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Fusion of Art Forms across the World: An Examination of Contemporary Dance Improvisation in England and America

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FUSING ART FORMS ACROSS THE WORLD: AN EXAMINATION OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE IMPROVISATION IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts with Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

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Western Kentucky University 2015

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ABSTRACT

Artists in the dance world are now experimenting with new and more varied subgenres of contemporary dance such as contemporary dance improvisation, but audience reception of this type of work is incongruent from country to country, and even from place to place within one nation. In America, the artistry spans from those who are making breakthroughs and experimenting with new techniques to companies which continue to perform celebrated repertoire. Because of London’s role as a world leader in the arts, and its geographical location in England, avant-garde artistry is especially common throughout that nation. The author spent time studying in both countries and developed an interest in learning how and why the differences are so prominent. In an attempt to assess how various audience members’ cultural backgrounds might affect their perception of the dance that they see, the author produced a concert series of structured contemporary dance improvisation alongside a collection of poetry inspired by both England and America and showcased them for feedback in both countries. Finally, the author analyzed audience responses and drew conclusions about the international state of contemporary dance improvisation.

Keywords: Contemporary Dance, Improvisation, Poetry, Performance, American Culture, British Culture
This thesis is hereby dedicated to every person, young or old, who ever put on a pair of dance shoes or picked up a brand new journal and felt right at home.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Movement, particularly...became very much a conformity. So all of that had to be reexamined. You had to find new compositional forms as well as new movement.” – Anna Halprin

While contemporary dance continues to become more prominent in the public eye, contemporary dance improvisation, one of its many subgenres, has yet to become an integral part of the culture of the dance world, both in the United States and in England. In Great Britain, the face of professional dance has dramatically changed since the “contemporary” style first took hold there in the 1960’s after American postmodern choreographers like Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, and Alwin Nikolais introduced it (Au 155). American and Central European artists have influenced dance companies across Britain with new choreographic ideas, creative artistic visions, and insight from their cultural backgrounds, and British dance companies have taken this inspiration and begun to create new works of art. The same can be said for the United States; the country’s status as a “melting pot” for various cultures has directly translated into the professional dance world with a variety of styles and subgenres of contemporary dance

2 In this paper, the term “artist” will be used interchangeably with terms referring to dancers and choreographers, reflecting the notion of “performance art.”
coming out of cities across the nation. This diversity in what is being performed today would seemingly suggest a shift in the direction of a more universal definition of contemporary dance, but this is not the case. Even today, there is a difference between British and American contemporary dance that is visibly noticeable by dancers, choreographers, and audiences of each country.

Contemporary dance holds a prominent place in modern British culture and society because it houses many more genres of movement expression, thematic imagery, and mediums of presentation than its predecessors; however, like America, this does not consistently hold true across the nation (Jordan 86). Historically, artists have had the tendency to migrate towards larger cities where their arts are more likely to flourish. Being an American dancer, I recognized that this is also visibly the case in America today, with the majority of today’s celebrated companies being housed on the coasts. In England, those artists whose work is inspired by multiple genres, cultures, and disciplines, along with those who come from mixed dance backgrounds, have especially begun to settle into the niche of contemporary dance in London (Burns and Harrison 4).

Contemporary dance has evolved at lightning speed from its beginnings in the 1960s. In both countries, multiple subgenres of contemporary dance have invaded the contemporary dance scene and show no signs of retreat. Site-specific dance is defined by Steve Kopowitz, Dean of Dance at CalArts and leading international site-dance choreographer, as including “work that is wholly inspired by a specific site and cannot be replicated anywhere else without losing its essence and core meaning” (75). He also acknowledges other categories of site-dance, like site-based and site-inspired dance, that have been practiced for decades by internationally renowned choreographers like Trisha
Brown and Meredith Monk. Another contemporary dance subgenre, dance installation, can be defined as “a platform for collaborative moving image works and innovative curations… Projects consider the expansion of choreographic thinking beyond dance in order to offer distinctive, haptic ways of exploring the world around us” (Straybird).

Today, dance performances can involve less actual dance performance than ever before; incorporation of mixed-media into contemporary dance has taken today’s performance art to an entirely new level.

Many contemporary companies that perform on the concert stage in England and America have adopted a theatrical style reminiscent of German-born dance theater, or “tanztheater.” This expressive movement of the 20th century unites genuine dance and theatrical methods of performance, “creating a new, unique dance form, which, in contrast to classical ballet, distinguishes itself through an intended reference to reality” (Servos). Rudolf von Laban, creator of the movement analysis method of the same name, finds that this “interdisciplinary total art form should allow one to be drawn into an inherent eurythmic harmony which is then expressed on stage” (Servos).

The contemporary dance subgenre that is the main focus of this research is that of contemporary dance improvisation and structured improvisation within it. Structured improvisation is a way in which improvisation can be performed with a prescribed structure, aka “physical inventiveness with structural intuition” (Morgenroth xiv). Improvisation is now viewed not only as a choreographic tool to help get creative juices flowing, but also as a less-structured form of performable choreography—an art form in and of itself (Tufnell 146).
Though these many subgenres of contemporary dance are seen in both England and America, audience reception of this type of work is not congruent from country to country, or even from place to place within one nation. The dynamic, ever-changing nature of contemporary dance, and especially contemporary dance improvisation, sparked an interest in me to discover how exactly it is currently presented and received in both the United States and in America. As an American dancer, I first became acquainted with this difference during my semester studying abroad at Harlaxton College in Grantham, England. My study of British contemporary dance and exploration of contemporary dance improvisation began with the local Chantry Dance Company. This “theatrical contemporary ballet company” is tucked away in an otherwise old-fashioned English town.\(^3\) The company had previously been based in Central London, the most significant hub for the arts in the UK, but had been forced to relocate to the small town because of their inability to receive funding from the Arts Council of England, the country’s main source of funding for the arts.\(^4\)

The situation of the Chantry Dance Company, being an innovative company in an old-fashioned town, set the stage for a few questions of my own: first, what different opinions people in both Britain and America had towards contemporary dance improvisation as it stands, and second, how people would react to another form of artistic fusion of my own creation, that of dance and poetry. The similarities and shared opportunities between these two creative platforms became increasingly apparent as I

\(^3\) The directors give this distinction to their company’s style due to its inclusion of genre-specific aspects from both dance theater and contemporary ballet. Contemporary ballet is a style of contemporary dance in which classical ballet technique is expanded to include more elements of modern dance, such as more grounded, organic movements and less rigidity of the upper body.

\(^4\) The Council was founded shortly after the Committee for Encouragement of Music and the Arts was set up by Royal Charter in 1940 to support art as a crucial aspect of the nation’s culture (Arts Council England).
considered the common presence they held in both countries as well as the timelines of their postmodern development. Poetry gives writers an expressive ability that is akin to the expressive nature of dance. International choreographer and certified Laban Movement Analyst Mary Lynn Babcock explained in her presentation at the 16th Annual National Dance Education Organization (NDEO) National Conference that “metaphor can translate into movement” (80). As a dancer and a poet, I was interested in exploring the many possibilities of combining site-inspired poetry with site-inspired contemporary dance improvisation. This research interest led me to the following questions:

Q1. How is contemporary dance seen/defined in England and in America by those who are actively involved in it?

Q2. How is contemporary dance improvisation being practiced in each of these countries?

Q3. How is poetry used in the creation and performance of contemporary dance?

Q4. How do audiences receive/respond to this work?

Q5. How does cultural background affect audience perception?

The following section will further discuss contemporary dance improvisation, reviewing the literature that is presently available on the topic. The next chapter will provide an in-depth discussion of the research I conducted in America and England through interviews and other forms of personal study, answering research questions one through three. This informed my creative processes in which I produced a poetry collection and concert series, which will be detailed in Chapter 4. The audience feedback results presented in this section point to answers to research questions four and five. Subsequently, I will provide implications and limitations of the research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: DEFINING CONTEMPORARY DANCE IMPROVISATION

While not as frequently studied as the more prominent styles of ballet, jazz, and modern dance, the action of improvising has been “applied to virtually all art forms in the twentieth century and has had significant impact on the practices of the arts, including dance, theater, music, poetry, and performance art, as well as the visual arts” (Carter 181). Contemporary dance improvisation as a whole, unlike other genres of dance, does not have a distinct originator or beginning point. However, a specific method, contact improvisation, does have a definite founder\(^5\). The creation of contact improvisation is attributed to Steve Paxton, a professional dancer and choreographer of the late twentieth century. Paxton was inspired by a variety of sources that developed his attitudes toward dance and, eventually, his origination of contact improvisation. In 1961, Paxton joined the prestigious postmodern dance company of Merce Cunningham, known for producing “movement for movement’s sake,” and it was here that his views began to transform. He noticed that the prominent ballet companies of the time portrayed beauty in a very strict, rigid way, while Cunningham encouraged his dancers to believe that any movement could be seen as dance and that any body could be an “aesthetic conveyor” (Novack 53).

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\(^5\) Contact improvisation involves physical contact between two or more dancers while improvisation is taking place.
One of the many misunderstood aspects of this contemporary dance improvisation is the essence of its spontaneous quality. The idea of improvised dance, as Paxton depicted it, was a rejection of the “dictatorship” of the usual choreographic process in which choreographers present dancers with a series of movements to be reproduced. Steve Paxton argued that dancers executing choreography often look like “watered-down” versions of their teachers instead of themselves (Novack 54). Improvisation avoids this by giving dancers the chance to portray themselves in their own element, “able to fully respond to stimuli and [to] engage using one’s entire range of resources,” whereas choreography forces them to imitate the style and movement quality of another person (Long). This does help dancers develop the ability to learn quickly and pay attention to detail, but it does not allow for the growth of the individual artist. Constantly learning “repeatable sequences and pre-determined arrangements” will produce a good technical dancer, but not a true artist (Kloppenberg 181).

Cynthia Novack, dance anthropologist and author of Sharing the Dance, presented an article in which Paxton explained the cultural period of the 1960s and his aims to develop new types of social organization in dance:

Many social forms were used during the 1960s to accomplish dance. In ballet, the traditional courtly hierarchy continued. In modern dance…the same social form was used except magicians rather than monarchs held sway. Post-modern dancers…maintained alchemical dictatorships…. It is difficult to make the general public understand other systems, inundated as we are with the exploitation of personality and appearance in every aspect of theatre. (58-59)
With the beginning of contact improvisation, Paxton was trying to break this structure and create something that the dance world had not yet experienced. He achieved this in 1972 when contact improvisation began to be practiced widely by various groups of modern dancers as a social and artistic experiment that preserved the characteristics and values of the 1960s (Novack 62).

Ballet and modern, two prominent styles of professional concert dance, can both be compared to and contrasted with improvisational dance. Modern dance encompasses many elements that are found in contemporary dance improvisation, as it initially began as a renouncement of classical ballet techniques. The disinterest in beauty and elegance are very “modern” ideals and are also found in most improvisational dance. Modern dance is a more natural style to begin with, so the parallels between the two are to be expected. Kloppenberg points out that modern dancers have a “significant history of improvising” as it was a fundamental aspect of the Wigman technique, a modern dance technique based off of the movement style and teachings of German dance pioneer Mary Wigman (188). Classical ballet, on the other hand, draws fewer parallels. Classical ballet is formed around a strict set of rules, as it is comprised of five set positions and eight facings of the body, each of these having coordinating arm and head positions. These positions, along with a strict movement vocabulary and a pedagogical structure, make up classical ballet dance; within this genre, there are multiple techniques such as the Vaganova and Cecchetti methods, but they all still conform to the rules of ballet and produce variations of the same group of movements. Improvisation is the exact opposite: improvisational dancers constantly strive to discover movement in a fresh and new way.
Even with such distinct differences, one parallel can be drawn between these two styles: when dancing both ballet and improvisation, internal dialogue is constantly occurring within the dancer’s mind. Ballet dancers must continuously think about what muscles are executing movement; what position their head, arms, and legs are in; what direction their hips are facing; and what movement sequences come next. In improvisation, choreography must be generated in real-time, causing persistent, spontaneous creation to take place. A commonly used tool for dance improvisation is the “What if?” question. Dancers can ask themselves, “What if I do this? What if I do that? What if I do it again?” and immediately act upon their bodies’ physical responses to the questions simultaneous to the thought processes’ occurrence. With these questions, improvisational dancers are able to access their “tools,” or the techniques used in generating improvised movement. The use of these tools can help distinguish the successful, effective improvisation from the unsuccessful. Though improvisational dance is spontaneously created, it, like other dance styles, can be done poorly. According to Lisa Draskovich-Long, Assistant Professor of Dance at Western Kentucky University, teaching dancers to use their “tools while trying to remain open” is a practice that can virtually teach the act of improvisation to student dancers. Like the five positions and various facings a ballerina has to choose from, improvisational dancers can access their “tools” such as rhythm, contraction, inversion, levels, and tempo.

Dance teacher Lisa Thomas also uses a metaphorical “toolbox” through which dancers can assemble their technical tools of improvisation. In this toolbox, student dancers are taught to keep the “tools” that can be accessed while improvising to provide inspiration and guidance for impulsive, engaged movement. Thomas and Long agree that
dance improvisation is a technique in and of itself; it requires dancers to be completely present “in the moment with music, partners, and audience creating a [deep] relevance and resounding vibration” (Long). Both teachers observe that improvisation classes begin with more structure and guidance than they use in the end. This is the goal of the improvisation teacher: to teach students how to “manipulate and support each other” of their own accord and ultimately without the direction of the professor (Thomas 18).

Dance improvisation presents a different experience for each of its participants; its ambiguous quality gives all dancers and onlookers the freedom to interpret the art in their own individual way. The fact that it is both spontaneous and learned and is both a process and a product can be difficult for most non-dancers and even many dancers to grasp (Ribeiro and Fonseca 73). In an interview conducted in 2012, Sara Mearns of the New York City Ballet provided me with her insights into contemporary dance improvisation. When Sara graduated high school, she was accepted directly into the professional field and has since worked her way up to achieving principal status at this world-renowned ballet company. Even this ballerina, who has known nothing other than discipline and structure throughout her extensive dance training, had good things to say about contemporary dance improvisation:

Improvisational dance is when the person is dancing just for themselves… independent of life around them… completely absorbed in their being, in their soul. Undisturbed. I believe it brings a life, a passion, a purity, a deepness to your performance that no one else can produce except for you…. Your soul is only yours, and it is your job to explore, enrich, inspire it, in a way that no one else
can. When someone shows their true soul in their performance, [that] is when you will really change someone’s life. (Mearns)

Mearns confided her belief that it is her “passionate soul” that has gotten her to where she is today because she does not think that she has technical skill equivalent to her colleagues. In the interview’s close, Mearns expressed her gratitude for the questions that had been asked, as they allowed her to discover things about herself that she did not know were there. This demonstrates further the power of improvisation to provide people with unexpected, individual, and extremely beneficial experiences that can change the outlook on dance, on their career, and on life.

As previously mentioned, the most common use of improvisation in dance is for choreography, something which nearly all dancers will encounter at some point in their careers, be it in the schooling process, on the career path, or as a transitional occupation after retirement from dancing professionally. Through improvisation, choreographers strive to “discover something that could not be found in a systematic preconceived process. Improvisation is thus a means of assuring a constant source of fresh materials avoiding stagnation” (Carter 182). In Dance Improvisations, Cornell University Professor of Dance Joyce Morgenroth outlines structured improvisation as a method of merging this free creativity into a performable product (xiv). With structured improvisation, choreographers play the role of facilitator while dancers generate their own movements within the boundaries given to them.

Annie Kloppenberg, dance author and Assistant Professor of Dance at Colby University, describes this process of creating structured improvisation in another way, terming it “post-control” choreography. This is a process in which the choreographer and
the dancers work together through the use of improvisation to create choreography for a piece. Kloppenberg explains, “A choreographer makes choices that mold a particular experience, while dancers make improvisational movement choices about how to engage within those frameworks” (189). This technique of using dance improvisation is beneficial for all participants: dancers are able to express themselves freely through improvisation and choreographers have the opportunity to observe the artistry of their dancers and to shape it into a final product that is a shared creative experience.

As a tool, not to mention one which is accompanied by its own toolbox, improvisational dance serves many purposes that benefit both dancers and non-dancers alike. It is human nature to have to improvise in many situations, and the practice of fueling this skill in an artistic way helps develop it in a more diverse setting than that of everyday life. While views on the dance form differ from person to person and the techniques of teaching and learning improvisation clash with more structured styles, the therapeutic qualities and the complete freedom of being present in the moment while creating beautiful, captivating art are unparalleled. As a subgenre of contemporary dance, improvisation provides all participants with aesthetic experiences that no other dance techniques can offer.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCHING CONTEMPORARY DANCE IMPROVISATION IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA

Data Collection

Methodology

Before beginning this research project, my only experience studying dance improvisation had been under the direction of Assistant Professor Draskovich-Long in her Modern Dance Improvisation course. In this course, we spent a semester learning the tools necessary for successful improvisation and working on becoming more confident and comfortable with the often intimidating art. Prior to taking this class, I had participated and performed in Professor Long’s structured improvisation, “Zavicaj,” a dance installation with Japanese Butoh influences.\(^6\) It was at this time that I began to feel drawn to contemporary styles of dance improvisation. I was surprised then that I, as a dancer who had been training for over a decade, had been so unaware of such an expansive genre within the discipline. This made the decision to embark upon this expansive research project even more compelling to me.

\(^6\) Butoh, a “non-codified form of dance, pioneered in Japan by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno after WWII,” is unique not only in its “meditative quality, but also [in] the invitation it extends to the audience to become a participant rather than a mere spectator” (Long, Au 198).
After having reviewed the available literature about contemporary dance improvisation, I set out to experience it in action in both England and America, further expanding my own personal knowledge of and experience with it. In an attempt to define contemporary dance, to discover the role that improvisation plays within it, and to learn how poetry might be used by dance artists today, I conducted a series of interviews and other personal research in both countries. Because the field of dance is so vast and is being practiced on so many levels by multiple parties with varying expertise, it is difficult to determine who is and who is not an expert, especially when dealing with such an ephemeral subgenre like contemporary dance improvisation. To combat this, I made a point to interview individuals with varying levels of experience in different areas, and I attended classes and performances of varying levels. This helped me to attain a more well-rounded perspective, and it allowed me to gain access to people’s opinions that had been formed from a variety of backgrounds.

I conducted eight interviews with dance professionals from the United States and six with professionals from the United Kingdom. Of the American sample, two had done extensive work in both countries and spoke to both cultures and bodies of work. Similarly, three of the British interviewees had career experience in both Britain and America. I gathered these perspectives in order to ascertain where English and American contemporary dance improvisation stands according to those who have a stake in it. I also took classes, attended workshops, and saw performances of multiple contemporary styles in both Britain and America, some with and some without improvisation. By studying each of these styles, I have been able to observe the way contemporary dance improvisation is, and is not, portrayed in each country. For the purposes of this project, I
took four different dance technique classes in England (one of which was repeated on multiple occasions), and attended/participated in ten different performances of either classically staged dance performance or installation of some sort. In the USA, I attended/participated in six performances and nine classes/workshops either on singular or recurring occasions.

*Interviews and Personal Study of the United States*

One of the most compelling interviews I conducted was with Laura Karlin, artistic director, choreographer, and active company member of Invertigo Dance Theatre. The company is based in Culver City, California, but Karlin was actually able to give me her views on contemporary dance in both Britain and America. This Cornell scholar was born a British citizen and moved to America as an adolescent. She has split much of her adult life between the two countries, studying and producing dance all the while. When I asked Karlin to speak about one or the other, she claimed that she could not really separate them because her “perspective is really wrapped up in having developed in both.” This background made her the perfect authority on this research in my eyes, but like most contributors to the arts, she felt as though she was still not informed enough to answer many of my questions. Even as a professional of this caliber, she explained that she could only give her perspectives on what she had seen and experienced through her own research. I found this to be a trend among most of the people I interviewed, thus reinforcing the idea of the “expert” being an elusive one.

The first experience I had with American contemporary dance improvisation outside of Kentucky was in an HOURGLASS workshop/production in Indianapolis, Indiana. This “multidimensional concept piece” is initiated by the performance of a long-
form musical composition by renowned violinist and composer Dr. Robin Cox. With this, dancer Stephanie Nugent guides participants through movement and orientation into the concept, while video projections commissioned for the event play in the background. Dancers and non-dancers alike are invited into the space to move together for the span of an hour, choosing whether to participate by dancing or by observing from the perimeters, or some combination of the two. This was the first organized “improv jam” that I had attended, and afterwards, I was extremely inspired by the concept.

Figure 3.1. Dancers in HOURGLASS Workshop.

In Los Angeles, I attended a Soul Motion class taught by Donna Gunther. This was conducted with an “improv jam” feel in a similar way to the HOURGLASS event, but there was a very different dynamic—a more “Californian vibe.” I learned after participating in the workshop that the Soul Motion Conscious Dance Practice is another technique that has developed out of improvisation, and it is codified in a sense that
describes the tools of improvisation in a uniform way: “In a Soul Motion class, the dancer moves through four relational landscapes [Dance Intimate, Dance Communion, Dance Community, and Dance Infinity], using three core movement platforms [Pause Presence, Orbit Orientation, and Echo Inspiration]” (Soul Motion). Each of these terms describes the journey a dancer takes through an improv session when participating in a group and labels the levels the dancers can relate to one another as well as the types of activity they might encounter.

I had the opportunity to take company classes in Los Angeles that also centered on a theme of improvisatory dance; however, these classes were founded in significantly different dance styles themselves. I was incredibly lucky to have the chance to take a Gaga class with the ate9 dANCEcOMPANY alongside artistic director Danielle Agami. This was by far my favorite class of this entire project, as it seemed to take my favorite aspects of modern dance and contemporary dance improvisation and fuse them together into one class.

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7 It is customary for smaller dance companies to open their company classes to the dance community at least once or twice a month in order to increase interest in their company, to raise funds, and to give dancers a chance to work with their style. These are the technical warm-up classes that company dancers take before their rehearsals each day.

8 The Gaga style originated in Israel with the Batsheva Dance Company, which was a daughter company of Martha Graham, the so-called mother of modern dance. Gaga is a very progressive contemporary dance style that does not emphasize a dancer’s technical skills as much classical ballet does. Much of the choreography is created with the “post-control” technique; in rehearsal, Agami improvises and her dancers pick up whatever they can. Then, the rest of the choreography comes through group improvisation.
Since it was within the company’s Gaga style, it had a clear structure and progression throughout the hour that mirrored that of a ballet or a jazz dance technique class; it began with a *plié* exercise, moved to a *tendu* exercise, incorporated floor work and stretching/conditioning, and concluded with large jumps and other locomotive movements.\(^9\) However, each exercise was infused with an improvisatory idea to keep dancers moving in their own ways. Thus, instead of the class consisting of lines of dancers all executing the exact same movements, we were a circle of artists doing *tendu* with the same rhythm but in different directions and varying movements with the upper body, for example. At the end of this class, I had the opportunity to stay and observe the company’s rehearsal, which showcased their Gaga repertoire. In their rehearsal of a site-

\(^9\) In French, *plié* means “to bend” and *tendu* means “to stretch.” These two movements are typically exercised in the beginning of a ballet class when following the proper pedagogical structure. It is also typical in a jazz class to spend time during the warm-up with conditioning exercises on the floor. Both ballet and jazz classes often work up to large jumps across the floor.
specific dance installation and a piece designed for a concert stage, I was able to see how Agami’s beautiful improvisation translated into their choreography.

At the National Dance Education Organization’s 16th Annual National Conference in Chicago, I took three more classes in various styles of contemporary dance improvisation, along with Dr. Babcock’s previously mentioned session on poetry and dance. Daniel Reichert, a certified Laban Movement Analyst, taught a contemporary dance improvisation class on the use of negative space in partner work through the use of concepts from the Brazilian dance and martial art Capoeira to create exercises that built upon each other with the intent of working up to a final goal exercise. In another workshop, professional musician and dancer Monica Dale fostered an environment that allowed dancers to learn Eurhythmics using contemporary dance improvisation. The last, and perhaps the most invigorating class I took at the NDEO Conference was an InterPlay Sampler led by Diane Rawlinson, a Dance Education specialist. With each of these classes, I attempted to obtain a wider array of knowledge about how contemporary dance improvisation is being taught, practiced, and received here in America. However, none of these classes could accurately depict for me what was being done on stage and in the public eye, which is ultimately what audiences are exposed to.

With this in mind, I made a point to see as many performances by contemporary and modern companies as possible. This proved to be a more difficult task, possibly due to my geographical location in the southern United States, versus the varied locations of

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10 This physical and rhythmical institute was termed Eurhythmics by Emile Jaques-Dalcroze and has been utilized by a number of influential modern dancers and choreographers such as Martha Graham, Jose Limon, Ruth St. Denis, and Ted Shawn.

11 According to Rawlinson, “InterPlay is an active, creative approach to unlocking the wisdom of the body and differs from traditional improvisational approaches as the end goal is to celebrate who we are and what we bring to the experience. It is based in a series of incremental ‘forms’ that lead participants to movement and stories, silence and song, ease and amusement” (75).
the more prominent contemporary companies. Nonetheless, I was able to experience a range of companies that displayed a range of styles. For my Honors Jazz Dance course here at WKU, I had the privilege of seeing the contemporary company River North Dance Chicago, directed by Frank Chaves, along with two modern companies, Paul Taylor and Alvin Ailey’s second company, Ailey II. River North brought a variety of styles to the stage, while Paul Taylor and Ailey II performed a more recognizable modern dance repertoire. Conversely, I saw two performances by contemporary ballet companies. The first was via an Honors Ballet trip to see the highly-renowned Complexions Contemporary Ballet under the artistic direction of Desmond Richardson. This company practices an incredibly athletic style of contemporary ballet that both adheres to the technique and breaks outside of the boundaries. The second was Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, a New York-based company that I saw at Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London while I was studying in England.

In a post-show talk after the company’s performance of their diversely choreographed and dynamic Triple Bill, an audience member brought up the question of why the company’s name still held the “Contemporary Ballet” distinction when their choreography no longer resembled a strictly balletic style. The interim artistic director Alexandra Damiani admitted that she herself was still trying to discern the meaning of contemporary dance; she argued that the word ‘contemporary’ is used to describe the happenings of the “here and now.” Part of this difficulty is the fact that it is an attempt to name and define something as it is taking place. It is difficult to assign meaning to something as it is being done because it is still highly dynamic and evolving.
Interviews and Personal Study of the United Kingdom

On the opposite side of the spectrum, and the opposite side of the world, I had fantastic opportunities to interview and connect with various dance artists and contributors in England. The theatrical contemporary ballet Chantry Dance Company was the first group of artists with whom I found my place, and it was with them that this project found its beginning. During my time studying at Harlaxton College, I frequented the company’s home studio and developed close friendships with the co-artistic directors, Paul Chantry and Rae Piper, as well as the dancers Oliver Freeston and David Beer. Along with sharing their thoughts on dance improvisation, Chantry and Piper provided insight into their various choreographic processes and views on the state of contemporary dance and contemporary dance improvisation in Great Britain. Chantry Dancers Oliver Freeston and David Beer had both danced professionally in the United States as well as in the United Kingdom, so they were more than happy to offer their perspectives on contemporary dance in both countries. They both agreed that from their experiences dancing in America, it seemed as though contemporary dance in the United States was “stuck in the nineties.” This striking conclusion turned into a focal point for much of my research.

While I was abroad, I had made it a personal goal to seek out opportunities to dance as often as I could, which I was doing with the Chantry Dance Company and when I traveled to London. As a poet, I had also made it a personal goal to spend time writing in a different location in the manor or on the grounds each day. When I learned of the number of other student poets and fiction writers in my class, I invited them to join me. What began as a seedling of an idea ultimately blossomed into a weekly writing group.
that organized and performed in four creative writing showcase events throughout the semester. We met everywhere from the manor’s state rooms to coffee shops in Oxford, and I feel that many of us grew significantly as writers during this time. I encouraged students to use the place and whatever emotions it evoked in them as their prompts, much as one would do with site-specific or site-inspired dance (Kloetzel 13). It was in these workshops that I wrote much of the poetry included in the collection that will be discussed in Chapter Four.

At the end of the semester, I worked with the Chantry Dance Company to produce a collaborative artistic performance titled *Creative Conversations*. In what turned out to be an extremely successful show performed by students from across the United States along with guests Paul Chantry and Rae Piper, artistry from multiple creative genres was showcased; poets, fiction writers, dancers, and musicians each brought a different dynamic to the stage. I invited both previously written work and improvised work to be performed. I worked to pair artists up with others outside of their discipline in order to create a more collaborative project, assigning dancers to poets or musicians, and in some cases, creating trios where music, spoken word, and improvised dance all existed together on the stage. Due to participants’ busy schedules, especially those of the Chantry dancers, we were unable to gather together for a technical rehearsal of any sort before the show. Some individual groups rehearsed on their own, but many of the pieces were performed in true improvisatory spirit; Chantry and Piper often met their musicians and poets for the first time on the stage. Presenting this type of raw-artistry had its risks, but the odds were in our favor that night. The program was performed beautifully by all and left the 160-person audience impressed and entertained.
Of the sixteen pieces included in the show, eight were comprised of either original poetry or original/improvised music and dance. One of the pieces I organized put a commonly utilized improvisation exercise— one in which random words or phrases are spoken as prompts for dancers’ movement— on the stage in its raw and instantaneous form in an attempt to display exactly how dancers must be fully present in contemporary dance improvisation. Instead of giving my own prompts, I asked the audience for suggestions, much like Diane Rawlinson did in her InterPlay sampler. This allowed for a feeling of involvement and connectivity that was enjoyed by all. I tried to keep up this connection between audience and performer throughout the show; the poetry presented as the “music” for the improvised dance duet “Geppetto” and “Pinocchio,” or “Like a Puppet” and “To its Master,” was easily relatable to those in the audience due to subject matter and setting. The show’s finale, “Creative Conversations,” was a group performance of both music and dance in which Paul Chantry and Rae Piper danced alongside and the other student participants and me, utilizing Soul Motion’s “dance communion.” I conducted this in the form of a traditional “improv circle” where dancers could enter and exit the center of the circle, the performance space, as they pleased or as invited by the other dancers because I found that this was how the English Chantry dancers were most comfortable conducting group improvisation.
Figure 3.3. *Creative Conversations* Concert Poster.

Figure 3.4. Kirstin Etheridge, Jade Primicias, Rae Piper, and Mallory Schnell in *Creative Conversations.*
Figure 3.5. Eastern Illinois University Student Ethan Kinsella on guitar.

Figure 3.6. Rae Piper and Paul Chantry in “Gepetto and Pinocchio.”
Also through my interactions with the Chantry Dance Company, I was led to meet Amy Dalton of ArtsNK in Linclon, England. She provided her insights into the state of contemporary dance and contemporary dance improvisation from the perspective of both a freelance dance artist and active community dance administrator. Dalton finds that “the power of improvisation can lead to imaginative, inspired and creative new material, whatever the stimulus, and can utilize the dancers’ own backgrounds and personal movement styles, informing new work.” In addition to these fruitful interviews and performance experiences, I had the opportunity to see five live performances, to take four styles of contemporary dance classes, to experience two dance installations, and to participate in one group improvisation performance. This diverse grouping encompassed everything from contemporary ballet to film installations, so I was able to explore the use of contemporary dance improvisation within a wide range of styles despite the small
sample size. Because I was unable to find many examples of contemporary dance improvisation in performance, it was important that I research contemporary dance in general along with its other subgenres to see what was being performed, if contemporary dance improvisation was not. The live performances I saw exemplified this factor, the first of which was the most classical yet perhaps the most groundbreaking of them all.

Matthew Bourne’s *Swan Lake* is a ballet that reimagines the original by reversing gender roles—it recreates the delicate image of the classical ballet by famously featuring male swans instead of women in pointe shoes and tutus. Though this full-length ballet does not necessarily fit the description of contemporary dance, and definitely does not display improvisation, it does play a crucial role in the history of contemporary ballet in Great Britain. Another historically resonant company I saw perform was Ballet Rambert, the company began by former ballerina Marie Rambert in 1966 as the first contemporary dance company in England. The third professional company I had the opportunity to see was the dance theatre ensemble Motionhouse. By utilizing impressive set props and interactive film, this company exemplified the meaning of dance theatre, uniting “genuine dance and theatrical methods of stage performance, creating a new, unique dance form” (Servos).
Figure 3.8. Alasdair Stewart and Olivia Quayle in Motionhouse’s *Scattered*.

Figure 3.9. Laura Peña Nuñez and Alasdair Stewart in Motionhouse’s *Scattered*.
The performances with which I became the most familiar were those of the Chantry Dance Company during the premier of their *Out of Bounds* tour. During my time abroad, I observed many of their rehearsals and attended their concert at the Guildhall Arts Centre in Grantham. Two of the pieces were ensemble ballets of a contemporary nature; “Ad Fidem” was based on Chantry’s original poetry about hope and a journey to faith. This was the first encounter I had had with poetry and dance by an English artist, and it was very inspiring to be able to witness its rehearsal and production process in such an intimate setting. Chantry’s poem was never made available to me as an audience member, but the journey was made clear by the choreography in the piece. Poetic symbols of restriction and boundaries were directly translated onto the stage through belts and a barbed-wire boundary line set up downstage.

![Image of Chantry Dance Company rehearsing “Ad Fidem.”](image)

The second group piece, “All I Can Do Is Be Me,” was a “spirited and joyful ballet celebrating the search for freedom through the music of Bob Dylan” (*Out of...*)
I especially enjoyed this piece as it told the story of a group of characters through his music and their beautifully abstract movements that Chantry explained were developed through contact improvisation. “Singing Day,” a solo performed by Rae Piper, was another piece that utilized abstractions “in a thing less defined, less delineated, and more true to life,” much like poetry itself (Out of Bounds). The final piece in the quartet was the most theatrical, the most contemporary, and the least balletic of them all. The comedic duet entitled “404-Not Found” illustrated the relationship of actress Hannah Lee and Paul Chantry, who danced and acted the silent role of The Internet. This was a true piece of dance theatre in that it utilized just as much acting as dancing, and it told an expressionistic story about its characters.

Figure 3.11. Paul Chantry in “404-Not Found.”
When I wasn’t taking class with the Chantry dancers, I took advantage of my close proximity to London and the multitudes of open dance classes offered there. The classical and Russian ballet classes I took there were similar to those I had taken in America, as ballet has a universal language and pedagogical structure, as I have mentioned before. The first class I took was a beginner/intermediate level Contemporary class with Stuart Thomas; however, it felt to me like an introductory modern dance class with multiple Graham-based elements. On another occasion, I took a Horton technique class with David Blake. I was somewhat surprised to see these strictly modern technique classes listed in the Jazz/Contemporary category in the studio’s class listings; yet, it occurred to me that the studio simply did not have a “Modern” category. These classes deemed “contemporary” in England, almost exactly matched the many modern dance classes I had grown accustomed to in America.

The only contemporary class I took at Danceworks that did not resemble a modern technique was one entitled “New York Contemporary” taught by London dancer Rosina Andrews. Andrews trained in New York at Broadway Dance Centre and the Ailey School for a year (Danceworks). This class resembled the commercialized contemporary style that is often seen in youth and teen dance competitions as well as on the popular television show So You Think You Can Dance rather than the more advanced,

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12 Danceworks is one of the largest and most famous open studios in London, comparable to New York City’s Broadway Dance Centre, and I took class there on multiple occasions.
13 Martha Graham’s modern dance technique involves contraction and release, along with utilizing opposition to create a spiral-like shape in the upper body/spine. These organic movements were developed in direct opposition to the straight body alignment of ballet dance.
14 Lester Horton’s technique focuses on creating lines with the body and strengthening dancers both physically and artistically. Movements characteristic to this technique are rolling down with the body, flat back executions, squats, lateral isolations, and leg swings. A great deal of control and focus is required.
professional contemporary dance that is being done around the world. Nonetheless, it was interesting to experience a British dancer’s take on the jazzy American style. A small amount of improvisation was encouraged at the beginning of the combination we learned in this class as a lead-in transition for the choreography. This is sometimes seen in American jazz and modern dance classes as well. Taking these classes helped to make me aware of what styles of contemporary dance are being taught in England, though I was surprised to encounter these older American styles rather than the more avant-garde artistry I had expected.

The main source of experience with contemporary dance improvisation I encountered during this portion of the project was through a Dance Umbrella event in a performance titled “Mixed Movement.” This event featured two musicians who improvised with digital sound equipment and other instruments along with seven professional dance artists from multiple styles. This was perhaps the highlight of my research in London; not only did I have the chance to watch professional dancers and musicians improvise together on the stage, but I also was invited onto the stage to join in with the talented group of artists. This was similar to HOURGLASS in the USA, but it had a clearer sense of performance and structure that transitioned from each segment to the next. This “open-mic” event started out of frustration at “the lack of spontaneous opportunities for performance and the segmentation of various dance communities” in New York by Baba Israel and poet Dawn Crandell (Dance Umbrella).

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15 On this program, dancers of varying styles learn choreography to be performed each week in competition. Celebrity judges give comments and viewers vote for their favorite contestants. Styles such as hip-hop, ballroom, and flashy contemporary dance are featured.

16 Founded in 1978, Dance Umbrella is still one of London’s premier dance festivals. Artistic director Betsy Gregory explained in an interview that she seeks out fresh, new dance to display in the weekend-long events.
Figure 3.12. “Mixed Movement” at Stratford Circus.

The performance began with improvised solos, as with Soul Motion’s “dance intimate”; moved into duets and trios, or “dance communion”; and concluded with a large improv jam in which audience members like myself took to the stage and danced together as one—“dance community.” This was the most invigorating portion of my research, and it functioned as a summary of all of my experiences in one setting. I observed professionals perform dance improvisation from their own contemporary genres, spanning from hip-hop to contemporary to classical ballet; I watched them fuse the genres together and explore the movement possibilities available there, and then I joined them in my own personal research journey while connecting with them on theirs.

Results of Preliminary Research

The expansive preliminary research I conducted in both countries of study helped me begin to answer my first three research questions regarding the state of contemporary dance and improvisation in England and America:
Q1. How is contemporary dance seen/defined in England and in America by those who are actively involved in it?

Q2. How is contemporary dance improvisation being practiced in each of these countries?

Q3. How is poetry used in the creation and performance of contemporary dance?

In both America and England, contemporary dance seems to exist as an umbrella term for multiple styles of dance within another contemporary distinction, such as dance installation, dance theatre, and site-specific dance. Dance installation is present in both countries, but in varied ways. In America, much of the installation that is seen as dance still involves human subjects, such as with ate9 dANSEcOMPANY and Lisa Draskovich-Long’s “Zavicaj,” but in England, mediums of art and film can be considered dance, as with Straybird’s mobile installation, for example, which adapted an RV into a mobile production of dance film, postcards, and other “stray gifts” (Straybird). Dance theatre is also present in both nations, but it still displays a subtle distinction.

In England, the European “tanztheatre” is more at play than it is in America. Some of the American dancers and professionals I interviewed who had not done work in the UK were still confused as to what I meant when I mentioned dance theatre and installation, while the British dancers had more distinct definitions in mind. Both countries seem to include these styles, along with site-specific dance and contemporary dance improvisation, in their collective depictions of contemporary dance; though, Americans separate modern dance into its own category in a way that the English appear not to do. Site-specific dance holds a place in the contemporary dance scene of both nations, also under the umbrella term of contemporary dance. However, I learned that
even though it has been prominent and successful for such a long time, not all dance artists are aware of or open to it.

There seems to be a perception of site-specific dance that classifies it as a less-valid form of performance, similar to contemporary dance improvisation, due to its absence from the concert stage. Betsy Gregory and Stephan Koplowitz are both renowned site-specific dance artists and have been making work in both countries for three decades. Laura Karlin recently commissioned a site-inspired work with the Invertigo Dance Theatre entitled “After It Happened” that earned them the ranking of Los Angeles’ Number One Contemporary Company, though this was performed on the concert stage (Haskins).

I found, as suggested by the literature I reviewed, that improvisation can be used as a tool for contemporary choreography in both Britain and America, but it is not commonly seen in performance. Most choreographers utilize improvisation for the generation of material on their own bodies, but it is rare that this original movement stays constant in the transfer from choreographer to dancer. For example, Danielle Agami improvises for her dancers in rehearsals, and then they try to imitate her movement as closely as they can. The Gaga style lends to this type of choreographic process, while many other American contemporary dance companies, such as Paul Taylor Dance Company and Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, create movement with more technical structure.

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17 Choreographers are also referred to as dance-makers, and the act of choreography is also referred to as dance-making. It is common to discuss the choreography and production of dance performance in this way, as an artist making work.
Unlike with the ate9 dANCEcOMPANY in Los Angeles, the Chantry Dance Company claimed to use mostly contact improvisation for the formulation of new work. Paul choreographed individual movements for the *Out of Bounds* tour on his own body and used contact improvisation within the company to create the many beautiful lifts that were included in their show. The improvisation performance in London, *Mixed Movement*, was made up of a number of British artists and was commissioned by a London dance organization, but it was initially begun in New York City. HOURGLASS by Robin Cox and Stephanie Nugent also began in the United States. When practicing contact improvisation in both settings, I found that dancers were open and able to respond to each other. This led me to believe that some of the tools of contact improvisation, such as the use of negative space as discussed by Daniel Reichert in his NDEO Conference presentation, are universally practiced.

I learned that in both countries, most contemporary dance artists come from backgrounds in ballet and/or modern technique, and that many of the dance conservatories in each country offer dance improvisation as a technical course of study for these highly trained dancers. Sarah Lyman attended the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance, where she would regularly be required to attend four-hour-long improvisations. This situation was also true for English dancers David Beer and Amy Dalton, who attended the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London. In England, this level of improvisation seems to be practiced mostly in conservatories and universities rather than in open studios. While conservatories in the United States also include improvisation, there are schools of thought such as Soul Motion and InterPlay that practice improvisation in more accessible ways.
One of the research questions I asked each of my subjects was in regards to poetry in dance, with my own creative aspirations in mind. Poetry is used as a source of inspiration for many choreographers across both the United States and England, but it is usually not present on the stage. Out of all of my interviews, Eric Rivera, Assistant Professor of Dance at WKU and former member of professional company Ballet Hispanico; Stephan Koplowitz, Dean of Dance at CalArts; and Paul Chantry were the only sources to provide their experience with the topic. Eric Rivera commissioned a ballet in 2014 celebrating the life and works of Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos entitled “Yo Soy La Vida, La Fuerza Mujer.” He explained to me that his choreographic process included extensive research into the life of the poet as well as into the body of her work. He displayed themes and subject matter that the poet dealt with in his ballet while simultaneously making a statement about cultural identity. He used symbolism and rhythm to reflect the poetic elements through his choreography. Similarly, Paul Chantry molded his piece “Ad Fidem” from his own poetry regarding religious journeys. The piece told the same story that the poems did without presenting the text for audiences to experience.

Stephan Koplowitz has also done a large amount of work with poetry; in one of his Task Force projects, he commissioned a poet to write a poem inspired by a site that he was working with. The poem then inspired the site-specific dance, but again, was not present in the performance in its literal form. During his interview, Koplowitz discussed with me the many techniques of using poetry in dance. He explained how dancers and choreographers can take the essence of the poem’s figurative language and translate it into the dance, much like Dr. Babcock discussed in her session at the NDEO conference.
According to Koplowitz, the process of choreographing dance directly to poetry is a tedious one. Audiences can interpret poetry in a variety of ways, and the same goes for dance. Taking the rhythm directly from poem and setting it into a dance, for example, can often limit the creativity of the choreographer, which is unnecessary. Among writers, it is commonly encouraged to first learn the rules of language and then to break them; this is quite similar to the contemporary, postmodern, and modern dance movements. They are techniques that have grown out of others and were formed by the breaking of the rules that came before them. This similarity in the process of both creative faculties formed the perfect combination in my mind, leading me to create my own body of work, guiding dancers to translate my own poetry into movement (Babcock 80).
CHAPTER 4

SURVEYING AUDIENCE PERCEPTION AS AFFECTED BY CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Data Collection

Methodology

Learning the perspectives of various dance artists in both the United States and in England as well as witnessing firsthand various styles of contemporary dance and contemporary dance improvisation influenced my own creative work in both theory and practice. As an artist, life experiences constantly contribute to my creative process, and the nuggets of inspiration I gathered throughout my studies informed and inspired my own body of work. As Stephan Koplowitz, Paul Chantry, and Eric Rivera taught me, poetry can often be used as a tool for choreographers. However, the manner in which I chose to create and combine it is not so frequently seen. For this project, the inspiration for my creative work came from my studies abroad and from the many lenses through which I viewed the world as an American poet, dancer, student, traveler, choreographer, and writer.

For this portion of the study, I created and produced one book of poetry and two concerts of collaborative performance art. Each creative work is tied to the next in this
collection, but they can each also stand alone. This multi-genre collaboration ventures in
the way of dance fusion, though instead of fusing two genres of dance, I have merged two
different creative platforms entirely.\footnote{Dance fusion is an emerging style of performance wherein different styles of dance are merged. For example, the fusion of ballet and hip-hop dance is now being seen in performance.} My goal in conceptualizing this type of medium for the stage was threefold: I wanted to test my limits as a poet, as a choreographer, and as a researcher; I wanted to introduce dancers to concepts that were either out of their comfort zones or completely foreign to them in order to expand their artistic capacities and encourage personal research; and I wanted to expose audiences to a work of art that might open their eyes to newer styles of creative expression, fostering excitement and/or a greater appreciation for the arts within them.

Because I drew from my experiences in both Britain and America and created the dance and poetry with inspiration from both cultures, I was interested in knowing how audiences from different cultural backgrounds received it. In order to discover this, I held talkbacks and conducted audience surveys at the conclusion of the two concerts entitled \textit{Whispering: The Sounds of St. Paul’s}. Audiences were asked to fill out an Audience Feedback Survey (Figures 4.1 and 4.2) after watching four pieces: \textit{Magpasiya}, \textit{Souls of St. Paul’s}, \textit{Strangers in the Dome}, and \textit{Beauty Lies}. As an incentive for audience members to stay through the end of the show for the talk-back, and as encouragement for them to fill out the survey, I held a raffle in which a participant drawn at random from the collection of completed surveys would win a concert poster signed by the cast along with a box of chocolates. After both concerts in the series were complete, I synthesized the data provided in the audience surveys, finding themes and gathering statistics based on answers to the questions below.
**Audience Feedback Survey for Whispering: The Sounds of St. Paul's**

Thank you for attending and participating in this survey. Your feedback is crucial to my research and your time is greatly appreciated. Your responses will be compared to those of the country opposite in order for me to draw conclusions on how cultural background may affect people's perception of the dance that they see.

Name (optional)  Country of Residence

Please briefly describe your experience with/connection to dance:

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<th>Which was your favorite piece? (Circle one or more)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Souls of St. Paul's (trio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty Lies (duet)</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What was your least favorite piece? (Circle one or more)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Souls of St. Paul's (trio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty Lies (duet)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you answered “None” to either of the above questions, please explain why:

Did you feel as though each of the pieces you saw were easy to follow, interpret, or understand? Why or why not?

Were there any aspects of the concert that you felt spoke to you culturally?

Were there any aspects of the concert that you felt unable to relate to?

Had you ever encountered anything like this before? If so, please provide details.
Figure 4.2. Audience Feedback Survey, back.

Please provide a detail or two of each piece that stood out to you:

*Magpasiya* (solo)

*Souls of St. Paul’s* (trio)

*Strangers in the Dome* (large group)

*Beauty Lies* (duet)

Please give your thoughts on the use of *poetry* in the concert. Was it interesting, did it get in the way of the dance, did it work well together, etc.?

All pieces (except for the solo, *Magpasiya*) were structured improvisations as opposed to strict choreography. Now that you’ve witnessed it, what are your thoughts toward *improvisation for performance*?

The middle two pieces, *Souls of St. Paul’s* and *Strangers in the Dome* were inspired by St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. Have you ever been to St. Paul’s? If so, did you feel that these pieces evoked the essence of the Cathedral in any way? If you haven’t been, did it remind you of anywhere similar that you have been?

How likely are you to seek out more opportunities like this in the future?

Not Likely - Moderately Likely - Highly Likely

Please list any additional comments here. Thank you!
Creative Works and Processes

Strangers in the Dome

As I mentioned in Chapter Three, I spent time writing my own poetry during my semester abroad. Because I made it a point to use my surroundings and my experiences as prompts during the Harlaxton Writers sessions, I had several poems that related to one another in this way at the conclusion of the semester. These poems dealt with subjects such as memorable moments from trips I had taken and emotional connections made to places via the people I was with or the relationship I was upholding. When I took a trip to St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, I sensed that I would soon have many more poems to add to this collection. The Whispering Gallery of St. Paul’s ended up being a great source of inspiration and a central theme for this book of poetry and for the subsequent concert series. When I sat on the stone bench surrounded by people of many different cultures, nationalities, and walks of life, I was enamored with the beauty of it all. The grandeur of the church is almost overwhelming, and the fact that hundreds of people from all over the world go there to visit and experience it each day simply astounded me. I was drawn to the thought that even though each person had an individual story and an individual agenda, we were all brought together there for similar reasons.

This poetry collection is broken into four parts, organized by the subjects dealt with in each section: “Introductory Poems,” “The Wanderer,” “The Strangers,” and “The Dancer.” The introductory poems situate the reader in the heart of the Cathedral, preparing audiences to embark upon a journey into St. Paul’s. “The Wanderer” and “The Dancer” are both told from my own perspective, both as a traveler and as a performer.

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19 See Appendix A.
Poems in “The Strangers” deal with different characters, either real or imagined, that I encountered in the Cathedral and during my time abroad. My intentions for this particular collection of poetry were threefold: I wanted to capture the essence of the Cathedral and the people in it, I wanted to discover their purposes for being there, along with attempting to examine my own, and I wanted to create a foundation for my next creative endeavor, the corresponding concert series. A crucial stage of this creative process was the revision. Much of the poetry I had written had been inspired by different people and places in England, making much of the language and content specific to those sites. When I returned to WKU, I workedshopped these poems with my fellow poets in the English department’s Creative Writing Capstone course, along with an Honors Directed Writing course led by Professor Mary Ellen Miller, a celebrated poet and my longtime mentor. Professor Miller especially helped in the process of revising these poems and organizing them into a cohesive collection, or chapbook, for future publication.

*Whispering: The Sounds of St. Paul’s*

The concepts I focused on in my poetry were further developed for audiences on stage through a fusion of poetry and contemporary dance performance. The concert featured the same five pieces in both countries but was performed by different casts. In England, two young British dancers performed alongside WKU Theatre & Dance Senior Fiona Mowbray and me in three pieces of structured improvisation. Two video projections were aired, showing audiences the remaining two pieces from previous

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20 A chapbook is a collection of poetry that is known for being shorter than a full-length book. The poems in this sort of collection tend to center on a single subject or theme.

21 See Appendices B (also available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5USUhOV-WGtMVFCsMdWtETPtM8/view?usp=sharing) and C (also available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1LLg8ZhcSaEdkM0V2w1WkVIQVU/view?usp=sharing).
performances. At WKU, a cast of fifteen dance majors and minors performed three structured improvisations and one choreographed solo, and a video projection of the final piece from the concert in England was shown. At the end of the concert in England, I took the stage for a talkback with audience members, and three dancers joined me for the same in the American version of the concert. This portion of the concert series was important in that it allowed me to personally discuss with audience members their concerns, allay their confusion, and explain the wider scope of my project and research purposes.

Figure 4.3. UK Concert Poster
The process of creating and producing this two-part concert series has been incredibly rewarding, and I am extremely grateful for having had the opportunity. *Whispering: The Sounds of St. Paul’s* was performed in Grantham, UK at the Guildhall Arts Centre on Saturday, 17 January 2015, and again at Western Kentucky University’s Gordon Wilson Lab Theatre on Saturday, 14 February 2015.

**Souls of St. Paul’s**

This piece opened the concert in England and was second in the program at WKU. The piece was originally performed by American dance students Fiona Mowbray, Alex Tucker, and Miriam Gaines at the 2014 Kentucky Honors Roundtable at WKU, and
was performed again by these three dancers in the American version of this concert. However, in England, I adapted the piece from a trio to a duet performed by Fiona Mowbray and myself in order to accommodate the varying skill levels we had in our British cast. The title of the piece hints at its intent; the three dancers and subsequently the three main sections of the piece symbolize what I have deemed the pillars of St. Paul’s: religious reverence, military strength, and cultural identity. The Cathedral was a major topic of focus in the British Studies course at Harlaxton College, due to the above factors. It represents each of these three things for England in a major way. Thus, I assigned each dancer in the trio a role according to these symbolic pillars. In this way, the “souls” of the characters they played were connected to their individual pillar with meaning taken from both their individual lives and from the greater picture. The three introductory poems from the poetry collection loosely represent these three pillars, as do the dancers in the piece:

Figure 4.5. Introductory Poems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dissonance is Bliss</th>
<th>Beautiful Cacophony</th>
<th>Polyphonic Peace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blissful is the dissonance when sewn together correctly like the patchwork of a quilt of rusted thimbles and calloused hands.</td>
<td>Cacophony is honesty; it echoes its true colors.</td>
<td>Polyphony is peaceful, tranquil, here among the whispers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s not pretty to begin with, but the blanket’s just as warm.</td>
<td>Sounds of sadness born of passion—the dear Johnny the unknown soldier a hesitant mother answers the door.</td>
<td>surround the strangers gathered here for thousands of reasons rolled into one.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first section of the piece represented religious reverence through symbolic movements; the dancer performed with a fluid, organic quality, often repeating motifs that resembled prayer and devotion to a God above.

Figure 4.6. Religious Reverence with Miriam Gaines, Fiona Mowbray, and Alex Tucker

As this was structured improvisation, my role as choreographer was to give dancers ideas to draw from and movements to play with, along with setting a structure for the dancers to follow while still allowing them creative license. In the case of this piece, I chose the music at the beginning of the process and used musical cues to separate each section. The music I chose, “They Move on Tracks of Never-Ending Light” by This Will Destroy You, worked perfectly with my vision of having separate sections for each “pillar.” The sound of the beginning of the composition is reverent and lyrical, which was perfect for the religious character.
The second section represented military strength, and the music reflected this with staccato rhythms and hard-hitting beats. This section’s soloist executed movement that mirrored these qualities as well, using high energy and a quick tempo, sometimes even going faster than the music itself. This strength in the dancer’s movement was meant to symbolize the strength of the military, and this was further hinted at with the dark green of the dancer’s costume.

Between the second and third sections, there was a transition duet that trickled into cultural identity. The dancers, who had before kept distance from each other on the stage, came together to dance as one, sometimes mirroring each other’s movements, and other times practicing contact improvisation. Miriam Gaines and Alex Tucker performed this portion in America, while Fiona Mowbray and I performed it in England. This difference in casting caused the dynamics of the dance to differ greatly in each show.
For the final section, the dancer who represented military strength stepped out of the spotlight, and the dancer representing cultural identity performed center stage. This acknowledgement of a bond with others while still having one’s own individuality portrayed cultural identity. At the end of the piece, the three dancers were brought back together in a powerful stance; the last dancer walked upstage with her back to the audience, and the two other dancers or “pillars” caught and supported her, finally uniting the three as one and visually symbolizing the Cathedral itself.
Figure 4.8. Literal Pillars of St. Paul’s.

Figure 4.9. St. Paul’s Cathedral. Photo from someinterestingfacts.net
Strangers in the Dome

The group piece titled “Strangers in the Dome” definitely required the most rigorous rehearsal process of all of the pieces included in these concerts. It may have also been the most complex. The cast of thirteen WKU dance students, freshman through seniors, rehearsed between once and twice a week for the entire fall 2014 semester and the spring 2015 semester until the date of the show. I cast this piece after observing dancers improvise in an audition setting, so even though they had highly varied levels of experience with contemporary dance improvisation, they all showed a clear passion for dance and the potential to improvise it successfully and beautifully. This was an important choice because, as mentioned before, many dancers have an aversion to improvisatory dance and may not have enjoyed being in this piece. Because some had studied the discipline before and others had not, I found it necessary and helpful to run each rehearsal as both an improv workshop/class and a time to rehearse the structure of the piece. This technique was advantageous in helping the dancers become familiar with dancing with one another as well as in teaching them to dance in response to poetry.

At the beginning of the semester, I would send various well-known poems, such as “My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke and “A Dream Deferred” by Langston Hughes, for my cast to read before rehearsals. When we would meet to rehearse together, I would conduct a short discussion of the poetry followed by a few improvisation exercises in which I would ask the dancers to use the poems as prompts for their movement. This was similar to the idea of a “free-write” that might be done in a writing course. As the semester continued and as the dancers became more comfortable with the explication of poetry through their movement, I transitioned into sending my own poetry
for them to use as inspiration for their dance. This gave the dancers the opportunity to practice responding to text and to each other in a low-pressure setting, allowing them to perform together with ease when the time came.

The process of creating this piece was an extremely involved one. It formulated itself slowly over the course of the semester, beginning with a great deal of inspiration that I found in the Whispering Gallery of St. Paul’s Cathedral. This piece was also broken into three sections, though instead of representing the three pillars, this piece was more character-driven. Each dancer developed a character to assume and to follow through the Cathedral, representing the many people that I found there and that attend the Cathedral each day. Some of these characters I assigned, and others were invented by the dancers themselves as they became more familiar with the concept. The atmosphere of the Cathedral was also mirrored through the formations the dancers moved in on the stage. In the second section, for example, dancers create a large circle on the stage that parallels the Whispering Gallery and the dome of St. Paul’s. This section materialized first in my mind after having seen Paul Chantry’s “Ad Fidem” performed in England and speaking to him about his choreographic process, which also included original poetry and religious inspiration.

One of the most crucial elements of this piece, for me, was the use of sound: music, poetry, and authentic sound recordings from my visit to the Cathedral. Selected stanzas of poems from the collection Strangers in the Dome that dealt with some of the dancers’ individual characters were recorded and layered over both the musical composition “Morning of Red” by Aurora Borealis and my own sound recordings from the Whispering Gallery. The poetry from the collection grew as this piece was created,
sometimes serving as a point of inspiration for the dancers’ movements, and vice versa. For example, the three introductory poems served as a foundation for the piece, as did “The Wanderer.” On the other hand, I wrote poems like “First Date” and “The Gallery’s Lost and Found” after watching dancers in rehearsals, taking inspiration from the characters they were beginning to develop or from movements we had discovered together. With the poetry, the accompanying cacophony, the many dancers portraying characters, and finally the lighting masterfully designed by WKU student Ben Carter, I felt as though the atmosphere of St. Paul’s Cathedral was truly and beautifully portrayed.

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22 See Appendix A.
Figures 4.10 and 4.11. “Strangers in the Dome.”
Puppet to its Master / Beauty Lies

Of the five pieces in the concert series, the piece creating alongside poems “Like a Puppet” and “To its Master” was the only one that did not have musical accompaniment. Instead, the symmetrical poems were played in accordance with the dance and served as the foundation for this piece. Simultaneously read by two voices, the poetry conveyed the clashing perspectives of relationship partners, their closeness compromised while she traveled Europe and he had his own adventures back home. The two poems stand independently from one another, but when read in unison, certain words, lines, and stanzas line up in rhythm and sometimes in language as well. This made crafting the structure of the dance relatively easy; I assigned certain movements or qualities of movement to certain stanzas, and the dancers filled in the rest.

Figure 4.12. Poetry with Dance Structure
This piece underwent the largest amount of change between its three performances; it was first performed as a duet by Paul Chantry and Rae Piper in *Creative Conversations*, but in the UK version of *Whispering: The Sounds of St. Paul’s*, Fiona Mowbray performed it as a solo because no male counterpart was available. This rendition of the piece was striking, as it gave audience members one focal point rather than two, allowing onlookers to follow the story of a relationship from the woman’s perspective while the man’s voice was perhaps overpowered due to the woman’s presence.

Figure 4.13. Fiona Mowbray in “Puppet to its Master.”

When performed at WKU, the title changed from “Puppet to its Master” to “Beauty Lies” in order to account for the addition of two solos to the beginning. This ironically transformed the piece into a *pas de deux*. This term is used in ballet to describe a usually lighthearted couple’s duet that also includes both a male and a female solo.

The male solo was done in silence with an air of excitement—a man who has found new love and cannot contain his joy. This display
of beauty and hope was followed by the female solo set to the poem “Eye of the Beholder.” The first line of this poem, and the first instance of sound being played in the piece, read “Beauty lies…in the hearts of lovers.” A double entendre is created here with the intentional pause after the statement “Beauty lies.” This sets the stage for the rest of the piece, where audiences, like the female character, are supposed to have been fooled by the display of beauty put on by the man. With the additions of these solos and this poem, even more structure and contact choreography was added to the piece, ultimately producing a heart-wrenching lovers’ spat full of beauty and sorrow.
Magpasiya

The solo, “Magpasiya,” was the only fully choreographed piece out of the entire show. For it, I echoed the technique used by Stephan Koplowitz, Paul Chantry, and Eric Rivera in the creation of their poetry-inspired works; instead of the text being present on stage, it is represented in essence and theme by the dance. It is important to note that “Magpasiya” is a Filipino word that translates to ‘decide,’ ‘judge,’ ‘move,’ ‘conclude,’ and ‘resolve.’

The soloist goes through each of these stages in the piece, mirroring the poem “Robots in Tights,” the choreography’s inspiration. The definition was not made available in the program, but the poem was. The storyline of the piece was relatable to audience members, and the same was true for WKU alumni Isaac Middleton during its creation. Middleton, a musician, actor, dancer, and otherwise creative artist, had experienced the same inner struggle as the character in this piece and offered to create a musical composition that followed the same journey. The product, “New Sky,” accompanies the soloist as she dances with her tutu, symbolic of the decision to continue leading a dancer’s life.

Robots in Tights
Do I have what it takes to give my blood, sweat and my tears to the merciless floor each day?

Do I have enough energy in my broken feeble body to be on my feet from nine to nine to dance to learn to dance to hurt?

Who does? Robots in tights leotard-wearing drug addicts with pain killers and protein bars and hair wrestled into a bun?

Do I wish to spend my mornings, afternoons, and nights relying on some bobby pins rancid, broken shoes a Marley floor a looking glass that doesn’t lie?

To be judged by onlookers, told that my blood, sweat and tears aren’t good enough?

I find the answer with my left hand on the barre as I take a deep breath and plié.
Creative Conversations

“Creative Conversations” was essentially a group improvisation, like Soul Motion’s level of “dance community,” originally performed in England as the final piece in the show and in the USA as a closing piece via video projection. The structure of this piece was much less complex than the others, and it was not tied to poetry as the other pieces were. It served the purpose of filling out the concert, being performed after intermission when audience members filled out their surveys and before the talkback discussion, so it was not necessary that this piece be tied thematically or conceptually to the others. This piece was set to Estonian composer Arvo Pärt’s “Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten,” written with regard to the 20th century English musician. The composition is reminiscent of church bells echoing through a cathedral, making it the perfect closer for this concert.

Figures 4.20. Fiona Mowbray and Jade Primicias in “Creative Conversations.”
Figures 4.21 and 4.22. Fiona Mowbray, Jade Primicias, Teegan Chambers, and Leah Maslin in “Creative Conversations.”
This piece gave English dancers Teegan Chambers and Leah Maslin a time to shine. The girls were able to showcase their talents and perform their newfound improvisational skills on stage with Fiona Mowbray and me.

The rehearsal process for this piece was highly enjoyable for my dancers and me. The young English girls had been trained in tap, ballet, and street dance, and had not been taught the tools of improvisation in their studies. When I arrived in England with only one week to prepare for the concert, I was faced with a challenge: most university-level dancers need months of coaching and practice before they can feel comfortable enough to improvise on a stage, and it is often longer before choreographers will feel comfortable putting their improvisation on stage. These girls were both in primary school and had a lot to learn in only a few short days. Luckily, I was blessed with two very talented young ladies who absorbed everything they were presented with and put forth remarkable efforts despite their anxieties.

Audience Feedback Results

The results of the audience surveys were surprising based on my initial assumptions. In England, 54% of those who answered listed “Souls of St. Paul’s” as their favorite piece, 38% people chose “Puppet to its Master,” and 8% chose “Magpasiya.” No one chose the large group piece, “Strangers in the Dome.” In Kentucky, the spread was as follows: 21% chose “Souls of St. Paul’s,” 23% chose “Strangers in the Dome,” 40% chose “Beauty Lies” or “Puppet to its Master,” and 16% chose “Magpasiya.” No chose the “None” option to identify that none of the pieces was a favorite. In England, everyone who filled out a survey only chose one piece as a favorite, while in America, eleven
audience members chose to categorize two pieces as their favorites, since the survey did provide that option.

I found it quite interesting that “Strangers in the Dome” was the least favorite piece of the English audience. This was the one that had required the most rehearsal time, and it had been very well received by audiences in America, yet 85% of the audience members who took the survey in England indicated that it was their least favorite. This also accounted for 100% of the people who decided to choose a piece as their least favorite, because 15% of those who answered the question elected to choose “None,” implying that they enjoyed all of the pieces. One of the two people who made up this 15% was David Beer, the only professional dancer in the audience. In America, 72% of those who took the survey also elected to choose the “None” option. This vast difference in statistics was quite interesting to me. Of the eight people who did choose to specify which piece was their least favorite at the concert in America, 12% chose “Souls of St. Paul’s,” 38% chose “Strangers in the Dome,” another 38% chose “Beauty Lies,” and the remaining 12% chose “Magpasiya.”

In the UK, a special set of audience members had to be accounted for during the statistical analysis; some of Fiona Mowbray’s family attended the concert in UK, thus giving the study an outlier of sorts. These two audience members were of American ethnicity, but they saw the English version of the concert and answered with the UK audience. Because they saw this version of the show instead of the revised American version where, for example, “Souls of St. Paul’s” was a trio and “Puppet to its Master” changed from a solo to a three part pas de deux, I was not able to count them with the American sample. Instead, they have their own grouping for the purposes of these
statistics. Both women chose “Puppet to its Master” and “Magpasiya” as their favorite pieces, while one listed “Strangers in the Dome” as her least favorite and the other listed “None.”

To find the overall favorite pieces of all audience members who answered the survey questions at both concerts, I accounted for the total number of answers to each question rather than the total number of surveys because of the option for audience members to choose one or more answer for each question. Of the 60 total answers to the question of the favorite piece in both countries, the results were as follows: 27% chose “Souls of St. Paul’s,” 17% chose “Strangers in the Dome,” 40% chose “Puppet to its Master/Beauty Lies,” and 17% chose “Magpasiya.” Of the 44 audience members who gave an answer for their least favorite piece, because no one chose more than one option for this particular question, 2% chose “Souls of St. Paul’s,” 34% chose “Strangers in the Dome,” 7% chose “Puppet to its Master/Beauty Lies,” and 2% chose “Magpasiya,” and 55% chose “None.”

The levels of previous experience each audience member had with dance varied from person to person. It is interesting to note that the groups of people who chose “Strangers in the Dome,” “Soul’s of St. Paul’s,” and “Puppet to its Master/Beauty Lies” as their favorites were made up of both dancers and non-dancers while all of the audience members who chose “Magpasiya” as their favorite piece were non-dancers or had no prior dance experience. I found it motivating that all dancers who saw the show were more drawn to the pieces of structured contemporary dance improvisation than they were to the choreographed piece, even though improvisation is less prominent in the dance world. Audience members who chose the choreographed solo as their favorite claimed to
have enjoyed the piece because of its relatability to real-world decisions that plague us all. In fact, much of the audience in both countries made this claim about this piece as well as “Puppet to its Master/Beauty Lies” and “Strangers in the Dome.” Those who had not personally been to St. Paul’s Cathedral said that the piece could have symbolized any church with its structural and aesthetic elements.

I was surprised to find that the majority of the British audience had never been to St. Paul’s Cathedral while 35% of the American audience had. The one person in the audience in England who indicated that he or she had been to the Cathedral said that the duet version of “Souls of St. Paul’s” and the video recording of “Strangers in the Dome” did not evoke the essence of the Cathedral in any way; however, she felt that the solo version of “Puppet to its Master” evoked the Whispering Gallery in some way. On the other hand, the twelve American audience members who had previously been to St. Paul’s Cathedral said that it did represent the Cathedral well either by evoking memories or by creating images. Of the American audience members who had never been there, 23% indicated that it gave them a clear picture of the place and made them feel as though they were actually there. Of those who had not been there, 65% said that “Strangers in the Dome” reminded them of other places they had been, from international city centers to popular destinations here in the USA.

The general consensus of the British audience was that the poetry and the dance worked well together on the stage. The American audience also agreed on this. The results were more scattered when it came to people’s thoughts on improvisation, though, especially in the English audience. In the UK, 73% of those who gave their thoughts about improvisation for performance thought it worked very well and was successfully
done while 27% had mixed views. The American audience seemed to enjoy the improvisation factor more; 92% of the audience members who answered this question absolutely loved the fact that improvisation was incorporated in such a way and were highly complimentary of the dancers and the choreographer. The remaining 8% also said that they enjoyed the improvisation, yet they pointed out limitations, such as that a change of cast could completely alter a performance piece and that the improvisation in these particular pieces made them look somewhat chaotic at times. One person in the UK audience said he or she would not have known the difference had the improvisatory nature of the work not been announced, and eight people said the same in America.

The answers to the question of whether or not the audience members felt as though any aspects of the concert spoke to them culturally delivered surprisingly disparate results. I had initially thought that the concert’s works would be more relatable to British audience members due to the subject matter, imagery, and symbolism. However, 62% of the British audience members who took the survey answered this question negatively or did not answer at all. One British audience member said that she felt a cultural connection to “Magpasiya,” another audience member felt a connection to “Souls of St. Paul’s,” and two people mentioned that the poetry was the most culturally relatable aspect. British dancer and audience member David Beer indicated in his survey that he did not feel as though anything spoke to him culturally, and provided the fact that “British culture is a big mix of so many” as his reasoning behind this.

This mention of cultural diversity within a country was also hinted at by an American audience member, though in an opposing way. This audience member pointed out the diversity of America and implied that “Souls of St. Paul’s” and “Strangers in the
Dome” spoke to that for her. The answers to this question from the American audience were on the opposite end of the scale; seventy percent of this audience felt a cultural connection to this concert in some way. This is almost the exact opposite result to the British audience. Of all American audience members, this time including the two American audience members who witnessed the show in England, 18% felt the most connection to “Magpasiya,” 6% felt connected to “Beauty Lies,” 24% felt connected to the pieces inspired by St. Paul’s Cathedral, and 27% felt an overall cultural connection to the aspects of the concert that pointed to England in general. Only seven people said that they did not feel a cultural connection to this concert, and of those seven, six people indicated that they were only “moderately likely” to seek out performances like this in the future. In America, 74% of the surveyed audience indicated that they were “highly likely” to seek out more opportunities like this in the future, while the remaining 26% indicated that they were “moderately likely.” In England, 62% said they were “highly likely,” and 38% instead indicated that they were “not likely.”
CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

Diverse audience responses, personal observation, and additional research have led to the following implications regarding the state of dance improvisation in England and America, the clash between cultures in both theory and practice, and the future of contemporary dance overall. Contemporary dance improvisation is present in both countries, but it is still not as widely recognized as a technique of its own. This is especially true in private studios where students generally study styles such as tap, ballet, jazz, and hip-hop or street dance. Just as modern dance is often introduced at a more advanced level, improvisation should be introduced then as well. Because of the lack of presence of improvisation in these settings, there seems to be a stigma that surrounds the art form.

In both countries, many classically trained dancers without much experience in the art of improvisation tend to fear it due to the intense vulnerability that comes with it, which can give it negative connotations among dancers. Likewise, many dancers and professionals see it as a tool for choreography or an exercise in creativity rather than being appropriate for the stage, but this is often because of their lack of exposure to successful improvisatory works. David Beer says that much improvisation he has seen in
Britain and throughout his international career can be “self-indulgent,” often causing him to turn away from opportunities to improvise, but he appreciates the conscious performance quality of the improvisation done in *Whispering: The Sounds of St. Paul’s*. If some professional contemporary dancers can hold negative opinions about the subject, then audience members with much less experience in the world of dance will absolutely do the same. Audiences in different places respond to new works very differently due to what they have seen in the past and what their expectations are prior to the experience.

The solution to this is clear: artists need to stage more work of this variety. This is currently being done in the world of contemporary dance in both England and America, but it is being done in such varied ways that audiences and dancers alike cannot keep up. Contemporary dance includes so many different styles and techniques that it is impossible for even current, contributing professionals to define. This could be a consequence of the following two reasons: contemporary dance is an umbrella term, and it is not codified as other dance techniques are. The phrase itself is known to encompass genres such as dance installation, site-specific work, dance theatre, structured improvisation, and in England, even different modern dance techniques. This variance in nomenclature may be a cultural miscommunication, which may also lead to part of the variance in audience perception of contemporary dance.

If contemporary dancers in England are dancing America’s modern dance, and contemporary dancers in America are dancing something else entirely, then there is sure to be a slight rift in perception from both onlookers and artists in the field. Additionally, the fact that contemporary dance is non-codified presents both confusion and opportunity
for growth and development. For example, ballet has been codified as a strict discipline with a class structure, famous repertoire, and variations for hundreds of years. Contemporary dance is still quite young in comparison, leaving it in its beginning stages of development for all of these things. In addition, the nature of contemporary dance seems to rise out of a tradition that pushes back against these strictures to begin with; contemporary dance came out of the modern tradition, manifesting as a less formalized, expressive dance technique, and the modern tradition came out of the ballet tradition as a manifestation of expressive dance that broke the upright rules of ballet. Contemporary dance today can also draw from the jazz dance tradition, which came out of African dance vernacular and American jazz music—which, ironically, carries a strong improvisatory feature. Because of its historical roots and what it has developed into today, contemporary dance may not ever venture in the way of being codified. Classes will continue to vary by style and technique, especially in different regions, and performances will do the same, rendering it difficult to classify for years to come.

If more artists continue to create genre-fused works such as the poetry and dance mixture of *Whispering: the Sounds of St. Paul’s*, the umbrella term of contemporary dance will only grow to include more of these styles. This is not, however, a negative thing; it shows that the art of dance continues to grow and expand today as artists create more and more innovative works. Not only are dance artists finding more and more venues of performance for this wonderful art, but we are also finding more ways to collaborate across art forms, perhaps leading us in the direction of a more widely practiced and celebrated genre-fusion. Collaboration presents “a mosaic of possibilities,” as termed by the National Dance Education Organization in the title of its 2014
conference, and is productive in that it includes more people in the creation and appreciation of art.

Though genre-fusion is currently being practiced and produced by this new wave of contemporary dance today, it is still not common to see works of this nature performed on stages in small towns like Grantham, UK, and Bowling Green, Kentucky. Though it is more commonly seen and appreciated in metropolitan arts hubs, like London and Los Angeles, it is still not exceedingly popular in comparison to ballet and modern dance. I considered staging the British show in London rather than in the small town that Chantry and Piper had once confided as being so unexposed to contemporary dance, but keeping the small-town England/America atmosphere consistent throughout the concert series was important to do. Not only did it control the results by assembling a more similar audience sample in both places, but it also accomplished the task of reaching out to a crowd for which contemporary dance is not as accessible.

This decision proved to be a successful one, despite the difficulties of completing the project in this way. The majority of audience members who completed the survey indicated that they were either moderately or highly likely to seek out and experience more shows of this nature in the future. Many of these audience members had not known what to expect, having never seen performances like this before, but they left feeling intrigued with a desire to experience that type of artistry again. It was extremely rewarding for me, as the artist behind both the poetry and the dance, to receive such a positive response to my work. I was also able to learn from those who did not thoroughly enjoy the shows, whether it was a matter of personal taste or an issue with the work itself. Personally, I feel as though the art of improvisation, both with and without the presence
of poetry, should be made more accessible to audiences and to dancers alike, and many who attended and participated in the concert series agree.

With that in mind, it is important to note that a larger percentage of the American audience enjoyed the show, felt culturally connected to it, and wanted to see more. The cultural implications of this surprised me, as I thought that I had purposefully tailored the concert to British audiences in both theme and subject matter. I suppose, though, that one’s own cultural background transcends even artistic intention. This might have also been because of the nature of each concert. There was much more variety of performance in the American version of the show, due to the larger cast size, especially with the group piece “Strangers in the Dome.” This was the crux of the concert, and in England, audiences saw this as a video projection on a screen rather than a live performance that could so deeply resonate throughout the space. I had not meant for the piece to be able to represent so many cultural icons across the world, such as the Cathedral of Notre Dame and the Beijing town center, but learning that audiences interpreted it this way helped me to appreciate that aspect of the piece as well. Interestingly, more American audience members felt culturally connected to the solo, “Magpasiya,” despite the fact that I did not provide the meaning of the title. They described it as the common struggle with the American dream or related it to ever-pressing decisions that any college student must make. Even with the heavy-handed insertions of British culture into the poetry of “Puppet to its Master/Beauty Lies,” American audiences still felt more able to relate to the struggle present within the piece.

Perhaps American audiences felt more enthralled by the show because of its being such a novel idea; Bowling Green, Kentucky, is not located anywhere near the bustling
arts centers of New York and Los Angeles. Closer in proximity are Nashville, Louisville, and Lexington, KY, but even in those cities, contemporary dance of this nature is not at all the norm. If I had conducted these concert studies in bigger cities, such as Los Angeles and London, the results would most likely have varied greatly. Audiences in Grantham might have been more exposed to art of this nature due to their close proximity to London and the number of artists near them that are constantly creating contemporary works. Chantry’s premier of *Out of Bounds* in Grantham in 2013 might have opened this audience’s eyes to emerging contemporary dance, acclimating them to it at that time.

There is also a possibility that there exists a cultural tendency in England to be more critical of art because there is always so much available at any given time. It also seems, from the results, that the American audience might have been more open-minded than the British audience was. At the same time, the large population of college students who saw the show in the USA might have influenced these results as well when compared to the English audience of the general public.

Perhaps the most important takeaway of the entire project was that, regardless of their response, both dancers and audiences were exposed to this particular body of work. I worked with a total of nineteen dancers in both countries; not only did these dancers enjoy a positive learning and performing experience, but their eyes were also opened to the many possibilities available to them as artists. The same goes for audience members; 46 total surveys were taken, but the total attendance of the American concert was at least thirty more than this. With the number of people reached by the *Creative Conversations* concert at Harlaxton College, plus those who attended the *Whispering* concert series, and the audiences who were in attendance when this research was presented at a number of
conferences in both Bowling Green and Chicago, I would venture to say that at least three hundred people have experienced this work in some way. The work may not have been everyone’s cup of tea, so to speak, but the fact of the matter is that these people were exposed to art in a way they had not been before.

Limitations

As the two American audience members pointed out in their surveys, dance improvisation for performance inherently has quite a few drawbacks. Aside from those pointed out by audience members, there exist many which have to do with the nature of dance itself. One never knows what is going to happen on the stage or in the site, because all situations can present difficulties that must be dealt with. With improvisation, the probability of something not going as planned is much higher because there is not as concrete of a ‘plan’ in regards to the choreography of the piece. It is also difficult to set pieces of contemporary dance improvisation on dancers without much experience in the field. This is what I ran into in England, more so than at WKU. I was lucky enough to have plenty of opportunity to rehearse with dancers both in the studio and in the performance space; however, different performances still went better than others.

In England, I ran into a great deal of trouble with securing my dancers for the Whispering concert. Communication had been sparse with the owner of the dance studio in Grantham that had enthusiastically agreed to collaborate with me on this project. By the time that it was made clear that she was no longer willing to participate or to provide dancers for the show as she had previously agreed to do, the circumstances were no longer ideal. Because of the project’s timeline, I was unable to establish a relationship with a British university student group as I had initially hoped to do. Instead, I agreed to
work with a private studio in Grantham, which automatically set me up to work with younger dancers of lower levels and less experience with improvisation.

Because of this and a number of factors, I was unable to accurately recreate the same concert from country to country. The cast was different between the two shows, causing each piece to change drastically in aesthetic appeal. The pieces that I was able to keep consistent between concerts were shown via video projection instead of live performance, which could have played a role in how audiences responded to them. I hypothesize that the majority of the British audience chose the “Strangers in the Dome” piece as their least favorite due to its being projected on a screen rather than performed live. The twelve-person piece leaves a much greater impact on audiences when performed in person as opposed to through video, and the same goes for the other pieces. Also, because of the transformation of “Souls of St. Paul’s” from a duet to a trio and the drastic change from the solo version of “Puppet to its Master” to the duet “Beauty Lies,” audiences in each country were not truly exposed to the exact same concert. This may have affected their answers to the survey questions as well.

Another limitation was the fact that not all audience members had had the opportunity to be introduced to the concert and its concepts before seeing the show. The levels of knowledge between audience members varied greatly, and this was something that was difficult to measure in the surveys. It was also difficult to secure as random of a sample of audience members in England due to the fact that much of the concert planning and advertisement took place online while I was in the United States. There were less pre-established community connections to utilize in audience recruitment and advertisement, not to mention the location being in a large-scale community arts center.
rather than on a college campus within two academic departments where student and faculty interconnectivity and support are prominent.

I attracted a total of over 300 followers on social media platforms with the accounts I created to advertise this concert series, but word-of-mouth advertisement proved to be the most effective in both countries. For the concert in England, I sent posters to contacts throughout Grantham and London to be hung in dance studios, theatres, and in other public areas. In Bowling Green, I handed posters out to my cast to hang up, along with hanging some up myself. Because I did not ask on the survey how each audience member learned about the performance, I do not know how well this type of advertisement worked. The limitations on advertisement and audience recruitment led to a variance in audience sizes, giving each British audience member’s survey answers more of a weighted percentage than each American audience member’s. If the samples of audiences had been more equal, then the results might have differed.

Additionally, a limitation I found that I had placed on the project on the whole was the vastness of its scope. Because my research interests and questions were so plentiful, it was difficult to exhaustively answer any one of them in full. This project was the product of nearly three years of study in contemporary dance improvisation, and almost two full years of comparing British and American styles of contemporary dance. In the case of this project, having too much data to process and synthesize was a downfall. Future studies may narrow the search terms down to only contemporary dance improvisation in performance, or only to the dealings with poetry in contemporary dance,
or only to the way England portrays American modern dance as a contemporary genre.

When I began this research, I did not anticipate that I would uncover such rich resources and implications that would encourage further study. I do, however, anticipate that my future replications of these studies will have a more narrow focus and will lead to more accurate results.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to say whether or not Oliver Freeston and David Beer were correct in their assertion that the current face of American contemporary dance is “stuck in the nineties” in comparison to what is being done in England. In fact, it is difficult to make such overarching claims about such a wide range of work that is constantly evolving and developing from region to region in a country of such massive proportions. Perhaps some less experimental individuals or groups in America are “stuck” practicing an old-fashioned technique, but in some ways, does England not have the same issue? Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake, for example, has been touring since 1995 and is still seen as one of the most innovative works of contemporary ballet on Broadway and in the West End. In America, longstanding traditions started by modern dance pioneers continue to be performed in celebration of those works, but that is not to say that there is no other source of innovation taking place.

When I was in Los Angeles, it was amazing to see the Gaga style at work not only up close, but in America. One of the ate9 company dancers I spoke to during a break, French-born Thibaut Eiferman, agreed that while much of America’s contemporary dance may be somewhat old fashioned, director Danielle Agami is definitely “stuck in the
future” instead. The same can be argued for many artistic groups found in both England and in America. Practices like Soul Motion and InterPlay, along with site-specific work, take dance out of the studio and into the real world, making it even more accessible to audiences. The same practice, in theory, is exercised across Britain in the notion of community dance. Straybird’s mobile installation is another work I would venture to say is “stuck in the future,” while studios like Danceworks that teach modern dance techniques as contemporary classes might be a bit old fashioned themselves.

In America, contemporary dance is highly regionalized. The contemporary dance being done in Los Angeles will be different than what is being done in Chicago, and that will be different than what is being done in New York, and so forth. In England, less geographical variance leads to less stylistic variance across the nation.

When it comes to improvisation, this idea of variance must be clarified to include the personal background and experience of the dancer. Improvisation is generally even less codified than contemporary dance, and its spur-of-the-moment nature truly gives dancers the capability to take it to new levels every single day. There is a great deal of significance that relies on the purpose of the improvisation. Contemporary dance improvisation for performance and improvisation through the Butoh technique, for example, will have completely different aesthetics and will communicate to onlookers in entirely different ways. Because of the many uses of improvisation, it may not be possible to renounce the negative stigma it carries across cultures and in so many different artistic groups. The solution: continue making work. Innovation must continue to flourish, and audiences must continue to be reached.
According to the way that contemporary dance took hold in England’s professional dance scene, and how artistic styles tend to spread, the face of contemporary dance and contemporary dance improvisation could be changed with more instances of this type of work. If the Whispering concert series were to go on tour, anywhere in the world, then more dancers and audiences would experience it. More performances of the work would bring it into more communities, enhancing more artistic scenes. Poetry and contemporary dance improvisation might begin to take root in some areas as contemporary dance and contemporary dance improvisation continue to evolve. The more contemporary dance is able to infiltrate societies across the world, the more it will begin to be accepted and adopted in different cultural groups, thus expanding possibilities for artists in more ways than have ever been done before.
Appendices

A. *Strangers in the Dome*, Poetry Collection

B. *Whispering: UK*, Video

C. *Whispering: USA*, Video
Appendix A

All walks of life are brought together in St. Paul's Cathedral to admire its beauty, to pray, and to remember those who stood and fought before us. The poet finds herself here, among strangers in the cathedral and across the continent, surrounded by their whispers and her own personal muse.

STRANGERS IN THE DOME

A Collection of Poetry
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Dissonance is Bliss

Blissful is the dissonance when sewn together correctly like the patchwork of a quilt of rusted thimbles and calloused hands.

It’s not pretty to begin with, but the blanket’s just as warm.

Beautiful Cacophony

Cacophony is honesty; it echoes its true colors.

Sounds of sadness born of passion—

the dear Johnny the unknown soldier a hesitant mother

answers the door.

Polyphonic Peace

Polyphony is peaceful, tranquil, here among the whispers surround the strangers gathered here for thousands of reasons rolled into one.
Part One:
The Wanderer

The poems in this section are written from the poet’s own perspective:
as a tourist, as a woman, as an artist discovering the world.
The Wanderer

I.

I walked in
through the back door.
Somehow missed the famous steps
where we gathered last November—

Those old stone steps,
full of pigeons
stalking tourists
with bagged lunches
in hopes of scattered bread crumbs.

I didn't see those
giant, cold steps
on my walk from the
tube station; instead,
I found the café entrance
and I wandered in.

II.

I would not pay
for a ticket.
Starving student,
play the sick card:
“My university took
a trip here, but I missed it—
let me through, please,”
which was true.

The man in the suit
who looked more like
a railroad conductor
than a museum ticket-taker
wasn’t as stiff as the
navy blue hat he wore:
“Someone found this
one on the ground
today—let’s say
it’s yours.”
And that was all
it took.
Lost ticket
in hand,
I was found
among strangers,
among tourists,
students huddled in groups
like me, but much more lonely,
see, those students
were forced to listen
and walk
and stop
and talk
and stare at the professor’s
next point,
to hear what it meant
to historians,
to memorize the names
on the statues,
to move in a herd
on a field trip
while I was a face
in a crowd
with my own time
to take it all in.
Black Leggings are See-Through

If you say the word ‘pants’
in London, you’ll make a
thousand Brits cringe, recoil
away from you—
like a serpent
exposed by a man
and his lack of them---
but only because, in England,
that’s what they call
our American panties
our grandparents’ underoos
and our streetwalkers’ thongs

but when you say panties,
one fourth of my poetry group
will gag at the sonance
so instead, we’ll say trousers.

Now these high-waisted trousers,
I bought back in England,
with the same fourth of poets
who doesn’t like “moist,”
and a cheap fifth of vodka,
and a succubus who drained
all but a sixth of my savings.
That was the first day we hung out.

We rode bikes down to Grantham
past the queen’s swans
and stinging nettles
and the black in my sweater
deemed me fit
to step foot
in a fitting room with her,
undressed, before I knew
that she might sneak a peek

as I tried on these trousers
and she, a slutty dress
that she couldn’t fit over
her fat thighs and ass-
sumptions that innocent Jadey
would be a good target
for her next pair of jeans.
Eye of the Beholder

Beauty lies
in the hearts of lovers.
It could,
    I guess,
be in their eyes,
but only if
they were as crystal blue
    and miles deep
as yours.
Only if
they were as clear
and magnetic
    as the magnetite
in the Burghley House
Garden of Surprises.

If they drew
people in like
the melodies that seep
    from the strings
of the busker's guitar
beside platform three
on the Piccadilly Line,
or the Jubilee,
at King's Cross St. Pancras
in London.

It could be in their eyes
If their eyes reflect
the sights that take away
their breath like
my journey across England
through Hampton Court Palace
downtown Grantham
across la Rambla,
    speak to natives,
see Gaudi’s art, the beach,
    and lightning
from the rooftop of a seashell—
And I know
you'd love it, too.

I know you’d love
the history
the aqueducts and Roman walls
a school that was bombed in ‘39
    where you can still
see the scars
the owls of Lincoln Cathedral
the Imp, Steep Hill
    vintage charity shops
the music store in Cambridge
Oxford's bookstore
    where it's quiet.

The markets with
fresh orange juice
    huge mangoes
    and the reddest meat
with jewelry made
    from sterling coins
and concert ticket art,
clover patches of odd numbers
where I search
    too many hours—

And even if you didn't—
    if you didn't love the paintings
country houses,
all the dance shoes
in store windows,
you would smile
    when you saw me
how I'd grin
and look up at you
and my eyes would
tell my secrets
of how glad I am
    you're with me—

And I know you'd see
the beauty
ripple through
chameleon eyes.
Please! No Thunderstorms in London

For months I lived without
the bangs of bass drums
in the heavens
bereft of bongos
played by angels or
an angry Zeus’ bolts.

The only lightning
I played witness to
was on the coasts
of Barcelona;

Balanced atop a castle
made of Gaudí’s thoughts
and seashells, I leaned
against the coral
and watched the thunder
from above.

And once, in all my days there
when a rainstorm
warned to brew
all of London closed its doors—
Hide the crown jewels!
Guard the Palace!
And God forbid
the tea gets spilled—

And at the top
of the Cathedral
all the tourists
claimed their campsites
ready, waiting for the drizzle
to roll in through
the London Eye.
Mayfield on the Map

Football town in West Kentucky;
pearl of the purchase
Jackson made;
where the quarterback likes physics,
plays percussion,
    and guitar;

where the cheerleaders
are guard girls,
right beside the ghetto-fab;
soccer fields are packed
on Sundays—
    don’t even try
to go to Wal-Mart—
Spanish speakers, cowboy boots
or black Adidas cleats
    and shorts;

and in the projects, all the children
throw the pigskin
past Crack Corner
while their mothers
go to high school
    outside smoking
    in their cars;

and the mayor’s kids,
 valedictorians, band director—
    worship songs—
and the mayor, a funeral singer
live Christmas tree,
    she’s at the top.

All the Rednecks hang
at Pocket’s, by McDonald’s
where the Jonesmobile
is spotted
snap a pic’ and win a contest;
    book a shoot, they’ll buy a prop.

Go to home games, or Paducah
to the lake
with coolers packed
Leeder Bottoms’ never too far—
in the Bible Belt on Sundays
pants are sagging
through the week
get in fights and go to A-school
lose a loved one,
    bless his heart.
In disasters, stand together
town united by a cardinal
tornadoes, ice storms
can’t defeat us—
Gridiron Glory, nothing stronger
in the state
    where blood
    and grass
are blue.
There's a Thin Line between Brave and Anxious

I want to ask someone to take my picture
but not to steal my phone.
I want to touch the ocean
without my dance bag
on my arm, fearful of looters.

I want to ask the guy with the dogs
and his friend with the surfboard
and the long, sunkissed hair
how long they've been in Venice
without seeming like a creep.

The taxi driver asked
if I was scared
to travel all this way by myself;
I'm not.
Just lonely.
I Don’t Have Dreadlocks

“Oh, she has dreadlocks”
they snapped as I walked
somewhere sandy
and their words
bounced off my back.

Then a shaggy man asked
my name
as his hockey stick
scrapped away at my
composure. Josephine
was the first lie that came to mind.

I don’t let down my façade
of a hardcore bitch who’s deaf
to the catcalls
and blind to the gestures
and vulture-like stares

until I find a spot
beside seashells
alone with the seagulls
and disappear into the crowd
just another silhouette by the sea.
Part Two:
The Strangers

This section’s poems explore the minds of the other wanderers present in the Cathedral and across the world.
The Gallery’s Lost and Found

The fallen soldier
whose name is etched
in a wall with thousands
of others who gave their lives
under Churchill’s orders
so as not to tip off the spies

The lost girl
eyes wide with amazement
at the number of strangers
who pay her no mind
as she stands beneath the dome
looks up, and forgets who she is

The homeless man
Bible in hand
who finds solitude in the Cathedral
who has gotten kicked out
of this place of worship
more times than he’s slept
in a bed

The disenchanted woman
who stumbles in
on a journey
between faiths, between lovers
between stages in her life

The eager student
first time abroad
who studies art and inspiration
sits in the chapel
with her sketchpad and
tries to recreate stained glass

The soldier’s brother
stands at attention
for what, to onlookers,
would seem like hours,
in front of the placard
where his family is honored
engraved in stone

The typical tourist
wrinkled tube map in hand
who will only remember
the sites that he sighted
through blurred snapshots
forged by missed memories

The tired father
hand in hand with Makayla
who seems to have forgotten
her mom
and giggles through the gallery
without the weight her
dad carries
The former dancer
  in awe of the movement around her
who disappears on the concrete
bench, eyes closed,
just to breathe
and remember the days
when she danced here
The grieving wife
  seated next to her
with the same breaths
that heave, but heavier
since she hasn’t let the tears fall
in almost thirteen years
The teenage atheist
  born of anger, raised
in a row house in the slums
who refuses the Church of England
but deep down,
she wants to know
The brand-new teacher
  come to learn
  to plan a lesson or a field trip
for her students
  who sits, defeated
overwhelmed by the history
The business woman
  on her lunch break
who can’t be bothered
with the beauty
and comes in so she can say
that yes, she often goes to church
The happy wanderer
  who finds herself surrounded
by these strangers
wonders what all of their stories are
while she writes a page in hers.
Our First Date Haunts My Lunch Breaks

You sat down next to
A Russian stranger
and your eyes invited me
to take my seat
on your other side,
my shoulder pressed into
your underarm, finger bones
traced back and forth across
your corduroys.

The warmth of you
enveloped me—
your strong arm on mine
held me in place
as we listened
to the voices echo
around us.

The silent stranger sat
still on your left,
and I keep going back
to that spot
hollow, not empty
on the unforgiving bench
after lunch,
or if I have time before,
to try to find him
or someone else
who remembers you.
First Date

First dates are meant for movies theatres, before dinner, so you can discuss the cinematography over overpriced meals, or just talk about the actors if you’re less artsy and more depressed. Talk about the glitz and glamour you don’t have in your plain life but you love to watch in theirs.

First dates end at the doorstep. Or at the fountain on the square with an awkward side hug and a not-so-subtle sniff of the hair, and if it went well, a peck on the blush of a cheek, and a sly invitation for a nightcap.

They don’t often conclude at the top of St. Paul’s with a view of the city and a sunset as seen through the London Eye and then four hundred steps descended hand in hand.

But still, I tripped and you caught me in the heart of the Cathedral.
Like a Puppet | To its Master

These two poems can be read individually or together.

I never meant to hurt you…

...You knew from the beginning that trust was an issue.

too familiar with the feeling

You knew I’d been hurt

myself, I’d never want to cause it.

Ever since you killed that night with
that cockroach

as we transferred all your music

and made sure I was alright

to the new phone that I got you

and made sure I wasn’t freezing

and we sat out in the starlight

and you told me how Brazilian

and I told you all my secrets.

your green jacket made me look

I knew

You knew you were worried

that night with the cockroach

from the start as we transferred all your music

that I walked in

from the start to the new phone that I got you

to ask a RadioShack question

with a few ulterior motives

from the RadioShack question

and I won you

patiently waiting

with the cherry on top.

in the backs of our minds.

But when you left me

You knew when I left

high and lonely

that I’d taken you there with me

breaking promises you’d made

in your bracelet

a field of clovers

in my shoebox

songs unfinished

in the songs from my guitar

lovers’ weekend

all the songs I’d ever written

filled with heartbreak

now in notebooks

But I still went

on your bed
and fed your dog.

If you didn’t
know I loved you
when we cried
then, on the phone—
you had left for Colorado
and I couldn’t wait for England
and the feelings
just got stronger
and the miles
felt like light years
in a story
where I loved you
to infinity and beyond.

I think that’s when I
knew you loved me
when we cried
and it felt right
but I stopped in Colorado
and then you left for England
and the “soulmates”
and “I love you’s”
were transparent
like the vodka
in glass bottles
in a story
where I loved you
that you drained
and then slammed down.

And when they did come,
I couldn’t hear them.
They were plastic
like your new friend
whose little minion
you’d become.
Still, I stayed here.
Still, I loved you.
Did my best
to hear you out
and you promised
but you wouldn’t
stop the person you’d become.

And when we argued
for the first time
when I urged you
when I pleaded
with my heart in
your back pocket
everywhere you went.

You’d dance;
to hurt you...
Constant reminders of the bruises—wished it fall out on the floor—

I guess I’m doing faithful wrong. You still don’t think you’re in the wrong. I’ve been more loyal than a puppet You still move just like to its master—and she’s the master—You’re her puppet and I’m just here.

You’ve always been there at the forefront of my mind. The continent’s the audience.

Don’t know where or when the trust went. We both wonder

I never meant to hurt you. where the spark went You knew from the beginning.
This section tells the tale of the poet, yet again, through her own eyes—the eyes of a dancer.
The Soldier’s Sister

He always told me
to stand up for what
I believed.
He said, with the tiniest
hint of a smile
that it was
okay if I didn’t
like football.
He’d pedal his rusty
red five-speed
through the city
to pick me up from
ballet class
and escort me home.

That’s what big brothers do,
right? They
protect you
from the bullies
in school
and the guys
on the night bus
who wouldn’t have
touched me
if I had looked as tough
and as stupid as them.

My big brother
didn’t care that
I didn’t talk about cars
like he did,
or that my grades
were better, or
that Mom liked me more.
Now his name’s
on a memorial
and I wonder
what he’d say
if he saw me
stand up
as a soldier like him.
The speckles of orange chestnut drift down on the dancer’s neck. Her auburn ponytail waits to be twisted, secured, pinned into a cinnamon bun. Sleek, elegant, just as the instructor ordered.

A burnt sienna path of bark shifts subtly to jade and rose blush puffs cover her face. She turns her graceful head to check and see if the chiffon of her tutu drapes in just the right way.

The pinks and yellows blend to cast a lovely spotlight on the dancer’s back as she tightens her bodice and warms the arch. She flexes, she stretches—focused strength.

Gold fades to ivory and still there she stands and fidgets, fixing her hair. She ties and re-ties the sinewy ribbon, hands shaking, nervous to perform Rhapsody in Blue.
Robots in Tights

Do I have what it takes to give
my blood, sweat and my tears to the
merciless floor each day?

Do I have enough energy
in my broken
feeble body
to be on my feet
from nine to nine
to dance
    to learn
to dance
    to hurt?

Who does?
    Robots in tights
leotard-wearing drug addicts
with pain killers
and protein bars
and hair wrestled into a bun?

Do I wish to spend
my mornings, afternoons, and nights
relying on some bobby pins
    rancid, broken shoes
a Marley floor
    a looking glass that doesn’t lie?

To be judged
by onlookers,
told that my
    blood, sweat and tears
aren’t good enough?

I find the answer
with my left hand on the barre
as I take a deep breath
    and plié.
Center Stage

The pleasant visage she displays—
a soft smile, far from pompous,
a relaxed disposition,
an air of belonging—
is a custom-made costume
that hides her true feelings
abuzz with excitement,
butterflies and nerves.

They know that she’s earned it
but she fears they’re mistaken—
that she won’t deliver,
she doesn’t deserve it—
yet, she stands her ground.

Body language is a struggle
when the room’s eyes pinprick her
from infinite angles
behind, beside her, in the mirror;
they anticipate her failure,
rejoice at her illness.

Overwhelmed with the attempt
to maintain a semblance
of conviction,
she rocks back and forth,
back and forth
on her heels.

In this room
there’s a tension
in the heat of the moment
understudies would kill for
and a teacher can’t feel.

If the clock on the wall
still ticked, you could hear it;
the sharp pop of a hip joint,
the crack of a knuckle,
and the toss of a bobby pin,
in the somber studio

where the pretty girl stands
in a sea of competition
where the outcasts, like a wolf pack,
-snarl silently at her feet.
The Hummingbird’s Premier

The dancer’s silhouette
cast a wispy shadow
of a hummingbird
blue and buzzing
like my brain after
last year’s Christmas dinner
filled to the brim
with butternut squash
in sister’s outgrown peony frock.

The stage went dark
as a Kalamata olive
and applause bounced off the walls.
The ballerina sipped
her nectar
red, refueling
in the wings.
I’m the girl who comes to class takes off her shoes and settles down into her lunchbox.

I can make a cheese stick last an hour.

I’ll steal your attention with my sausage and my bacon in a crumpled paper towel from my knockoff North Face pocket.

I’m the queen of leftovers.

Your best and your most awkward friend. I’m introduced “the Asian girl” but you can’t tell; I microwave cigarettes.

I’m weird because I hate Silverfish.

I was a valedictorian once and now my hair’s a ballet bun. My teacher calls me stupid.

I write bad poetry. Procrastinate to the point of tears;
no good at
making coffee.

I’ll be your girlfriend
if you buy me a bunny.

I sit like a monkey
in my desk
and dance because
I have to.

I call my mom
when I get the chance
and cry
about my sister.

I’m the girl
with musical tastes
bright pants
and a love for owls.

And this is how you see me.
Works Cited


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