

REKINDLING THE DANCER'S IMAGINATION

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

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## **Abstract**

### REKINDLING THE DANCER'S IMAGINATION

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George Mason University, 2021

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This thesis investigates the trend of dancers losing their ability to access the imagination, to engage in child-like play, and to connect emotion to dance. In the process of researching this thesis, the author utilized literature on child development, dance pedagogy, dance improvisation, and acting improvisation. Throughout the course of this investigation the author refined the thesis by writing a short research paper on the topic and by creating an original course dedicated to the rekindling of the dancer's imagination. This research culminated in the creation of two pieces of choreography whose process of creation will be described and reflected upon in this document.

## **Introduction**

In the year 1998 the pre-eminent modern dance choreographer Paul Taylor asked me to join his second company, Taylor 2. My primary job was that of a dancer and performer but, immediately upon joining I was given the added responsibility of teaching. In the two years I spent in Taylor 2 I taught in a wide range of environments and I taught an even wider range of dancer levels from elementary school children to professional company members. Included in this range were countless masterclasses and residencies at universities across the country. Upon joining Mr. Taylor's main Company in 2000, I not only continued teaching numerous masterclasses at universities while on tour but, I was also asked to teach the professional level classes at the Taylor School in New York City. Then, in 2005 I was asked by Mr. Taylor to lead any and all of the company's open auditions for new dancers. I was a member of the Paul Taylor Dance Company from 1998 to 2019. This continuous exposure to generation after generation of dancers in university programs, young professional dancers taking Taylor classes in NYC, and the dancers auditioning for the company opened my eyes to an alarming trend. I began to notice as the years passed and subsequent generations of dancers entered the dance world, that although the technical level of the dancers was elevating, imagination, emotional connection to the choreographic content, and what I believe to be artistry was sharply declining. I found as generations of dancers came and went that this was no longer an

accessible ability. This deficiency seemed to be something to which very little attention appeared to be given in the university setting. When I began teaching in 1998, I recall most students being alive with imagination and the freedom to explore. As the years went on, I found that the university students I was teaching were more and more out of touch with the emotion or character driving the choreography and it was difficult and at times impossible to coax it out of them. Then I began to notice the pre-professional dancers at the Taylor School were beginning to take class with a disconnection of face and body and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't help them break out of their shells and feel free to smile or scowl or whatever the movement mood called for. Finally, even at the open auditions, the time when most dancers put their dance lives on the line and showcase everything they have, many or most could not access their imaginations and show the dancing on their faces. They couldn't turn on their emotions and let their faces reflect the movement even when specifically told that this was what Mr. Taylor was looking for. To be fair, not every choreographer asks for emotional connection, imagination or "acting." I have danced for a few such choreographers and I had to turn off my natural tendency for the dramatic but, it was an ability I could choose to access or not. I must also be clear that, before dance captured me in its warm embrace, I was a child of the theatre. So, is it any wonder that I still prioritize imagination and emotional connection to dance or that I joined the dance company of a man whose dances are rife with characters, moods, and emotions all played out through extreme physicality? Because of my theatre beginnings and the choreographer that I danced for, I decided very early on to craft my classes with an eye towards performance. I made this focus on imagination and performance a major

component to my teaching philosophy. This recognition of the trend away from focusing on what I consider to be artistry towards technique and my decision to fight that trend in every class and rehearsal was the genesis of my thesis.

## Inspiration and Research

As my performing career came to an inevitable close, I began pursuing a graduate degree in dance with the aim to one day teach at a university with a strong dance program. For one of the required courses, I was asked to write a short research paper on a topic related to the field of dance. As I thought about what interested me, I realized that although I had spent my entire teaching career attempting to bring emotion and imagination back as a foundation of dance pedagogy, I had never taken the time to research how we might be losing our ability to access those parts of ourselves. As an assignment for the course, I was asked to read *Dance: A Creative Art Experience* by Margaret H'Doubler. Margaret D'Houbler was a pioneer in dance education in higher learning. She introduced the very first dance curriculum into a university setting at the University of Wisconsin in the early twentieth century. The third chapter of this book boils down H'Doubler's idea of what a well-rounded dancer is to be and it spoke to me on many levels as an artist and as a teacher. Almost immediately H'Doubler states the crux of my thesis when she says, "...when the movements of the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual natures are coordinated with the activities of the body, there will result an expression that is vital and dynamic." I had seen that the emotional and spiritual aspects of dance were being overlooked in favor of technical prowess in many institutes of dance

education which resulted in an endless parade of brilliantly technical dancers who had forgotten that their faces and spirits are also a part of their bodies.

H'Doubler later states that "Of all the arts, dance is peculiarly suited to such a fulfillment of the personality." She continues to describe how to achieve this by stating "Dance education must be emotional, intellectual, and spiritual, as well as physical, if dance is to contribute to the larger aims of education—the developing of personality through conscious experiencing. It should capitalize every possible resource, selecting and integrating the contributions into a totality." She is speaking here of something greater than technique and performance. She is speaking of creating a well-rounded individual but, creating a well-rounded and emotionally and intellectually integrated individual will ultimately result in a well-rounded and fully realized dancer. H'Doubler is speaking during a time when many in higher education believed that creating a fully realized person that would contribute to the community was just as important as the knowledge gained during their education. Institutions such as Black Mountain College were focused less on the technique of any of the arts and more on the growth of the artist. Josef Albers, who was a teacher of visual art at Black Mountain tries to explain his teaching method by saying, "Make the result of teaching a feeling of growing. That is the greatest incentive to continue developing yourself. The feeling of growing. And today a little bit more than yesterday. And a little bit more than it was last year. You see? That you feel: I'm getting wider and deeper and fuller..." This idea of growth as a human being, as a fully realized individual as the goal of higher education was popular during this time period. It was taken to an extreme by commune type colleges such as Black Mountain (which never

became an accredited institution) but the basic goals were sound. Create a thoughtful, introspective, emotionally inspired, problem solving student instead of simply someone with a head full of knowledge or in the case of dance, physical technique. My philosophy has always been to give yourself as large and varied a palette as possible as an artist. You may always choose to use or not use certain colors but, having access to them at any time is crucial. Yes, a dancer may find themselves dancing for someone like choreographers Trisha Brown or Merce Cunningham, where the type of emotional connection and imagination to which I am referring are utilized very little but, shouldn't we as educators and mentors cultivate the spirit and emotional connection to dance so the young dancer may have it but, not need it as opposed to the other way around?

I also found myself in agreeance with H'Doubler's and Albers's assertion that education should be a means to a well-rounded individual and in turn a well-rounded artist. I feel strongly that the current state of education focuses too strongly on typically left-brained subjects (i.e., math, science) and sees the arts as non-essential or a luxury. As my research into my thesis continued, (and I will speak on this in subsequent passages) I found this to be a shared and researched concept. Dance offers balance of left and right-brained training but with the added integration of the body and physicality. H'Doubler states that this is important because the body is the receiver and the expresser of information. It is our means to communicate. I would take that a step further into non-conscious communication. I started my performing life as a singer and an actor. People have often asked me why I chose dance over the other artforms and I tell them that I believe the body to be our basest form of communication. We smile when we are happy,

we cry when we are sad, we throw up when we are sick, we jump when we are startled. I prefer dance because I get to convey thoughts and emotions without the complication of words. I get to communicate at our most primal level. So, we are limiting our means of expression when we fail to utilize our entire instrument, our entire selves. By letting young artists work through a university dance curriculum without actively cultivating their emotional and spiritual connection to movement and their bodies and without forcing them to engage their imaginations, we do them a disservice.

H'Doubler wrote, "One of our problems is how to keep the creative impulse alive through the maturing years and how to help carry this impulse over into the realities of adult life with heightened powers and enlightened purpose." This idea launched me into the next phase of my thesis. It focused me on a question I have had as a teacher, an artist, a human, and a father. Where does our imagination go? Why can we all access make believe with complete freedom, without embarrassment or self-consciousness as children when only a portion of us can continue that freedom of imagination into our adult life? And how can we somehow keep that imagination alive within education? Most importantly, how do we rediscover that lost freedom to make-believe? In December of 2019, the website Stage Minded: Equipping Performing Artists to Thrive ([www.stageminded.com](http://www.stageminded.com)) published Phillippa Ziegenhardt's article *Emotions and the Body- Part 1: Dance Is Emotion in Motion*. Within the article Ziegenhardt states, "If we can give the expression of feelings some space in the dance studio on a regular basis, we may actually produce dancers who are more authentic, intuitive, expressive, grounded, creative and moving to audiences." She goes on to say, "...the way we typically train

dancers is so detached from this. We separate technique from expression, we focus almost exclusively on the physical elements of strength, flexibility, shape, line & form and then get frustrated when our graduating students don't know how to stand out at auditions, inspire choreographers, be creative and expressive and intense and moving.” This statement defines the main focus of my teaching philosophy and although this clear confirmation that I am not alone in the fight to regain expression and imagination in the studio, it is not a solution. Is it simply a matter of giving space and attention to the expression of feeling and imagination that is the cure all? To move forward I needed to plunge more deeply into what may be the different causes of how we lose our imagination and freedom of expression. I also needed to discover or create exercises (quite possibly from outside of dance practice) that would reawaken and enliven these abilities and that would also translate into my choreography.

I decided to follow the path of child development to try and answer the question, why is the imagination, so easily and readily accessed as children lost to many as they grow into adulthood? One leading researcher in childhood development, Dr. Stephanie Carlson, believes that there are a few reasons why this is. Dr. Carlson states, “simple lack of practice is one reason. As we are forced to turn our attention to logic, reason, and facts in school, we spend more of our time and brain power in reality—and less in creative imagination.”

How then do we overcome these obstacles and allow a young adult to gain access to their lost sense of wonder and imagination? If a student is out of practice, then they should practice. Dr. Carlson's conclusion is that practice in pretending helps you come up

with alternative ways of being—and of seeing an issue—and results in more creativity and better problem-solving.

Every theater/acting program I've ever been a part of, from middle school through undergraduate study had a movement aspect to it to help get the actors in touch with their bodies and movement. Wouldn't it be beneficial then, to introduce acting improvisation and exercises into a dance curriculum as one way to allow students to reexplore their ability to make believe? Dr. Carlson believes that active imaginations can benefit us as adults by joining the child and adult into a creative problem solver. She concludes by saying, "People would be more creative if...they prepare like an adult, and also act like a kid." According to Dr. Carlson another cause of our loss of imagination is simply the fear of being wrong. If we are wrong at work, there are negative consequences. If we are wrong at school, there are negative consequences. She goes on to theorize that since creativity inherently requires a willingness to possibly be wrong, we begin to avoid it. According to Sir Ken Robinson, an expert in creativity, "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original." So, we should strive to make every class the student takes a safe and encouraging environment that is free of judgment. Accentuating the positive and eliminating hard "rights and wrongs" in favor of gentle guidance towards growth and depth of understanding and creativity. As every dancer should know, you may be doing something right, but it can always be better. In these ways we may achieve the goal set forth by Albert Einstein who said, "To stimulate creativity, one must develop the childhood inclination to play."

## **Process**

My thesis is comprised of two works. “Never Better” (a quartet) and “Pixelated” (a solo). The quartet is more of a “mood” piece. There is less an element of direct acting and character work, but the dancers must still connect emotionally to the movement and physicalize it. The solo is more definitively geared toward my thesis as it requires acting, imagination and character development.

The quartet was in its nascent stages when I decided to steer it towards my thesis. I say steer in consideration of the fact that all of my dance making, and teaching include a dramatic element and imagery. With the creative process already begun, I then made the decision to create more specifically with my thesis’s intention. In November of 2018, I was on tour with Paul Taylor in China, and I was suffering from jet lag. At the same time there was a piece of music by the musical group Le Castle Vania entitled “John Wick Mode” which had caught my attention. Its driving beat and bombastic instrumentation immediately evoked a movement language in my mind. With this music in mind, I began creating solos in my head, while I lay awake unable to sleep. When I woke later in the morning, I would immediately grab a notebook and write out all of the choreography I had envisioned (See Figure 1).

This went on for a week and as I got deeper into the process, I found that I was seeing four dancers. Two men and two women seemed to be the right combination for this piece as I envisioned a quartet and wanted to showcase the ferocity of both male and female dancers. Also, the movement language was becoming so cohesive that I was able to put a word to it. That word was, frustrated. The music and movement I had created was sharp and violent.

QUARTET [EACH SIDE 8 8's]

MAN 1 SIDE (PL)

7-B GET TURNED BY SHOULDERS BY ~~WOMAN #1~~ WOMAN #1  
 BRUSH RT LEG BACK TO "FOOT" INTO ANCHORED JUMP, HEAD  
 BACK, LAND TWO FEET, HUNCHER OVER

1 - STEP ON LF AND BRUSH RIGHT TO FLARED 2<sup>ND</sup> POS.   
 RT ARM DOWN, LF ARM BACK w/FIST

2 - SWING LF ARM OVER TO GRAB RT ANKLE

3-4 PULL ANKLE DOWN AND READY TO LUNGE FORWARD 

5-6 SWING BACK LEG VS TO INITIATE A 180° PIVOT TO  
 FACE LUNGE SR

7-B PULL UP TO STANDING POSITION, CLEANING HANDS UP TORSO

(A-1) - (A) STEP LF 1 - STEP RIGHT, HANDS PALM IN FIST ELBOWS UP TO RT  
 2-3 SWIVEL TURT w/ ARMS CIRCULING JUST OVER HEAD, BACK IS CHICKEN TO  
 4-6 REPEAT  (A-1) HARD JAB SIDE

7-B (A-7) STEP LF, RT TO TRAP LUNGE  ~~(A-7)~~ (CROSS)

1-2 SWING HEAD LF, OPEN ARM AT ELBOW, REPEAT RT  
 3 - ARMS TAKE OFF SHIRT TO OVER HEAD, LEGS TO 

4 - SNAP ARMS DOWN. RT HAND TO SIDE IN FIST, LF TO ELBOW UNDER  
 CHIN, PARALLEL TO FLOOR

5-8 RT HAND, PULSE OVER ON COUNTS  
 LF HAND, WAVE ACROSS UNDER CHIN  
 HEAD, ROLL RT TO LF

(Figure 1, Choreographic Notes)

It was angry but, a simmering anger. This feeling was embodied by the sharp and violent movement and also the tight, clenched movement I was seeing as well. With this in mind, I continued creating in the sleepless hours of the night and I soon had an opening to the piece, followed by the four solos which then transitioned into a long phrase that would be performed in canon by the four dancers. I found two aspects of this process quite interesting in its unconventional style. First, I enjoyed creating movement without actually physicalizing it; I was always lying-in bed. I found that I was creating more interesting movement than I would have if I were physically dancing as, I most likely would have defaulted to my natural way of moving. I spent most of my adult dance life moving in the Taylor style which can be very physical and spacious. It also has very common arm shapes and ways of using the back and torso. So, by not getting up and dancing to create, I made movement that I would not have typically created on my own body. Second, I was anxious to see how much, if any, of this movement was physically possible. I saw these phrases and movements and recorded them to my notebook not knowing what was going to happen when I finally began setting them on the dancers.

Due to the long tour and the hectic lead up to the company's New York season, I had to pause all progress on the piece until the summer of 2019. At this time, I asked four Taylor Company members for their time and began setting what I had created on them. I was fortunate to have free studio time at the Taylor Studio where I set one of the solos and, after renting some studio space to set the other solos, I was able to set and rehearse

the short opening section and the canon phrase. To my surprise, I found that nearly all of the movement that I created while lying abed was achievable by the incredibly talented dancers I was working with in the studio, and I was able to find an alternative for any movement that was physically impossible to achieve. Mostly, this consisted of taking out the element of the movement that was too difficult. Whether it be a jump, a turn, or by slowing down the tempo. My goal was to rehearse and film what I had already created with the aim of having a visual source alongside of my notes. I planned to take this material with me to my first full semester on campus with access to student dancers and facilities. In the spring of 2020, I arrived on campus to both study and teach. Near the beginning of this semester an audition was held by the semester's student choreographers in which every dancer in the School of Dance was expected to participate. During my teaching, I had already spotted the two female dancers with whom I wished to work so I attended the student choreographer audition to observe and hopefully find the two male dancers. After watching only a few movement phrases I easily decided on two wonderful dancers. Both dancers showed a degree of physicality and versatility that I knew the piece would demand. They also both showed the ability to commit fully to the movement given to them.

I decided to teach the choreography from the beginning so the dancers could begin to learn the movement language together and I could guide them all as to what the mood of the piece was and how the physicality reflected that mood. I also gave the dancers the assignment to think of three to four things that happened in everyday life that frustrated or annoyed them. I wanted them to write these ideas down and write down

what they might be saying in their head as these events happened. This exercise was to serve two purposes. One, was to connect the mood or idea I wanted to convey in this piece to them in a more personal way. Second, I was composing the music for the quartet myself (which I will speak more on later) and I intended to record the dancers speaking these phrases to be used as part of the score. A few examples from what I received back from the dancers were: When I get catcalled or pursued by someone creepy, “If you don’t back up right now, you’re going to get decked in the face” or Lack of manners, “Who raised you?! SAY THANK YOU!!” At this time, I decide the working title of the piece was to be Fuss. I thought this word summed up the feeling I was after. The feeling of being fussy and frustrated but without taking things too seriously. At the time I didn’t want the dance to come across as some overindulgent statement piece commenting on society. I managed to set the opening of the piece, the canon phrase and its form, three of the four solos, and I choreographed and set the ending of the section before we broke for spring break. Unfortunately, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we never returned to that semester and my process was once again put on hold.

As part of a choreography course, I was taking that summer, I began choreographing two duets with two friends of mine who were still dancing in the Taylor company and I was given permission to use the Taylor studios in New York City. I knew that one of the student dancers in my quartet lived in New York so I reached out to her and her parents to see if she would like to continue working over the summer and if they were comfortable with her dancing in the studio. She expressed interest and her parents agreed after I explained that only myself and my friends would be using the studio and

that I was intending to follow strict safety protocols with the dancers at all times. My intention for that summer was to build material for the quartet but, also to begin work on a solo for the dancer that was to be an artistic creation that reflected my thesis as succinctly as possible. This solo turned into “Pixelated” which is the second part of my thesis.

At this point, I knew that I wanted to create movement phrases based on words and that I wanted to create these phrases with the dancers. I started these as more or less expansive gesture phrases before manipulating the time, facings, fullness, etc. I took these words and created movement with the dancer using four counts for each movement: slash, swipe, burn, grid, fall, write, diagonal, stir, drive, spit, glide, twist, bloom, shiver, love, square, bones, stack, pounce, light, crash, pool, connect, expand. I chose these words because I believed they would result in interesting and varied movement, and I intended to create the intention and mood of the piece through manipulation of the phrases and with coaching. We then modified the phrase for a two-count value per word and then one count and we created a fuller phrase with floor work, jumps, and turns. These variations of the word phrases were made with the idea of building size, energy and freneticism as the start to the third section which would lead into locomoting through the space. Since I knew these phrases were to start the third section of the dance and that I wanted them to be in the four corners of the stage, I made sure that the phrases we created remained more or less stationary. By the end of our time in the summer, I had rehearsed the dancer in her solo, the canon phrase and the opening and closing sections of the first section of the quartet in the hopes that she would be an anchor in the ensuing

rehearsals with the complete cast. We had also created and solidified her word phrase and all of its variations.

I returned to campus in the fall of 2020. George Mason and The School of Dance had decided to attempt in-person instruction following strict protocols. One of these protocols were no use of studios or any indoor rehearsing until six weeks into the semester after a proper assessment of how the protocols were working could be made. Another obvious protocol was physical distance and no touching. For me this posed small problems and larger problems. The beginning and ending of the first section needed to be rethought and rechoreographed as I had the dancers in close proximity and touching. This turned out to be rather simple to achieve and I found that it didn't compromise my artistic vision for the section. This was to be a very physical and technically challenging dance so I knew that I would not be able to rehearse the completed first section on cement or grass. The course of action I decided upon was to create the word phrases with each dancer (including an additional locomoting version of each word phrase), rehearse and solidify those phrases, as well as lightly rehearsing the solos and material from the first section so we wouldn't be starting from square one upon entering the studio space. I rehearsed with each dancer separately once a week. Additionally, on returning to campus, I learned that one of the female dancers would not be attending in person that semester, so I turned to her wonderful and quite capable understudy. As I continued to work outdoors in those preliminary six weeks, I realized I would not be afforded the time in studio to create on the dancers. Once in the studio I had six weeks with only one, two-hour rehearsal per week. That left me roughly twelve hours to choreograph and rehearse the dance before I

intended to film the work. I began spending free time between teaching technique classes, choreographing the third section, which I knew would be the most difficult and complex section of the dance because of the puzzle piece or collage way in which I intended to fit the different phrases together. I had a concrete plan as to how the section would work. I intended to take the locomoted word phrases we had created to make up the bulk of the movement source. My idea was to have the dancers begin one phrase and then join another to create short unisons before breaking away to dance their own phrases again. I wanted a constant rotation of solos, duets, trios, and unisons utilizing their locomoted phrases and movement I created. I also wanted facing changes and spatial patterns. All of this was to surprise the viewer as they watched different views of the same phrase, four different phrases happening at once and then seeing them coalesce into unison much like a canon in Baroque music. I soon realized that I would have to come up with a more organized form of notation if I were to keep all of these counts and movement fragments clear. I decided to create a grid with the 8 of music the dancers were dancing on the left column and each dancer having a row. (See Figure 2) Although, this took time to create and fill in, it ended up being invaluable as far as keeping each dancer's choreography clear and aligned with the others. I tend to be a very organized person and I enjoy order and finding the method to creating order out of chaos. I created a more specific schedule for myself as I needed to keep track of what I needed to finish setting on the dancers, what I needed to rehearse and clean with the dancers, and what I still needed to choreograph. This grid and how I crafted the third section, while being less fulfilling

from a collaborative standpoint, showed me a method which I believe will stay with me and all of my future choreographic endeavors.

	EMMA	RACHEL	CALEB	BREXIDYN
25	3 <sup>RD</sup> 8 RACHEL'S	3 <sup>RD</sup> 8 RACHEL'S	3 <sup>RD</sup> 8 RACHEL'S	WAIT
26	4 <sup>TH</sup> 8 RACHEL'S	4 <sup>TH</sup> 8 RACHEL'S	4 <sup>TH</sup> 8 RACHEL'S	WAIT
27	5 <sup>TH</sup> 8 RACHEL'S	5 <sup>TH</sup> 8 RACHEL'S	5 <sup>TH</sup> 8 RACHEL'S	ENTER 7-8 w/ OTHERS
28	RUN C.C. 1-4 SPIRALING CIRCLE AIR TURN TO LAND LF 5-6L	IN HANGING HANDS ON KNEES → 7-8 LAY BACK	ON RT LEG, LF FEET KICKS OUT, ARMS DRAG OFF OF SHOULDERS	
29	STEP BF 1, 2-3 CHANGE SIDE RT ARM SWAY IN RT 2, LF 3 TO GRIP	ELBOWS IN FRONT OF FACE 4 LUNGE LF OUT ON SPOKE, RT ARM SHOUT	4  5-8 SCUD PUNK OFF w/ SHOUTING ARMS	EMMA EXIT 4R BREXIDYN EXIT 4L CALEB EXIT 1R RACHEL EXIT 4R
30	WAIT	(WAIT 1-4) (TO 1L) CHANGE L 5-6L SWAT FLUTE L 7-8	WAIT	CHANGE RT 1-2 (TO 1R) 3-4 SWAT FLUTE RT LEG 5-6 LF RT STEP 7-8 CHANGE LF
31	CHANGE RT 1-2 (TO 4R) 3-4 SWAT R 3-4 STEP R-R 5-6 7-8 CHANGE BF	STEP R-L 1-2 CHANGE R 3-4 SWAT FLUTE R 5-6 STEP L-R 7-8	WAIT (1-4) (TO 4L) CHANGE 5-6 L SWAT FLUTE L 7-8	1-2 SWAT FLUTE LF 3-4 CHANGE RT-LF 5-8 OFF CHANGE

(Figure 2, Third Section Grid)

Once I finished creating the third section, I moved on to the middle section of the piece. My original intent for this section was to contrast the ultra-physicality of the first and third sections while also contrasting the emotional mood of the piece. While sections one and three were to reflect the frustration of the dancers, I wanted the second section to show vulnerability and weakness. I wanted to show how broken we as people sometimes

can be, whether that is our fear of rejection or abandonment or even our fear of happiness. I originally planned on this section to include a great deal of physical proximity as well as partnering. Here was another instance where I had to think of a new way to express these feelings without the closeness and touching. I decided to keep the original gestures and touching, but at a distance. The dancers were given the challenge to embrace or hold hands, to cup the other's cheek or grab their partner's wrist all from a distance. At first, I thought this would hinder my ability as a creator and the dancers' ability as performers to convey the emotional currents I wanted to show, but as I saw the section unfold, I realized that (with some coaching and work) these intimate gestures performed from afar often held more power in them than had they been performed with the intended physical proximity. The music I had written contained a definite rhythm that could be counted but the interactions I had designed were not at all choreographed to those counts. I wanted it to feel pedestrian as opposed to danced. This raised the problem of musical timing. As with most dancers, especially young ones, the gestures and interchanges were rushed or not given their full due. So, a lot of time was spent embracing the sparseness of the movement and fulfilling each gesture and pause. This not only helped fill out the music and create proper musical timing but more importantly, it clarified and gave importance to each moment.

The third section of this piece was the "bear" to create and coach in such a short period of time as my intention was complexity of both movement and architecture, as opposed to the second section in which there was time to give the emotional content its due. This section needed every movement to be infused with the frenetic, angry tone that

I was after. Taking my thesis idea of connecting the movement to an emotion or state of being was the most difficult in the opening and closing sections as the movement was more abstractly physical and less purely gestural. The dancers needed to not only solidify the movement on the correct counts and in the right spacing, but they needed constant reminding that no movement be left untouched when it came to emotional connection to the mood. With the condensed rehearsal period I was also banking on costume and lighting to assist the dancers in fully entering and engaging in the world I was trying to create.

I decided that the costuming, hair, and makeup of the piece should take the viewer into a nondescript time and place. I decided early on that I wanted the dancers in white jump suits to reflect the idea of a prison or asylum, something institutional. The plain, white jumpers lacked the other worldly feel I was after and I felt they needed something more, so I collaborated with an artist friend who painted the costumes for me. Due to the ongoing pandemic, I was forced to add masks to the design, which I painted to match the jumpers. Obviously, the addition of masks compromised the dancers' ability to convey emotion through their faces leading to the necessity of even more extreme physical embodiment of the mood. To further present a "where are we?" feel to the dance, I designed a severe look for the dancers' hair and added black make up under the eyes. I wanted the lighting to be simple, so my only design elements were a center special at the beginning of the piece and four corner specials at the beginning of the third section to create a feeling of isolation for the dancers, following the emotional closeness of the second section. I also had a few ideas for the color palate if each section. I had decided to

write and record my own music for the piece. One reason that I chose to do this is that, quite simply, I enjoy writing music and I was inspired to do so. I could make of the music whatever I wanted as far as length, instrumentation and feel. Quite often I will find a piece of music that I would like to choreograph to, but it is too short, or it takes an unexpected turn that doesn't fit with the choreography. I knew I could avoid all of these pitfalls by creating something of my own, specifically designed for the work. The second reason for writing my own music was that, if I decided to show the filmed work on an online platform, I wouldn't need to get permission from the musical artist or publishing house to do so. After choreographing the second section and seeing its effect on the feeling of the dance, I changed the title to "Never Better." I felt that the title "Fuss" and its tongue in cheek nature no longer worked. "Never Better" was meant to have a double meaning. The first was the reply you may give if someone asks you how you are doing and no matter how terrible things may be, you paint on a smile and utter "Never better." The other being the idea that these people may never get better.

The creation of the solo, "Pixelated" was the perfect exercise in which to explore my thesis. I had already taught technique class to the dancer for this solo and also worked with her in "Never Better." I found her to be the perfect dancer to tackle this solo as she was technically brilliant but, self admittedly, cut off from her imagination and emotions while dancing. I had the idea to create a solo that was at once physical, but also extremely gestural. I wanted a piece of work that would not separate acting and playing from the dance movement. I wanted the solo to contain rapid changes in emotions and actions, so I began to write down ideas. My original notes have actions such as, wave and chase

goodbye, look in a mirror laugh and then get mad, get sick and throw up, get shot and wipe off the blood, be a little kid, sob. We began working in the summer at the same time that we were generating material for the quartet. I knew that she was apprehensive and scared to begin the process because she knew how difficult and uncomfortable this would be for her. The main obstacle in the creation of the solo was slowly getting the dancer comfortable with her emotions and portraying them with me watching. It was obvious to me through rehearsals and discussions with the dancer that she had spent too much time in the dance world where being “right” and achieving technical perfection took priority over self-expression and imagination. This discovery brought me solidly back to my original thesis that not enough focus was placed on imagination and artistic exploration in most technique classes. I constantly asked her for more or deeper emotions, and I also worked with her on actually “seeing” what she was imagining. These ideas turned out to be two separate hurdles to jump over and needed to be approached in different ways. I always find it interesting how most dancers, students, or even just people can remember a strong moment of feeling anger, sadness or joy, but can’t access that feeling out of context. I follow the technique of some practitioners of method acting where you recall similar experiences from your own life and use “affective memory” to stimulate the desired response. One moment in particular that was difficult for the dancer was when I asked her to look at herself in an imaginary mirror, laugh at herself and then get suddenly very angry, saying to herself “fuck you!” It took her the entire choreographic and rehearsal process along with the “homework” assignment to practice in a real mirror before she finally felt comfortable and fully embraced and felt the anger. Then there was

the task of getting her to access her imagination and play. What I found worked best was to take each moment out of the dance and have her play only with that moment. I asked her what she was seeing, asking for specifics. There is a moment in which she is a child pointing at something she very much wants. I asked her to make sure she knew what she was seeing that she wanted. Was it a doll or toy or candy? I also asked her to make sure that her visualization of the world around her matched that of a small sized child. Overall, the moments began to deepen and ring true, and this was due in part to our work together but the greatest factor to her success was time. She needed the time and practice to find her imagination again and to dismantle the walls that life as an adult had built. I spent many hours getting her to realize that she should not be embarrassed to be silly or vulnerable in front of me or others. I often demonstrated things for her to not only convey ideas that words could not convey but, to also share in what I was asking her to do. One rehearsal I asked her if she thought Jim Carrey was either stupid or awesome for the incredibly silly things that he had done on camera. I asked her if she was embarrassed for an actor when she saw them cry in a film or whether she was moved and awed by their performance. She responded that she thought Carrey was awesome and that she was awed by actors. I told her that her audience would feel the same about her if she decided to really dive into what I was asking of her. This reframe seemed to help her abandon a great deal of her inhibitions. As I stated, above all it was practice that made the difference in her performance. She was out of practice with child-like play and truly integrating her imagination into her dancing. Although the process was slow, I felt as though progress was made each and every rehearsal. On filming day, once in lights and costume, having

logged hours of imaginative practice, the dancer truly embodied the character and made the solo her own.

For the solo I chose the music “France7” by Mr. Oizo. I found this music to be perfectly frenetic and jumpy to pair with the rapid changes of mood in the solo. I decided that I wanted this character to appear “carefully disheveled” so, for the costume I chose ratty, cut off shorts, an old, distressed t-shirt, baggy socks, and beat up tennis shoes, which took care of the disheveled element. To make it careful, I had the dancer (who is a wonderful visual artist) draw and write on the shoes and shorts. My only guidance was to make it manic and eclectic so as to reflect the character’s personality. I designed the hair to be down and styled paired with nice street make up. I was hoping to present the image of someone who tries hard to look like she didn’t care about her appearance, when part of her actually did. Thankfully, as this was a solo, she was able to perform without a mask, as I’m not sure whether this solo would have worked with her face covered. I wanted very simple lighting for the piece, so I ended up with a lights up cue with warm tones and that was enough. I didn’t feel lighting changes or specials would have added to the piece in any way. On the contrary, I felt they would have distracted from what was important in the piece. I wanted her manic changes in mood and thoughts to show in a consistent atmosphere.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, I was not going to be allowed a live performance of these works. I filmed both dances and had them edited for online viewing. I made a mistake when filming the dances when I used cameras of differing quality to film different angles so, editing the footage into a consistent look was difficult, however I

don't believe "Never Better" suffered too greatly from this inconsistency. In my mind, I felt the goal was documentation, to truly show the choreography more than it was to create a slick dance film. "Pixelated" actually benefited from the mismatched camera quality as the edits ended up augmenting the jerky transitions that the dancer was performing.

## Reflection

As this process unfolded, I was struck by how important daily practice of child-like play and imagination truly is to the relearning, growth, and keeping of these skills. My research had stated that this was the case but not until I had the time and opportunity to put this into practice did I truly see the results. There were times during the process that I began to waiver in my belief that consistent coaching and time could unearth the buried imagination and emotional access the dancers needed. There were times I believed that possibly, our current focus on social media, the near constant exterior input via devices and our results driven culture had permanently extinguished the imaginations and introspection of our young people. Each piece presented different challenges in that regard.

“Never Better” was difficult in that I had decided to make a very challenging dance in regard to the physical demands and choreographic complexity that the dancers had to execute. Given the time constraints of the short creative period, I didn’t have the time I would have liked to coach the dancers and allow them to slowly find what I was asking them to find. I was forced to spend the majority of rehearsal time coaching the movement and cleaning the architecture of the piece. Since I didn’t have the time to set aside for exercises on building emotional connection, I settled on the tact of constantly reminding the dancers of what the emotional undercurrent of the piece was. I reminded

them to let the violent movement affect their emotional direction and in turn, let the emotion affect the movement. Because of that, I did see progress in the form of the dancers more consistently and quickly approaching the movement from the correct emotional and physical place. I did force myself to spend precious rehearsal time on the second section and the honesty that its gestures demanded. This section was not driven by extreme physicality like the other two sections so time needed to be taken to assure the gestures would ring true to the observer. I spent time stripping away the gestures that the dancers thought represented the word or feeling that I wanted in a dance. Then, I helped them discover what the genuine gesture would be.

“Pixelated” was challenging because although I had started the process in the summer, leaving me with more rehearsal time, I had to dig much deeper and bring the dancer much further along in utilizing her imagination. This dance had no complicated movement or architecture to hide behind. I knew from the outset that the success or failure of the piece rested almost solely on the dancer’s ability to fully inhabit the character. Being in touch with emotions was only half of the battle. She needed to access and switch those emotions quickly. She also needed to see the things she was seeing so perfectly clear that the observer would be able to see them too. I took a lot of time having her slow down and think. I needed her to really think about why she was doing things. There is a sequence in which she is shot, she looks down, sees the blood, touches and feels it to make sure it is blood, and then begins to wipe the blood off of her hands. This is a perfect example of a place where I had to utilize involved coaching for her to take time for her thought process. She needed to take each gesture separately as if it was the

very first time that she was experiencing them and she needed to take even a little more time than that so the observer could see and discover with her. Looking back, I must admit that there were times in which I was scared that the dancer would never break through. I felt that I had tried all of my tricks to open her up to the experience and to get her in touch with her inner child with minimal gains. On those days I had to remind myself of my research. I had to give her more time and practice. One internal obstacle I always must overcome when coaching young dancers is how to blend critique and encouragement. I know as a former performer how frustrating or discouraging it can be to try to perform something well just to hear that it's not correct yet. I knew the "Pixelated" soloist to be a dancer who is very hard on herself and when discouraged, could quickly spiral down emotionally to the point that no progress could be made. Knowing this, I made sure to not push her when she appeared to get discouraged. I also tried my best to continually come up with new methods, exercises, or analogies to coax what I wanted out of her since telling her the same things over and over would only frustrate her. I knew that it was my job as the choreographer and also as someone attempting to reinvigorate a young performer's imagination, to find the way or ways to get what I wanted for me and for my dancer. With time, focus, and nurturing she eventually broke through and put a brilliant performance on film.

Choreographing solely in my mind was somewhat of an experiment to say the least. I had never thought to create movement without using my body and I never would have had I not been envisioning choreography while lying awake at 3AM. I found this method oddly rewarding as I took the phrases from my mind and put them to paper. I

didn't feel the need for structure and I never overthought what I was making. I just wrote it down after it surfaced in my mind. On a few occasions I found that my brain had made a solo that was shorter than the others so I would fill it out in my waking hours, still demanding of myself to create in the mind. I believe that this will become a method for my choreography from now on. I find that I create more interesting movement and that I create movement that might be foreign to the way my body moves. I'm hoping that continuing this method in the future will allow me a much broader choreographic movement language. Another new method (at least new for me) that I incorporated in this process, that I intend to utilize in future work, is the grid I created for the third section of "Never Better." This method of aligning each subdivision of music (8's in the case of "Never Better") with each dancer's track simplified and clarified my choreographic notation. I could easily give each dancer their choreography, without getting lost, and with the knowledge that I was teaching them all the same amount of choreography, and that it would all line up. This was actually more important when I was creating and notating the choreography. Being able to look down at the simple grid and know where each dancer was in their choreography and where they were on stage on any given count streamlined and organized the process a great deal.

The shortage of creative and rehearsal time for "Never Better" was the main reason that I needed to implement the grid. I was not going to be afforded the luxury of creating on the dancers as I went. Instead, I needed to enter each rehearsal with finished choreography to teach to the dancers. In general, I would prefer to create with the dancers, and I did get to do my fair share of that while we were still creating and

rehearsing the word phrases outside. This process showed me that I prefer creating alongside the dancers as much as possible, as it produces a more interesting result. Each dancer will bring a different approach and a unique way of moving and thinking about movement to the studio so involving them in creating results in a much broader movement palate. Because I was lucky enough to have summer studio time with the dancer in “Pixelated”, I got to spend time creating in the studio with her. Considering that the dancer was already feeling vulnerable about what I was asking her to do, I think that this was the necessary process for the solo. I found that the more I could deeply connect the movement and gestures to the dancer personally by having her help create them, the closer she came to achieving a performance that read as genuine.

As I’ve explained, I was forced to film the dances due to the suspension of live performances. This was the biggest detriment to what I set out to achieve in choreographing these works in regard to my thesis. Having a live audience watch a dancer perform a dance that they may not feel completely comfortable with is the point at which the dancer either caves into their self-consciousness or immerses themselves in the world behind the proscenium. I would have learned a lot about the dancers and where they were in the process of exploring their imaginations and emotional connections if I could have seen them perform in front of a live audience. I feel that the solo dancer in particular, would have benefited greatly from hearing an audience react to the wonderful things that she was doing. Most performers, once they have braved that final test of exposing their insecurities to a watchful audience, take a gigantic step towards incorporating their emotions and imagination all of the time. Nothing is more confirming

than having that frightful experience and coming out okay on the other side and even more, receiving positive reinforcement in the form of laughter, awe struck gasps, or applause.

Throughout researching the topic of the loss of imagination and the ability to child-like play as we grow into adulthood, I realized how beneficial it would be for all adults to relearn these skills simply for the goal of more creative thinking. Furthermore, I believe it is not only beneficial for dancers to relearn and practice these skills, but it is vital. There were varying levels of disconnection from imagination and emotion amongst the dancers I worked with. All of them needed a great deal of coaching and reminding that they must convey the intent with their faces as well as their bodies. They needed coaching and reminding that the choreography is only the starting point of conveying the emotion or mood of the piece. The choreography must also be infused with the emotion it is intending and they must use their imaginations to conjure that emotion.

The process of choreographing my thesis works reinforced my belief that not enough is being done in the dance curriculum of higher education to engage dancers in their imaginations and connect them to their emotions while dancing. There are many professors and faculty, including myself who involve these ideas in their teaching philosophy but that is not enough. I believe that there ought to be designed courses, such as my Dancer's Imagination course, focusing on this issue in every dance curriculum. If we actively work to rekindle our dancers' imaginations and to reconnect them to their emotions while dancing, we will once again be infusing the dance world with more

thoughtful and creative problem solvers and choreographers, and more dynamic performers.

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## **Biography**

Robert Kleinendorst received his B.A. in Dance from Luther College in 1995. Immediately upon graduation, Robert moved to New York City to pursue a dance career. Robert attended daily classes at the Paul Taylor Dance Company while dancing for Anna Sokolow's Players' Project, Gail Gilbert Dance Ensemble, and Cortez and Co. In 1998, Robert was asked to join Paul Taylor's second company, Taylor 2. Robert was then asked to join Mr. Taylor's main company in 2000 in which he danced until his retirement in 2019. In his 21 years with Paul Taylor, Robert danced 98 roles in 77 of Taylor's dances and also originated 28 roles with Mr. Taylor. He also originated roles with choreographers Larry Keigwin, Doug Varone, Lila York, Doug Elkins, Bryan Arias, Pam Tanowitz, Margie Gillis, and Kyle Abraham. In addition to his performing career, Robert taught master classes domestically and abroad as well as teaching at the Taylor School in New York. Robert also took on the responsibilities of assistant rehearsal directing and administrating all of Mr. Taylor's company auditions. Currently Robert is completing his MFA in Dance at George Mason University and beginning his investigation into his own choreography.