shifted from the baby chicks we held in the market, to the joy of the children to the heart of the burning monk. From this I formed an intention behind this gesture...may the sacrifices for peace be the hope for the future. May the sacrifices...that the monk made establish the intentions for the future”

Throughout the interactions that I had with various historical sites, markets that showcased daily life, and teaching in the international school while in Saigon, I was able to synthesize a clear intention behind a gesture. The intention I set calls for action and also relates to an action, the action of holding our hands one above another and it calls for actions of peace in the future. This gesture provided me with the most embodied knowledge of how I could empathize with the events I was learning and experiencing throughout the trip. While holding this gesture, the intention behind it was informed by my experiences. Simultaneously Sarah Prinz was performing her solo and I was also responding to the feelings she was conveying through the action of her hand inching towards her neck and consequently grabbing it in a choking fashion. The choreographed movement was to turn and hold our shirts close to our mouths as if in fear when she performed this action. This response to her movement was a moment where I was not only

embodying my own experiences, but also responding to the feelings she was conveying. This action-response relationship is an example of the empathic relationship we formed while performing this section of the piece. We were no longer on feeling for Sarah as we observed her complete her choreography, but we were also feeling her emotions and experiences with her.

The intentions behind the choreography we created changed according to the experiences throughout our time in Saigon, specifically those experiences where I witnessed a unique relationship between the space and the people moving within it, my emotional response to historical sites, and when I played the role of the observer and performer to witness those embodied experiences. The evolution of my intentions allowed me to empathize with historical events and experiences I would have never understood by translating my emotions to my body and active visualization.

PERFORMANCE INTO ACTION

After creating and setting our intentions, we were able to perform with the International Choir and Orchestra of Ho Chi Minh City for one night. After two rehearsals we performed Saturday night. The main lesson I gained from this experience was the tremendous interconnectedness that I felt among us as performers, observers and choreographers and the choir, orchestra and audience completing the circle of observers. McKechnie and Stevens (2009) claim that choreography for the observer, “is a multi-layered event with numerous avenues for emotional and affective communication”(McKechnie & Stevens, 2009, pp 45-47). If the observers are able to comprehend the emotions that performers are conveying, would this not be an experience of kinaesthetic empathy on the part of the observer? Performance opens up the experiences that I translated into movement, to an audience. Perhaps the audience will not

perceive the same burning heart held in my hand during Sarah Prinz's solo, but they will feel the emotions that I was trying to convey. As Kunkel (2015,a) argues in her blogpost "after our performance tonight, it won't be the movement that anyone remembers, but how we connected with each other and the audience" (Kunkel, 2015,a).

There is limited literature in my review towards what type of emotions or memories certain dances make the audience feel, and this a limitation of my research. However, I do have evidence that the audience felt a connection to us. This can be best traced to an interaction with an audience member who came up to talk to us after one of our rehearsals. He was deeply touched by the choreography and thanked us for our performance. Further research on the ability of performance to create a feeling of empathy in audience members with or without further knowledge of the intentions behind the movement would provide an interesting insight. Nevertheless, the performance was the action of us sharing our experience with others. For me it was the ability to share the feelings of connection and empathy with others.

Sharing the knowledge about emotions and empathy that we gained through performing, is something that in practice has led to several successful dance therapy exercises. The work of Natalia Duong(2013) with Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange and Harris' (2014) work with Sierra Leone boy soldiers demonstrate an ability of movement to heal (Duong, 2013; Harris, 2014). Yet, it is the ability of movement to inspire the most intense moment of empathy among the facilitators. During Harris'(2014) discussion of the work, he recalls a moment where the boys would pin him down and how he drew parallels between this movement and the image that these boys would have witnessed of severed amputated arms in the battlefield (Harris, 2014). Harris was not present to experience those war terrors. Neither was I present to experience the burning

monk, however certain movements reminded him of the pain that these boys must have felt. Movement was able to inspire empathy in Harris' interpretation of this image.

As a performer, I was able to feel empathy for historical experiences that I would never be able to relive. Just as I was able to feel empathy for those individuals that experienced these historical events, Duong(2013) was able to feel empathy towards the physically disabled adults she worked with during her project (Duong, 2013). She was able to do so by participating in activities where she mirrored the movements of the individuals. The connection between Duong, Harris and me is that we were all able to feel empathy from a position of privilege: whether that privilege be that of being able-bodied or being an American visitor. The difference is that I perceived empathy for those who lived through the war and the persecution of humans through the role of a performer where Duong and Harris observed it through the role of dance therapy facilitators. The fact that I was able to develop empathy towards people I had never met by learning about the history they experienced, and then being able to share those feelings through action, shows the relevance of choreography and performance in inspiring empathy in not only facilitators and dance therapists, but also performers.

CONCLUSION/ENCORE

During our journey in Saigon I was able to empathize with others' experiences and memories by translating them to movement. Kinaesthetic knowledge provides information about space, experiences and emotions that the performer presents to the observer, but it also allows the performer to empathize and understand their privilege by processing the experiences and emotions of others. This idea supports McKechnie and Stevens (2009) claim that the role of the performer, observer and choreographer are interconnected (McKechnie & Stevens, 2009). The

observer is not the only that is able to gain knowledge, the performer can also gain knowledge and understanding of the experiences of others and the space around them. Kinaesthetic knowledge leads to empathy from a variety of points of views. It is this ability to develop a sense of empathy through movement, that allows choreography and performance to establish the eternal connection between each other and the space around us.

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