

CHOREOGRAPHY GUIDELINES AND BEST PRACTICES

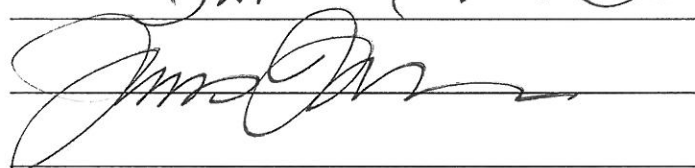
by

Christopher d'Amboise  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Dance

Committee:

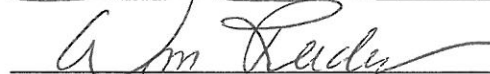


Director

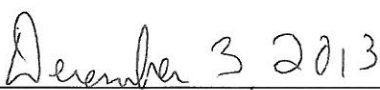




Director of the School of Dance



Dean, College of Visual and  
Performing Arts

Date: 

Spring Semester 2013  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

## Choreography Guidelines and Best Practices

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

By

Christopher d'Amboise

Director: Dan Joyce, Associate Professor  
School of Dance

Fall Semester 2013  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Copyright 2013 Christopher d'Amboise  
All Rights Reserved

## **DEDICATION**

To KC in the house, Ken Dodd, and T-man and the Geeg:  
“Better when we’re together.”

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the following people who offered me guidance, support, and encouragement throughout this process and every day: Buffy Price, Susan Shields, Dan Joyce, Jim Lepore, Karen Reedy, Kim Harris, Marjorie Summerall, Linda Miller, Dena Hudson, Asma Omarzad and Bill Reeder. Special thanks to Victoria Salmon for her wisdom, patience, and editing magic.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1. The Problem .....	3
Rationale.....	3
Theoretical Framework .....	4
Statement of the Problem .....	5
Delimitations .....	6
Limitations .....	6
Definition of Terms .....	6
Chapter 2. Review of the literature .....	8
Analysis of Existing Literature .....	10
1. <i>A Primer for Choreographers</i> by Lois Ellfeldt .....	11
2 and 3. <i>Pre-Classic Dance Forms</i> by Louis Horst and <i>Modern Dance Forms in Relation to the Other Modern Arts</i> by Louis Horst and Carroll Russell .....	11
4. <i>The Art of Making Dances</i> by Doris Humphrey.....	13
5. <i>The Intimate Act of Choreography</i> by Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chapin...	15
6. <i>Choreography and the Specific Image</i> by Daniel Nagrin .....	16
7. <i>A Choreographer's Handbook</i> by Jonathan Burrows .....	18
8. <i>Choreography: A Basic Approach Using Improvisation</i> by Sandra Cerny Minton.....	20
9. <i>Dance Composition: A Practical Guide to Creative Success in Dance Making</i> by Jacqueline M. Smith-Autard.....	21
10. <i>The Creative Habit</i> by Twyla Tharp .....	22
Summary .....	23
Chapter 3. Examination of Balanchine and Robbins .....	25
Balanchine .....	25
<i>Don Quixote</i> 1966.....	25
New York City Ballet.....	27
Berlin 1980 .....	28
New Ballets .....	30
Father and Son .....	31
Jerome Robbins .....	33
1969 .....	33
The Steps He Asked For...and Then One More .....	35
Almost Right Is Not Right.....	36
Versions: The Other Side of the Coin .....	36

Older: 1997 .....	38
Leaving: 1987 .....	40
Dance Matters.....	41
Balanchine and Robbins and the “Pull” .....	42
Conclusion.....	43
Chapter 4. Examination of personal choreographic history.....	44
Part 1: The Beginning .....	44
The Playboy Club, 1978.....	45
Blue Suede Shoes #1: “Hernando’s Hideaway” .....	46
Blue Suede Shoes #2: “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” .....	47
Part 2: Development.....	48
1987-1990, Off-Center Ballet.....	48
The Strange Pull .....	50
The Muse .....	50
Part 3: Pennsylvania Ballet .....	51
Franklin Court: Commissions.....	51
<i>The Golden Mean</i> : Dramaturgy.....	53
<i>The Golden Mean</i> Part 2: Re-Do .....	55
<i>The Planets</i> : When the Music is Bigger Than the Steps .....	56
<i>Glazunov Variations</i> : What’s in the Basement?.....	58
<i>Dumbarton Oaks</i> : The Power of Music.....	60
<i>Da Mummy, Niet Mummy</i> : Muse, Intention, Spark .....	61
Part Four: Freelancing: The Good/The Bad.....	66
<i>Children of the Titanic</i> : Just Say, “Yes.” .....	67
<i>Bach in Four Voices</i> : Another Spark.....	70
<i>Symposium</i> : Abstract Meaning .....	71
<i>Circle of Fifths</i> : Image.....	72
Chapter 5. Reflective Comments .....	75
<i>Volatizing the Esters</i> : 2013, Calm After a Storm.....	75
Summary .....	79
Appendix: The Lessons.....	81
Works Cited .....	89

## **ABSTRACT**

### **CHOREOGRAPHY GUIDELINES AND BEST PRACTICES**

Christopher d'Amboise, MFA

George Mason University, 2013

Thesis Director: Dan Joyce

This thesis study examines and reviews the existing literature on choreographic craft and process. In addition, it adds to the existing literature on the subject of choreography including elements of craft, process, theory, common pitfalls, as well as best practices. The historical figures George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins are studied in regard to their choreographic process and practices. A personal exploration of my own career as a choreographer is included from which practical lessons are distilled. A list of these choreography lessons are offered as guidelines for professional as well as aspiring choreographers.



## INTRODUCTION

What step should come next? This is a question every choreographer is faced with each time he or she enters a studio to create a dance. Learning the answer to that question can be a lifelong quest.

In 1978, as an aspiring choreographer, I was extremely fortunate to become a dancer in the New York City Ballet and to work directly with George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. Working with these choreographic geniuses gave me insight into craft, artistry, and even an understanding as to why someone choreographs in the first place. I was able to witness them at work, perform their repertoires, and participate as a dancer in the choreographic process. In addition, I was able to ask them advice about my own choreography. As an eighteen year old, and a new member of the company, I was working on my third piece of ballet choreography when I got stuck. I literally ran out of ideas and had no clue which “step” to choreograph next. Mr. “B” (the nickname the dancers had for Balanchine) welcomed me into his office and listened quietly as I explained my predicament. It has taken me thirty years and the creation of over one hundred ballets to understand what he told me that day.

Jerome Robbins, universally considered the greatest “Broadway” choreographer, as well as a great ballet choreographer, often seemed genuinely baffled by choreography.

I worked extensively with him on creating new work and when I got up the nerve to ask him to look at some of my choreography, his response was unexpected and humbling.

In my thirty years of creating new choreography for ballet companies and musical theater I have gained a perspective that has enabled me to form theories and practices of chorographic craft and artistry. I have also been able to recognize and distill the many lessons I learned from Balanchine and Robbins. Hopefully the sum of these lessons can be of use to an aspiring choreographer and offer a singularly subjective and personal answer to the question: What step comes next?

## CHAPTER 1. THE PROBLEM

### Rationale

**“If ballet is to have a future, it needs new choreography.”**

**– Alastair Macaulay, *The New York Times***

The traditions of the art of dance are commonly handed down interpersonally as one generation passes on knowledge to the next. Very few dancers rely on textbooks to teach them techniques of dance, and they would find such literature of limited value. They receive their training and experience through direct teaching from experienced professionals. But in the field of choreography, outside of a university setting, there are no systems, opportunities, or programs for a student to learn from professional choreographers. In fact, professional choreographers rarely, if ever, teach choreography. The most common path for a choreographer is to become a dancer first, and through performance begin to gain some familiarity with the elements of choreographic composition and process. Then he or she might try creating some choreography with the voluntary participation of friends and peers. If fortunate, a student might receive some feedback from the company choreographer, but there is no guarantee that this feedback will be of any substantive value. Aspiring choreographers are, for the most part, on their own with little direct access to the knowledge amassed by their predecessors.

The obvious place to find professional guidance would be to study the existing texts and curricula offered by professional choreographers. However, current texts published on the subject of choreographic practice are very few in number. Many are outdated, and their relevance to today's artists is limited. Others are overly technical or academic in form and are daunting to a student. The vast majority of the literature on choreographic guidance is written by people who have studied the choreography of others, or have modest choreographic experience. Of the few books written by universally acknowledged successful professional choreographers, there is no clearly stated, practical, and contemporary guidebook for developing and successfully practicing the art of choreography. Therefore there is a need for more literature illuminating the study of choreography including craft, artistry, and process. The art of choreography is as complex and layered as the art of music composition or the art of writing. In these parallel fields students have ample opportunity and access to direct interaction with professionals as well as a great wealth of literature written by professionals to guide them. However, choreography students, even in university bachelor of fine arts programs, must achieve their education with limited guidance from working choreographers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The education I was fortunate to receive through my interaction with Jerome Robbins and George Balanchine and the extensive experience I have had in creating new choreography have given me a unique perspective on how these two artists addressed the practice of choreography.

This thesis examines the existing literature, memoirs, and guidebooks on the subject of choreography and examines the valuable contributions these works offer to a choreographer or choreographic student. It also reviews my personal knowledge of the choreographic practices of two major choreographers, Jerome Robbins and George Balanchine. From this material I distill information pertinent to the study of choreography and best practices.

This thesis includes an in-depth examination of my own history as a choreographer. I have been a choreographer for over thirty years and have created over one hundred original works. Over that period, my understanding of the challenges and obstacles in creating a successful piece of choreography has evolved and grown, as has my understanding of what elements of craft need to be present for a work to succeed. These “lessons,” gleaned from my experience and culled from my studies, are organized into a contemporary and succinct list of guidelines and useful practices for professional choreographers and serious aspiring students of choreography, presented in this thesis as a short booklet of choreographic theories, maxims, guidelines, and best practices. This contribution offers a unique and contemporary perspective which complements the existing literature on the subject as well as contributes new ideas to the field.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Current texts published on the subject of choreographic practice and process are few in number. Their relevance to today’s artist is limited, as they are often outdated or overly technical in form and offer little practical and digestible information to aspiring choreographers.

## **Delimitations**

The study was limited to the practice of choreography only. Other related issues such as performance, dance technique, and historic repertoire were not included. The study was also limited to exploring choreography of modern dance and ballet—although the conclusions drawn in regard to successful choreography may indeed be applied to all forms of dance. The study included the examination of two historic choreographers as well as the my own choreographic experience.

## **Limitations**

Neither historical figure, George Balanchine nor Jerome Robbins, is living. Therefore, all information regarding them was based on published material and personal experiences with them.

## **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are used in specific ways.

*Choreography*: Translated from Greek, choreography literally means “dance writing.” However, in today’s context choreography is the art of arranging movement and movement sequences into a dance.

*Ballet*: Ballet is an artistic dance form performed to music, using precise and highly formalized set steps and gestures. Classical ballet, which originated in Renaissance Italy and established its present form during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is characterized by light, graceful movements and the use of pointe shoes with reinforced toes (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

*Modern Dance:* Modern dance is a free expressive style of dancing that developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to the rigid formal technique of ballet (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

## CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter presents an overview of the existing theory and research literature on the subject of choreography and best practices.

As of this writing, Google identifies 111,839 books available on the *art of writing*. There are 33,478 books on the *art of musical composition*. There are only 988 books on the *art of choreography*. Of the 988 books on choreography, only a small percentage deal directly with exploring the craft or art of choreography. This comparison is indicative of the disparity between choreography and the parallel art forms in regard to existing methodological literature and technical writings. For this study I reviewed twenty-five books which dealt directly with the technique of choreography or had relevant information.

The following ten books are reviewed in this chapter:

- *The Art of Making Dances* (1959) by Doris Humphrey
- *Choreography and the Specific Image* (2001) by Daniel Nagrin
- *A Choreographer's Handbook* (2010) by Jonathan Burrows
- *A Primer for Choreographers* (1967) by Lois Ellfeldt
- *Choreography: A Basic Approach Using Improvisation* (2007) by Sandra Cerny Minton
- *Pre-Classic Dance Forms* (1953) by Louis Horst



- *Modern Dance Forms* (1961) by Louis Horst and Carroll Russell
- *The Intimate Act of Choreography* (1982) by Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin
- *Dance Composition: A Practical Guide to Creative Success in Dance Making* (2010) by Jacqueline M. Smith-Artaud
- *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life* (2003) by Twyla Tharp.

The following books were researched but were not found to contain any pertinent information:

- *Dance: A Creative Art Experience* (1940) by Margaret N. H'Doubler
- *Choreographer and Composer: Theatrical Dance and Music in Western Culture* (1983) by Baird Hastings
- *A Sense of Dance. Exploring Your Movement Potential* (1996) by Constance A. Schrader
- *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (1987) by Sondra Horton Fraleigh
- *Balanchine: Celebrating a Life in Dance* (2009) by Costas
- *Balanchine: A Biography* (1984) by Bernard Taper
- *Jerome Robbins* (Library of American Choreographers) (2005) by Brian Seibert
- *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography: It Starts From Any Point* (2011) by Steven Spier
- *Choreography: The Art of the Body* (2011) by Jane Winearls

- *Choreography: Theories and Exercises in Composition* (1976) by Leonide Massine
- *Unveiling the Mysteries of Choreography: A Girlfriend's Guide to Belly Dancing* (2012) by Sharon M. Ross (This is an actual book. No, I did not actually read it.)
- *Changes: Notes on Choreography* (1968) by Merce Cunningham, edited by Francis Starr
- *One Flat Thing Observed* (2009), the essay on choreography by William Forsythe
- *Dance Composition Basics: Capturing the Choreographer's Craft* (2006) by Pamela Anderson Sofras
- *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader* (2009) with many authors, edited by Jo Butterworth and Liesbeth Wildschut.

### **Analysis of Existing Literature**

The existing literature available on the art and craft of choreography falls into three categories: personal memoirs of artists, studies about practicing choreographers, and academic writings. Although all of these books contain valuable information, on the whole they fall short of being sufficiently useful to the contemporary student of choreography.

This section reviews the ten books whose content I found to be directly relevant and useful for the purposes of this study. They represent the pertinent literature currently available on the subject of choreographic best practices.

### ***1. A Primer for Choreographers by Lois Ellfeldt***

Lois Ellfeldt is Professor Emeritus at the University of Southern California where she was founder, chair, and director of the dance department for thirty-two years. She studied with Marian Chace, Lester Shafer, Mary Weidman, Rudolf von Laban, and Doris Humphrey, among others.

*A Primer for Choreographers* is a guidebook for the beginner. It is intended as a map for students to develop their own process. It is a simple and accessible book most effective for a student who has no prior experience or understanding of choreography. Its stick figure illustrations and relatively concise content make it useful and important to a novice, but it is of limited value for the professional or mature student.

### ***2 and 3. Pre-Classic Dance Forms by Louis Horst and Modern Dance Forms in Relation to the Other Modern Arts by Louis Horst and Carroll Russell***

Louis Horst (1884-1964) was an American (Kansas City, Missouri) composer and dance educator. He was instrumental in defining the principles of modern dance choreographic practice. Because he considered himself a musician first his work was concerned primarily with musical structure and its correlation to choreographic composition. He taught choreography at Barnard, Sarah Lawrence, Columbia, and Julliard universities. He wrote two books: *Pre-Classic Dance Forms* (1937) and *Modern Dance Forms* (1960) with Carroll Russell.

In *Pre-Classic Dance Forms*, Horst concerns himself with the study of classic dances and music forms, believing that the study of these early forms creates an “elementary course in formal dance composition” (vi). Through the examination of dance

and music forms from the Pavane to the Chaconne, Horst believed he, “developed a sense for dance form among young and aspiring choreographers; it developed a restraint in dance composition, an intellectual approach to the creation of dance” (Gilfond vii).

Although the book offers some general studies of dance and choreography, Horst is clearly most interested in music forms and the book offers very little substance for today’s student or professional concerned with craft, artistry, and choreographic practice.

Horst and Russell’s *Modern Dance Forms in Relation to the Other Modern Arts* is concerned with contemporary choreography and offers specific guidelines and suggestions for best practices. Some of these are universal and very useful. For example, the first paragraph of the chapter “First Rules of Composition” states, “Composition is based on only two things: a conception of a theme and the manipulation of that theme” (23). I believe this to be a fundamental truth and an important maxim for all choreographers. However, where Horst and Russell detour—or more precisely, where they let their subjective admiration of music form and structure overpower purely choreographic concerns—can be seen in the argument that the best form for a dance is an A/B/A progression. They further limit the movement possibilities by giving simplistic and limiting examples: “The first theme is stated in the A and manipulated; B is a contrasting theme, and after its manipulation the finish is a return to A. Material introduced for the theme of B should be fresh and contrasting. For instance, if A includes a turn, do something in B which does not turn” (24).

Both books offer a solid basis for the understanding of where Western dance forms came from, what they were, as well as some sound basic principles for

choreography. As this book was written so early in the evolution of modern dance, it has a slightly defensive tone as if they felt they must justify modern dance and its principles. Horst's work was groundbreaking for his time and now illuminates how far choreography has developed since he created his curriculum.

#### **4. The Art of Making Dances by Doris Humphrey**

One of the most successful and useful books on the art and craft of choreography was written by Doris Humphrey (1895-1958), an influential figure in twentieth century dance. She was both a dancer and choreographer and is considered one of the founders of American modern dance along with Martha Graham and Katherine Dunham. Some of her choreographic works which are still in contemporary repertoire include *Air for the G String*, *Invention*, *Soaring*, *Two Ecstatic Themes*, and *Water Study*.

Her book, *The Art of Making Dances*, was published posthumously in 1959 and it is still used as a text for dance composition courses. One of its strengths is its authentic and authoritative tone. She has a great deal to say on the subject which is both anecdotal and analytical. She treats her subject with clarity, a strong sense of what is important and, perhaps more importantly, what is not important.

From the perspective of 2013, her book is somewhat dated. She was pioneering new ideas which were not commonly accepted or even understood and therefore, appropriately, takes time to explain them. Chapters like, "Choreographers Are Special People" and "The Sleeping Beauty" seem obvious and overly simplistic for today's far more knowledgeable dance enthusiasts.

However, her chapters on craft, although written in a style that contemporary students might find slow, are filled with valuable insight, guidance, and examples of successful practices. Her chapter titled “Check List” is a very succinct distillation of some of the most useful insight into choreographic craft and artistry. Here she writes almost in a contemporary style (sound bites geared for a short attention span) and she lays out maxims that are both illuminating and humorous. Here are some examples which I feel are not only valuable to choreographers but elegantly stated:

- “Symmetry is lifeless.”
- “The eye is faster than the ear.”
- “Movement looks slower and weaker on the stage.”
- “All dances are too long.”
- “Don’t be a slave to, or a mutilator of, the music.”
- “Don’t leave the ending to the end” (a particular favorite of mine). (159)

Of all the books I scrutinized, *The Art of Making Dances* offers students who are willing to overlook the dated aspects of the prose the most important, inspired, and practical advice to guide them in the pursuit of achieving excellence.

I have included here two other passages which relate directly to my own observation and philosophy:

- “No matter what the subject, the first test to apply is one word—action. Does the theme have inherently the motivation for movement?” (48)

- “It is probably rare for a choreographer to deliberately make a choice of a theme by rational means. He is more likely to be seized by an enthusiasm which wells up from the subconscious and demands to be born.” (32)

## **5. The Intimate Act of Choreography by Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chapin**

*The Intimate Act of Choreography* is a widely used reference book on the subject of choreography. It was written by two university professors with backgrounds in modern dance improvisation. This book is filled with exercises and suggested improvisations and is very useful for a teacher who is looking for clearly articulated elements of dance composition. For example, “A *phrase* is the smallest and simplest unit of form. It is a short but complete unit in that it has a beginning, middle, and end. A phrase is to a dance as a sentence is to a book. Just as a sentence is comprised of separate words, so a phrase is made up of individual movements” (23).

Although the information offered in the book is precise and in most cases very accurate, the text is overly protracted and lugubrious. To ask a student to read two pages explaining the idea of “stillness” is daunting and, I believe, loses the trust and commitment of the reader. The book is a scholarly endeavor with an earnest desire to identify and define—in detail—every aspect of dance. The result is a book which is successful as a dictionary of terms and as a series of improvisational class exercises.

In the preface to the book the authors state the premise that, “improvisation is a good way to learn choreography. Such experiential learning by doing builds intuitive and kinesthetic knowledge in combination with intellectual understanding” (xiii). It is here, in the statement of their philosophy, that I find the book to be of limited value, at least as a

comprehensive exploration of the craft and art of choreography. To state that improvisation is a means to learn choreography is to leave out the whole spectrum of craft, vision, intention, purpose, and artistry. Improvisation is an extraordinary tool to discover and develop successful movement or movement phrases. It is not, however, choreography. The student who has completed a successful improvisation has not choreographed a work. It is what the student does with the results of a successful improvisation that illuminates the process and best practices of choreography.

*The Intimate Act of Choreography* is a very valuable, in-depth, thoughtful workbook and study of dance and dance and improvisation. As a workbook to teach choreography it is of limited use as it leaves unexplored the complex, illusive, and necessary practice of manipulating the results of improvisation into fully realized choreographic work.

## **6. Choreography and the Specific Image by Daniel Nagrin**

Daniel Nagrin (1917-2008) was an American (born in New York City) modern dancer as well as a choreographer, teacher, and author. He has a large list of choreography but is best known for *Dance in the Sun*, which was adapted and filmed by Shirley Clarke. Nagrin studied with Anna Sokolow, Martha Graham, and Helen Tamiris.

There are some very valuable insights in the book, although many of them are surrounded by ancillary and distracting information. This is unfortunate as it has the effect of weakening the impact of his very intelligent and useful observations.

When writing about choreography the text is often so broad as to offer little concrete information. One senses that he is trying to express something very important



but it is difficult to grasp a clear actionable idea. For example, in his chapter on “Mindset” he writes about wearing eyeglasses:

...those of us who live with them know too well that they are never perfectly clear. They always need attention. There is a useful metaphor here. It is not entirely fanciful to say that everyone wears “eyeglasses” if you believe that all that we see is glimpsed through the prism of our personal experience and mindset. If we regard our self-awareness as the distorting dirt that clutters up our vision of what is out there, it behooves us to continually wipe our eyeglasses as thoroughly as possible. (160)

Nagrin derides the idea of anyone writing “rules for choreography.” He states in the introduction,

The field of modern dance with its multiple choreographers and styles should have weakened any attempt to lay down rules. And yet, there are individual choreographers who do lay down rules for all and who judge all dance from their vantage points. Too bad. They might be able to learn from the others if they were not so sure they held the only truth. (4)

And after this statement, Nagrin proceeds to lay down his series of rules and judgments in his chapter “Rules for Choreography.” The irony is that I found his self-derided “rules” to be extremely insightful and valuable.

Here are a few rules and statements which I think are important and useful for a student of choreography:

- “Any work of art is highly suspect unless it contains a significant hunk of the unexpected.” (38)
- “Don’t be satisfied with the first solution.” (39)
- “The artist’s task is to go where the passion leads.” (39)
- “Never let the perception of your choreography depend upon a title or a program note.” (60)

And this final “rule” which I have included in my list:

- “The one person from whom you dare not keep secrets is yourself.” (61)

These are inspired ideas from someone who clearly has experience with and knowledge of choreography and practice.

## **7. A Choreographer’s Handbook by Jonathan Burrows**

Jonathan Burrows is a working dancer and choreographer. He is currently in residence at Kaaitehater in Brussels and is a visiting professor at Hamburg University and Royal Holloway University of London.

I was very excited about reading Burrows’ book as it seemed his intentions were to offer a concise, succinct series of choreographic rules or maxims to guide the student as well as professional choreographer. The style of choreography Burrows works with is primarily a pedestrian gestural vocabulary manipulated into an informal, avant-garde presentation format. *The Choreographer’s Handbook* is also very accessible and informal and there are many smart and well-articulated ideas.

Burrows often expresses ideas that he clearly wrestles with as a creative artist but are of limited practical use to a student. Here are some examples:

- “Am I exploring writing this book? Or am I writing this book? I don’t want what I’m doing to be just a test, a practice run for something that will happen later. I want it to happen now.” (29)
- “Sometimes choreography is useful only in as much as we don’t notice it.” (33)
- “Choreography is about making a choice, including the choice to make no choice.” (40)

The book, in my opinion, is most interesting for someone who might be following Burrows’ career and would enjoy hearing his thoughts or insights. It is a journal of daily personal thoughts as well as a resource for interesting related quotes by others. There are many very true and useful ideas expressed in the book. I have included a few which are particularly consistent with my own philosophy:

- “The performer I choose to work with is the first and most important material of a dance piece.” (5)
- “Repetition is a device to emphasize or erode something by showing it more than once.” (9)
- “If I have a subject I want to pursue and I want to show it in movement, then I had better find the right language to say it.” (30)
- “It is very easy, when we know what we want to say, to fool ourselves into thinking we’re saying it.” (30)
- “Complete and utter failure is always an option.” (49)

## **8. Choreography: A Basic Approach Using Improvisation by Sandra Cerny Minton.**

Like many of the books on choreography that I have reviewed, this one goes into great detail about minute elements of the elements which are most likely already obvious to a student choreographer. The book is useful for a teacher who wants to utilize new improvisation exercises in their class. On a general note, I find it virtually impossible to describe in detail a movement or phrase in text without becoming dry or lugubrious. For example, this is the first paragraph of three pages of similar explanation:

Focus on your right shoulder. Lift your shoulder up towards your ear. Lower your shoulder to a center position and immediately press it to the back. Return your shoulder to the center and then lower it. Finally, after returning your shoulder to the center, press it forward and then return it to the center. Use the shoulder to connect each of these directions. (14)

Describing dance with words is, perhaps, a futile endeavor as it takes so many words just to clearly explain a simple movement. I have found that the more broad and opened a written concept is, the more it can be easily grasped and applied.

The information Minton provides is well articulated and researched. In her very thorough workbook the most valuable writings and concepts are the open ones, the ones which are more abstract and universal. For example, in describing the creative process, Minton offers these broad concepts:

1. A period of preparation
2. Time for incubation
3. Occurrence of insight

4. Sessions in which evaluation occurs
5. A period of elaboration. (2)

These concepts are useful as they give a student an intention to explore without burdening them with subjective specifics.

All in all, this is a useful book but, like many of the others, it tries to cover so much material and information that it can be overwhelming to a student. It is of greater benefit to a teacher as a reference for lessons plans.

**9. Dance Composition: A Practical Guide to Creative Success in Dance Making by Jacqueline M. Smith-Autard.**

Jacqueline Smith-Artaud is a dance educator and also author of *The Art of Dance in Education*. Her book is well researched and articulate and is the most comprehensive of all the literature reviewed in this study; still, due to its scope and detail, it might be overwhelming and daunting to a student.

The book is clearly written and avoids the common tendency toward pretention when writing about dance. However, the book approaches teaching choreography by writing about choreography rather than about how to do it. Once again we are faced with the problem endemic to writing about movement: Words become excessive in the attempt to be clear and comprehensive. For example, in the chapter “Literal Movement Into Dance Content” she writes:

Movement can be taken: while standing, from an open sideways extension of the arms, trace a peripheral pathway to forward medium, palms leading, slowly bringing the hands together, fingers closing last, with the head back. Then

drawing the arms in towards the body center, allow the chest to contract and curve inwards. To be taken with a sudden impulse at the beginning of the movement in to a sustained closing of the hands with increase of tension from fairly firm to very firm. (21)

Once again I find that this approach to writing about choreography and specific movement is very useful for a professor who can wade through the prose and translate the words into movement. But for a student of choreography we see again and again how the enormity of the art form is overwhelming if taken in its entirety.

#### ***10. The Creative Habit by Twyla Tharp***

Unlike many of the previously reviewed authors, Twyla Tharp is a practicing professional choreographer. She is prolific and has worked extensively with modern dance, musical theater, ballet, and cinema. Her book is not offered as a guide to choreography but as a guide to her personal creative practices and habits. The advice she gives in the book is, for me, some of the most useful to a choreographer—both student and professional. Because she writes about concepts rather than minute specifics, she offers broad succinct statement which can guide the student.

Here are the quotations that I found most useful, entertaining, and most universally true:

- “In order to be creative you have to know how to prepare to be creative.” (9)
- “The most productive artists I know have a plan in mind when they get down to work.” (118)

- “But there’s a fine line between good planning and overplanning. You never want the planning to inhibit the natural evolution of your work.” (118)
- “Creativity is an act of defiance.” (133)
- “When you actually get down to work, pick a fight with your first impulse that day.” (134)
- “The spine is my little secret. It keeps me on message, but is not the message itself.” (146)
- “Identify the concept that isn’t working. Write down your assumptions about it. Challenge the assumptions. Act on the challenge.” (193)

Tharp is a very eloquent and articulate artist. She can describe dance in ways that are both poetic and practical. I have read her writings and have, on occasion, spoken with her about dance and choreography. I am always left feeling that her understanding and point of view about dance elevates the art form. It is unfortunate that, as of yet, she has not chosen to write comprehensively on the subject of how to choreograph as her insight would be of great value to all choreographers.

## **Summary**

Writing about dance is an inherently problematic task as the immobile nature of text immediately grounds the fluid and ephemeral subject it seeks to illuminate. It is like trying to capture wind in a bottle: As soon as it is corralled it ceases to possess the qualities that define it.

To write about choreography is exponentially more challenging. The author must not only define movement but also the relationship between bodies moving, the

emotional impact of architecture, the hierarchy of spatial influence, the effect of repetition, the subtlety of variation, the relationship to music, and so on. It is a daunting task for a writer to guide a reader to not just understand dance, but to feel and experience the evanescent, often oblique, emotional actuality of choreography.

Of the existing literature on choreography, the most successful contributions come in the form of succinct statements or tenants which are broad in scope and not overly technical. These tenants can be grasped instantly by any student and applied to the specific challenges a student is facing. Expressing dance and choreography in this distilled form allows for clarity of intent without tethering the appreciation of dance to the anchor of detailed text descriptions.



### **CHAPTER 3. EXAMINATION OF BALANCHINE AND ROBBINS**

The two historical figures I was fortunate enough to work extensively with are George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. They are universally considered to be the most influential American ballet choreographers. In addition, they both worked on Broadway in musicals, Robbins with particular distinction. Balanchine all but established American ballet by creating the School of American Ballet and forming the New York City Ballet. His choreographic work revolutionized the art form of ballet and is among the most enduring work ever created. Robbins had an equally profound impact on dance both in creating work for ballet as well as his work as a Broadway director and choreographer. Both men approached choreography in very different and personal ways. Their choreographic styles as well as the methods and practices they utilized illuminate the intricate, complex, and ultimately subjective nature of the art of choreography.

What follows is a brief personal memoir of my encounters with each of these men with a particular focus on how their approach to choreography influenced my own career.

#### **Balanchine**

##### ***Don Quixote 1966***

My first memory of George Balanchine was a frightening one. I was making my performance debut at the New York City Ballet in Mr. B's full-length ballet, *Don Quixote*. I was one of six "monsters" that sprang from the imagination of Don Q. These

demons attack him with swords and he desperately fights them off. I was six years old. All the other boys were older, ten to fourteen, but I fit the tiny costume of the Rat and so I was in. As both of my parents had been lead dancers in the company, this was a natural progression for a d'Amboise child. In fact, my older brother was in it as well as the Green Lizard Monster. The monster scene came at the beginning of the ballet and the stage was filled with dry ice "smoke" which was thick and covered the whole stage at a height of three to four feet. We had performed the ballet several times with Richard Rapp playing the role of Don Q. Richard was extremely consistent and the complex fencing, chasing, ducking, and weaving had become second nature to us all. Then, one night before performance we heard a rumor that someone named Mr. B was going to be playing Don Quixote. There was a palpable excitement among all the dancers, but I had no idea why. That night, as the stage filled with smoke, and I ran out to make my first fencing pass, a madman appeared out of the smoke. It was Balanchine, dressed just the same as Richard Rapp, with the same costume and beard and sword, but this was a crazy man. He had a truly wild and manic look in his eyes, and as he came toward me I was actually scared. But I held it together and did the fencing choreography as always; it called for me to click swords twice high, then once low, then run a circle around and come at him again. As I raised my sword for the first parry, Balanchine slammed at my sword with all his might. He knocked it out of my hand and halfway across the stage where it fell to the floor and disappeared beneath the smoke. I spent the rest of the fight scene crawling around, buried in dry ice, trying to find my sword: Even at that age I knew it would have been wrong to leave it out there on stage. I found the sword and ran off stage. When I looked at the

sword I saw that it was completely bent like an elbow. From that night on, we all asked “Who is Don Q tonight?” And if it was Mr. B, we all were on guard and held our swords with both hands.

LESSON: If you are going to do something...do it full out!

### ***New York City Ballet***

There were only four times in my career that Mr. B worked on choreography with me directly. Two were simply occasions when he decided to tweak, or slightly alter, choreography from an already existing work. The first was in the *Nutcracker*. In the fight scene between the Nutcracker and the Mouse King there used to be a set choreographic sequence. Unfortunately, as I was ten years old at the time, I do not recall what the “old version” was. What I do recall was that Mr. B did not give me new steps or counts, instead, he made sound effects indicating movement and then said, “Just run...jump on back”—meaning that I, the Nutcracker, would jump onto the back of the Mouse King. This delighted me as “running and jumping” was my favorite part about dance so I ran...took a giant leap from far away...landed on the King’s back and knocked him to the floor. I looked up in horror (this was a dress rehearsal on stage in full costume and lights). But Mr. B paused and said with satisfaction, “That’s right.” Paul Sacket, who danced the Mouse King, eyed me warily. He never let me knock him over again (and believe me, I tried). I only wonder if he, just like us kids in Don Q, checked to see who was playing the Nutcracker each performance so he could be ready for my Balanchine-inspired enthusiasm.

LESSON: Once again, if you are going to do something...do it full out.

The second time Balanchine worked on choreography with me was ten years later when the company was performing his master work, *Symphony in Three Movements*. The opening entrance for the male dancers was specific and set to the intricate rhythmic score of Stravinsky. Once again, Balanchine told me to ignore the counts and just “jump.” He said, “You know, forget entrance. Just run, jump and chum, chum, chum” (“chum” was a side-to-side, crouched forward, moving chugging step). Again I was running and jumping and again I got a, “That’s right” for my efforts.

Most ballet dancers are filled with a constant and evolving neurosis about all the things that they believe they are unable to do correctly. Much of this is nonsense, but insecurity is a common result of ballet training. However, most dancers also have at least one thing that they think they can do well and for me, it was jumping. Like both of my parents I loved to jump and had the ability to jump high, suspend in the air, and cover a large amount of space. It was the one thing I felt confident about. And Balanchine knew it and exploited it.

LESSON: Whenever possible (when doing so doesn’t compromise any vital part of the choreography), change the step to exploit the specific talents of your dancers.

### ***Berlin 1980***

For Balanchine, the music always came first. Music was the driving force of his inspiration and the defining context of each work. I once asked him about his process. We were on tour in West Berlin, there was a cafeteria, and I was sitting at a table listening to a Bach keyboard concerto on one of the first Walkmen made by Sony. I was preparing to choreograph to the music and was writing down the steps I imagined onto

the musical score. Suddenly, Mr. B came and sat with me at the small table. This was a first. I had often spoken to him but I always initiated the encounter. This time he came to me. I waited for him to speak, assuming that he had something to tell me, perhaps a correction or suggestion for my dancing. But it seemed that he had just come to chat. I told him I was working on choreography and asked him how much he worked out his choreography in advance. I had choreographed a handful of pieces by then and I always worked out how the dancers would count each phrase, which steps they would do, and which patterns I would utilize—all before I walked into a studio with dancers. Mr. B's response to the question was to tell me about a woman he had met once, years ago, who came into his apartment with her suitcase and said she was moving in. He told her, "No" and then finally she went away. I have no idea why that was something he wanted to tell me. But you never knew what Mr. B might say when, on those rare occasions, he wanted to talk. After a while he looked at the score I was notating; he looked for a long time and then nodded. He asked, "Who are your dancers?" I told him I did not know yet, I was just preparing. He replied, "Must know dancers first. Go to studio, look at dancer, then you can start."

I was twenty years old at that time and was extremely busy dancing for the New York City Ballet, and I had choreographed about ten works by then. My process was to listen to a piece of music over and over again and let my imagination give me the clues to the choreography. I likened the process to pouring the music through a sieve and collecting the little creative sediment that was trapped. I would listen to the music over and over until I had enough material to begin. The next step for me was to go into a

studio to work out all the steps by myself. Then, and only then, did I feel confident to work with dancers. Now, in hindsight, I see how this in-depth pre-preparation led me to create choreography that was well crafted but derivative and never transcendent. Another disadvantage of my method was that, if the dancers I worked with could not dance the way I did, the choreography did not work fully. The idea that I could walk into a studio with dancers and not know what I was going to do terrified me. Many years and many ballets later, I would not only come to understand Mr. B's directive but embrace it as my own.

LESSON: Preparation should be a suggestion, not an end. It limits you and your dancers.

LESSON: Preparation gives you the foundation to embrace uncertainty.

LESSON: Working out steps by yourself is valuable...trying to make dancers imitate you is not.

### ***New Ballets***

*Mozartianna* was one of the last ballets that Balanchine created. In it, there was a solo for a male dancer. It was a long "gigue" with intricate and quick twists and jumps. I premiered the role when Victor Castelli (a soloist in the company) got injured. Again, Balanchine said very little and articulated his desires primarily with grunts, "Chum, chums" and sentence fragments like, "You know, maybe, jump."

Mr. B rarely spoke in rehearsals. When he did it was often a short, often vague statement. He was very specific about what he wanted, but he expressed it obliquely. This is an extremely effective way to work with dancers. It keeps the process strictly focused

on the goals of the choreographer but allows for two very important opportunities: One, it allows the dancer to discover the step organically. Two, it allows for gross misinterpretation which might lead to the dancer coming up with a step that the choreographer had not thought of. This is often of no use to a choreographer who must then give more instruction to the dancer.

However, sometimes the unique step offered by a dancer's misunderstanding is far more interesting than what the choreographer initially imagined. Now, the choreographer not only has his own imagination to work with, he also has the imagination of the dancer who, often unwittingly, can stumble upon choreographic "gold."

LESSON: Speak as little as possible.

LESSON: Know what you want, but let the dancers find it for you.

LESSON: Be specifically vague.

### ***Father and Son***

The last ballet that Balanchine ever choreographed was a short work set to Stravinsky's *Tango*. It was only a few minutes long. The New York City Ballet was doing a second Stravinsky Festival—a two-week long celebration of the composer with many new works premiered. I was called to a rehearsal with Karin von Aroldingen (a longtime favorite dancer of Mr. B's). My father, Jacques, was also called to the rehearsal. When Balanchine arrived he said, "Now, you see, the father understudy the son." I still have no idea what was behind this wry statement. My father suggests that it was a celebratory gesture honoring the next generation. He also suggests that perhaps it was a

dig at him for the fact that he had started his own company (The National Dance Institute), and Mr. B was annoyed that Jacques was “abandoning” NYC Ballet. My father also guessed that since Mr. B had never created a work from scratch with me, my father was included in case I had difficulty understanding what Balanchine wanted.

Perhaps it was all of these things; regardless, Mr. B had Karin and me enter from opposite sides of the stage and then he directed me, once again, to “jump.” He indicated with a flick of his wrist and a twist of his hip that I should make some jumping-twisting entrance and end up with my back to Karin. The entire process of choreographic creation was achieved in this fashion with Mr. B giving vague, yet specific indications and Karin and me filling it in with movement. Sometimes he was unsatisfied and said things like, “No. Other hand, maybe, is faster.” I would try again until I got no response which meant that he was satisfied, or I received his approving, “That’s right!” With just a few words and an occasional gesture Mr. B created a new work which satisfied his intentions and also was completely organic and comfortable for us to dance. Once the dance was finished, unlike Jerry Robbins who would rehearse it to death, Mr. B left us alone and never offered any more suggestions or corrections. He trusted us to bring it to life. He knew exactly what he wanted. He led us to create the most important elements and then he left the details for us to complete. After the initial rehearsals the only thing Mr. B said to us was something he said over and over to all his dancers: “Bigger.”

Ideally, a choreographer eventually develops absolute faith in his ability, embraces the uncertainty of the creative moment, and is unruffled by temporary failure. Balanchine, at the end of his career, was no doubt completely confident and in control of



his domain. It has taken me my whole career to approach that kind of confidence and self-trust. An artist is blessed if he or she can actually witness the genuine practice of a coveted ability. Once someone has experienced something he or she knows that it is possible and the rest is simply a journey.

LESSON: Whenever possible, witness a master choreographer at work.

LESSON: Ask your dancers to be “bigger.” They can, they will, and it reminds everyone that, in dance, the extraordinary is always expected.

### **Jerome Robbins**

In short, Jerome Robbins was theatricality, character, and choreography from the inside out. Sometimes in life, there are clearly identifiable turning points in one’s personal history where a single event or encounter can be identified as the beginning. It was in these early sessions with Robbins that my yearning for and appreciation of choreographic expression was launched.

### ***1969***

At the age of nine, I was called to a rehearsal with Jerome Robbins for a new work he was creating. By this time I was a veteran performer, having started performing at age six in Balanchine’s *Don Quixote* and continued performing in many dance productions which required children. I was told to present myself at the Main Hall rehearsal room on the top floor of the New York City Ballet at Lincoln Center. I was familiar with this routine as I had auditioned with many other children on numerous occasions in the Main Hall. To my surprise, when I entered the studio wearing my black tights, black ballet shoes, and white t-shirt, I was the only dancer there. It was me, a big

empty studio, and a man (then in his late fifties) with a balding head, a neatly trimmed white beard, a suntanned face, and a warm and welcoming smile. I discovered that this was not an audition but it was a working session. Jerry, as I later came to call him, wanted to work with me to explore some choreographic ideas for a new and highly experimental ballet he was creating called *Watermill*.

What I expected was that he would give me some ballet steps to perform to a piece of music with counts. I assumed I would be doing traditional steps that I had learned from my years at the School of American Ballet. To my surprise, Jerry did not assign me ballet steps; instead he assigned me a character. “Imagine you just had a fight with your father and you ran out of the house. Your house is on the beach so pretend this studio is covered in sand. Now, run across the sand as if you are angry but then slow down as you notice something beautiful out on the water.”

This was perhaps the most influential and important lesson I ever learned about choreography, although it would take me almost twenty years to realize it.

For the next three hours that day and for several days to follow, Jerry gave me character-driven actions to take and those actions began to manifest in traditional ballet steps. For example, the directive, “imagine you are flying a kite and it gets away from you. Now chase it across the sand and leap and try and catch the string” turned into a series of grand jettes and attitude jump turns. What was so new and radical to me was that the steps were initiated from emotional and character-driven imperatives and therefore the steps had a *reason* to be performed. In all other works of choreography I had learned,

the steps were the event and the precise execution of those steps was the goal, but with Jerry, the *reason* was the goal and the steps simply an expression of that intention.

LESSON: A step must have a reason to exist. I do not intend to imply that a step must express or even be related to an emotion, or story, or character as in the Robbins *Watermill* sessions, but simply to state that every step is connected to the context of the step which preceded it, and in an abstract and purely linear process, must be consistent with the paradigm of the whole.

### ***The Steps He Asked For...and Then One More***

During my teenage years at the New York City Ballet, Jerry used me often to work out new choreographic ideas. Why me? I cannot say, but no one else was working like this with him, and I would like to believe it was because I had, intuitively on some level, an understanding of what kind of movement he responded to. I became very familiar with Jerry's style, vocabulary, and musicality. These were stylistic choices which I also found appealing and satisfying. After a while, I began to start to guess where Jerry was going with a given phrase and gradually and subtly began to try and lead him toward what I thought he was searching for. He would assign me a phrase consisting of, perhaps, the three next steps of a solo we were working on and I would execute his three steps and then add one more. What I added was what felt organic and what I guessed he might find useful. Most often he would say nothing but leave my step in and continue from there.

LESSON: Encourage your dancers to create steps. Let it flow organically for them. Take or leave the results to the degree that they resonate for you. Edit without judgment.

LESSON: Sometimes a dancer can also serve as a compass.

Jerry always responded to movement that seemed organic and felt comfortable to a dancer. The irony was that he so often badgered the dancer with demands for excessive repetition that he destroyed the organic ease which was what attracted him to the step to begin with.

LESSON: If your dancers have to think about what step comes next, rehearse them more. If your dancers lose their joy and spontaneity, you have rehearsed too much.

LESSON: Repetition is needed only until the choreography moves from a dancer's brain to his or her body.

### ***Almost Right Is Not Right***

“Version eighteen.” We did the step again, only this time the arm came down on the count of “two” rather than “three.” Jerry was notorious for spending hours, sometimes days, on one seemingly simple phrase. It was mind-numbing to try and keep track of all the versions. What I witnessed most of the time with Jerry (and his excessive versions) was that he almost always went back to the original version in the end. This harkens back to my observation that Jerry wanted movement to seem effortless and natural.

### ***Versions: The Other Side of the Coin***

In working on *The Gershwin Concerto* (a ballet Jerry choreographed for me, Maria Cagliari, Mel Tomlinson, and Darcy Kistler) there was a three-beat phrase shared by two dancers. I watched as Jerry went through version after version to the great frustration of everyone. I was sure he was about to revert to his first version when he created the twenty-second version (combining elements of three earlier versions) and it

just “clicked.” By that I mean there was no doubt as to the “rightness” of that version. When a step is right, it has clarity. It rings like a bell and everyone knows it instantly. This was the first time I experienced how difficult it can sometimes be to get choreography right. There were many additional times that I witnessed Jerry wrestling with choreography and experienced the “click” when he got it right. I have since experienced the same frustrating/exhilarating process in my own work.

LESSON: Almost right is not right.

LESSON: When something is “right,” you know it instantly and instinctually. It is a feeling, not an understanding.

Sometimes the “rightness” can work against you. Early in my career I created a dance where I stumbled upon an inspired “rightness.” However, this phrase was inconsistent with the rest of the ballet and it made everything around it look diminished and desultory. I could not make the “right” part fit in the ballet but I forced it together like two unlatching pieces of a crossword puzzle. In hindsight I know that what I needed to do was to keep the “right” phrase and throw out everything else. Instead, I forced the material together. The result was an unsuccessful work.

LESSON: Choreography is a wrestling match where you win by being pinned, not by pinning.

LESSON: Don’t force things together.

LESSON: Pushing through an obstacle is valuable but make sure you actually get through to something “right.”

LESSON: Pulling is always better than pushing.

***Older: 1997***

The last time I saw Jerry creating a new work was when he was creating *Brandenburg Variations*. It was a truly upsetting experience. I watched a man with whom I had spent countless hours in the studio and knew creatively very well wrestling with the familiar frustration of trying to find the right next step. I could see that he was lost, struggling to find that inner source from which he had always drawn inspiration. He wrestled with it and, frustrated, he wrestled some more. But when he finally found something “new” it was material he had done forty, fifty years before. Jerry could not find any new or percolating ideas; instead, he simply rehashed and diminished his old material and was not even aware of the fact. This was one of the saddest things I have ever witnessed and I harbor a profound fear that this reality is inevitable for all artists.

LESSON: If you can avoid it, don’t grow old.

As a teenager, I began exploring choreography for no other reason than I felt compelled to. I would ask fellow students or fellow dancers in NYCB to work on choreography. I found a lyrical string quartet by Tchaikovsky that inspired me to make a pas de deux. This was followed by several short experiments in choreography using different kinds of music from Brahms to Claude Bolling. Most of the time I never showed these works to anyone. But on one occasion, I chose to do a showing of a work for a large ensemble that I had set on students from the School of American Ballet. I invited Jerry to come see it. To my surprise, he arrived on the appointed afternoon early and waited impatiently to see the piece. It was a “jazzy” style dance set to music of Jellyroll Morton. It used an ensemble of twelve women and was clearly influenced by Balanchine’s ballet,

*Who Cares?* (set to the music of George Gershwin). My piece was performed in an informal studio setting with about twenty other people watching. Jerry said nothing. He left the studio without making eye contact and my first thought was that he hated it and did not want to tell me so.

However, several weeks later Jerry spoke to me about the piece. We were rehearsing one of his ballets on stage when he gave us a break. He indicated that he wanted to talk to me. Usually when Jerry wanted to “talk” to you it meant he was displeased with your work, and he would often berate you with a verbal abuse that would leave you feeling both humiliated and guilty. This time, however, he spoke in a hushed and very confidential tone. “Your piece.... I wanted to talk to you about it. I know choreographers want to get feedback and I didn’t want you to think that I had nothing to say.” He paused, then he got this vulnerable look on his face. It was as if he was having difficulty speaking. “Yes...uh...it’s something I’m just not good at—moving large groups of people. I can’t do it. It’s a...always difficult for me. Good, good, keep it up, Chrissy.” (He called me “Chrissy.” I hated that nickname.) And then he went back to rehearsal.

The exchange was significant to me for several reasons. First of all, I was shocked that the man whose work I admired so much could possibly feel inadequate. Despite all his success he still felt that choreography was something beyond him, something that he was still trying to figure out. Second, the fact that my choreographic idol took me into such confidence, offered encouragement, and for that brief moment treated me like an equal, like a fellow artist, was the greatest gift he could have given me. Jerry had called me a “choreographer” and although it would be fifteen years and thirty ballets later

before I would accept to myself that I was actually a choreographer, his embrace and inclusion of me into that elite and honorable club still resonates in my soul.

LESSON: Having a hard time? That is okay. Choreography is difficult.

LESSON: There is always more to learn.

### ***Leaving: 1987***

In 1987, I decided to leave the New York City Ballet and retire from performing all together. At this point in my career, although I was a very successful Principal dancer in the company, only twenty-seven years old and just approaching the height of my ability as a dancer, I could no longer push aside the burning creative desire which drove me to want to dedicate myself full-time to choreography. The few people I had told of my decision were appalled that I would “throw away” a career that was so sought after and that I had worked so hard to achieve. But I had always been driven by internal creative imperatives and my creative compass was pointing elsewhere.

I went to have a meeting in Jerry’s office to tell him of my decision. I was so nervous, almost to the point of tears, as I explained my decision to him. I was certain that he was going to berate me for being foolish and that he would be mad that I would not be dancing for him anymore. To my surprise, he said, “I’m sorry to see you go. But you have to go, I understand. When you are a creator, you have to create. It’s good, Chrissy, it’s good. And, you are always welcome if you want to come back.” With that, I did burst into tears. There were times (and these were rare and in painful contrast to Jerry’s normal terrifying demeanor) when Jerry exuded a warmth and a charm that reassured you like a benevolent father. This was one of those rare moments.



## ***Dance Matters***

There were many important lessons on the craft of choreography that I learned from those valuable years working with Jerry. Even though many of the tactics he used in order to get the best out of the dancers worked against that goal, the lessons on craft, process, choice, and value stand apart for me, free from any emotional or moral judgment of his process. Whether or not Jerry's leadership was excessive, one thing is certain; Jerry made a dancer feel that dance was important. The stakes were never higher. He made us believe, despite or perhaps because of how challenging he was to work with, that what we were doing was profound, vital, and essential—an almost life-and-death quest for something undeniably valuable.

LESSON: Honor the importance of what you do; Let your dancers feel it.

LESSON: Learn to recognize the difference between fine tuning and fussing.

LESSON: If time drags in rehearsal, you are probably off track.

The last time I saw Jerry, before he passed away, was at the funeral of one of our colleagues. I had been hired to choreograph a Broadway revival of *On the Town*. Jerry, who was the original director/choreographer of the show, had a contractual right to approve or deny the choice of choreographer for the show. He had approved me for the job the day before. We stood silently together for a long moment then he said, "You're doing *On the Town*...not easy."

"I know," I replied.

He asked, "You have ideas?" I told him I had lots of ideas. "Good, good, Chrissy."

That was the last time I saw Mr. Robbins who was, without question, the most important, influential mentor of my life. I am so grateful for every painful, extraordinary, infuriating, and inspiring moment I had with him.

LESSON: Great mentors are your creative parents. Take advantage of the time you have with them.

### **Balanchine and Robbins and the “Pull”**

“Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love—it will not lead you astray.” – Rumi (Barks and Moyne)

Without question there was one, single, and crucial lesson that I learned from Balanchine and Robbins. It was unspoken, unidentified, but in my opinion it is the most fundamental foundation for any artist. All of their work, and in particular their most successful work, was driven by one, singular, and personal desire; one secret yearning; one “strange pull” which drove them to create.

Balanchine’s world was all about women; women as idealized and unattainable. The role of the man was that of servant to the woman, facilitating her glory while secretly yearning for her attentions. Of course, Balanchine’s private life (he married six of his dancers) directly reflected this passion.

The personal desire of Robbins is more subtle but, in the end, simpler. His ballets reflect Jerry’s most longed-for but illusive desire for himself: to simply be comfortable with who he was. Most of Jerry’s ballets present the same simple paradigm: Men and woman, comfortable with who they are, come together to dance. They interact naturally, with ease, grace, and lightness. Jerry’s ballets express no inner turmoil. They create a

happy, light world where everyone is comfortable with who they are and dance is as natural as skipping. I am reminded of something the painter Eric Fischl said, “Choose one problem then spend your life solving it” (Fischl and Saltz).

LESSON: Creation comes from the desire to experience a personal yearning.

LESSON: Mine your own passions. There you will find your “pull.” You don’t have to tell anyone, but don’t lie to yourself.

### ***Conclusion***

The opportunity of working so closely with both George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins gave me an education in dance and choreography that has shaped everything I do as an artist. They taught me so much about why artists create, how to collaborate with dancers, how to realize a vision, and how to be both a teacher and a student. Both of these choreographic geniuses were men that I, and most of us who worked with them, felt honored to serve. I use the word “serve” deliberately because that was the nature of our relationship. We were not just employees but devotees. And although Jerry and Mr. B had polar opposite ways of interacting with dancers, the work they created and the standards they upheld were inspiring to us. For me, as a young man, there was nothing more rewarding than having the opportunity to be in service to something you believed in.

## **CHAPTER 4. EXAMINATION OF PERSONAL CHOREOGRAPHIC HISTORY**

What follows is a personal and subjective exploration of my choreographic work. The specific work analyzed here was chosen for the importance of the lessons they taught me and to provide context and clarity to those lessons.

### **Part 1: The Beginning**

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that curiosity about and a creative interest in choreography were instilled in my psyche from birth. This nascent calling was awakened early in childhood as I began to choreograph for my brother and sisters in homemade productions performed in the living room of our home in New York City. These productions were, of course, childish and superficial; however, they reveal an early interest in the role of “maker” rather than “performer.” My family was a family of performers; both parents were professional dancers in the New York City Ballet and had an irrepressible joy of dancing and public performance. This passion was passed down to all four children. We all loved to perform and did so professionally as well as at home (the nightly impromptu productions that were improvised as we all helped clear the dinner table and wash the dishes were boisterous, joyful, and competitive). Unlike anyone else in my family, I found early on that, in addition to performance, I was drawn to explore the context of a work rather than simply the role to be performed. Soon I began

“writing” and choreographing original works for my siblings to perform while I conceived and directed.

There is not much more to be said on the subject of childhood play-theater and no significant lesson can be derived from that period except to make the observation that although, like most children, the desire to have my creations seen and appreciated by my parents and friends was important, I also found great satisfaction simply by witnessing the success and “rightness” of what I had created. This is an internal satisfaction rather than an external one and is, I believe, an appreciation shared by all serious choreographers.

LESSON: Choreographers don’t wait for permission to start creating.

### ***The Playboy Club, 1978***

My first professional job as a choreographer came because of an accident. I was eighteen years old and had been a member of the New York City Ballet for over a year when I suffered an injury to my foot which put me on the sidelines. An acquaintance of mine took advantage of my availability and invited me to choreograph two numbers in a 1950s style music revue entitled *Blue Suede Shoes*. The review was to be cast, rehearsed, and performed in a theater space inside the Playboy Club (then located on East 58<sup>th</sup> Street in New York). Back in 1978, the club was still successful, but the tide of cultural awareness and political correctness was beginning to turn and the club would be closed by 1986. The Playboy Club is hardly the highbrow, sophisticated and “high art” venue that a serious choreographer would take pride in listing as his or her first employer.

However, I have to admit that I learned a great deal from that opportunity. When you are young and starting out you cannot be picky about your options.

LESSON: Every opportunity to choreograph is valuable.

***Blue Suede Shoes #1: “Hernando’s Hideaway”***

The tango rhythms of this popular tune (originally from *The Pajama Game*) are infectious and exciting. I was given an extraordinary ballerina from the New York City Ballet to work with and my first thought was to design all sorts of jumping, traveling, rhythmically playful phrases for her. But then, I was told that I had to also use a man named Bo who was the “M.C.” of the review. His job was to introduce the acts, tell jokes in between, and to do so in a full-on imitation of Groucho Marks (eyebrows, mustache, cigar, and all). A ballerina and Groucho? I was annoyed at this forced marriage. How could I work with Bo, who was not a dancer and could never dance the playful vocabulary I had planned for this piece. I decided to simply remove him from the equation. At the first rehearsal I set the number in a café with a table and chair and simply sat “Groucho” at the table while the Ballerina danced around him. This was going fine until, at one point the Ballerina did a “penche” (lifting one leg straight up while standing on the other) and Bo stood up from the table as if mesmerized by her flexibility. As she slowly lowered her leg, Bo began to crouch and shrink as if her leg were pushing him down. Then he stopped her leg (now parallel to the floor), spit on his hands and rubbed them together as if getting ready to do a difficult task, and then he leaned way back and shuffled under her leg as if playing “limbo.” It was hilarious and we all fell to

the floor laughing. I threw out all my choreography and we made a comic number which turned into a kind of “Beauty and the Beast” at a nightclub.

LESSON: Be open to a better idea.

LESSON: Shape the paradigm of your work to create a world where the disparate talents of your cast can exist and shine together.

LESSON: Embrace “impossible” challenges; they can lead to unexpected creativity.

***Blue Suede Shoes #2: “The Lion Sleeps Tonight”***

For this number, I decided to use three women. We had three full-body costumes, a lion, a zebra, and a leopard; I was expected to cast very “Playboy-like” full-figured dancers. But there was one woman, Maura, who auditioned and although she had the exact “wrong” body type, she kept catching my eye. There was just something interesting about her and because of that, I fought to have her cast in the show. I won the battle, but slightly damaged my relationship with the director. However, every night when the three dancers performed the number, it brought the house down and Maura stole the applause. On a more interesting note, there were a couple of performances when Maura was sick and an understudy filled in for her. The number laid an egg every time. It was flat and boring. I realized that my choreography by itself was not “successful”: It was Maura who made it work.

LESSON: Casting is everything.

Balanchine once said to my father, when speaking about ballerina Allegra Kent, “You see dancers on stage but there is one that you look at first, one that keeps catching your eye. This is presence...this you cannot teach; it is innate.”

LESSON: If a dancer has something special but is “wrong” for your piece, reconceive your piece (if possible).

## **Part 2: Development**

### ***1987-1990, Off-Center Ballet***

It is important for a choreographer to have a period of creative exploration and development. Ideally, this comes early in one’s process so that a novice can learn the craft of choreography which includes: the technique, the practice, the process, the specialized proficiency, and the ability to successfully implement a choreographic idea.

PERSONAL DEFINITION: *Craft* is the ability to successfully transfer intent from the mind to the body.

This includes all the mechanical aspects of structure and design, such as manipulating unison and asymmetry, effective canonic ability, or a proficiency with thematic deconstruction. A novice must find a way to not only master the practical elements but also to begin to discover and develop his or her own unique style. Although there are exceptions, very few choreographers create fully realized, successful, and unique works their first time out. George Balanchine had the opportunity to choreograph constantly for dance companies and opera productions. When examining the catalogue of his work it is interesting to note that the first work to be considered significant and lasting was his ballet *Apollo*. This ballet was his eighty-fourth work.



With that in mind, in 1987, I retired from performing and started a small contemporary dance troupe called The Off-Center Ballet. The company's mission was to experiment with the expansion of classical vocabulary by including modern and idiosyncratic movement. I had eight dancers and over a period of two years we performed in universities, at Dance Theater Workshop in New York, and had an annual performance series at the Westbeth Theater in New York. During this period I experimented with choreographic ideas which interested me, including an expanded ballet/modern vocabulary, theatrical elements of set design and lighting, and a variety of nontraditional music choices.

LESSON: (For novices:) Find a way to learn your craft. Practice anywhere and everywhere you can. Ask fellow dancers to work with you. If you don't have access to professional dancers then choreograph anywhere you can. Choreograph for children, or recitals, or weddings, or high schools, or cheerleaders; all of it will teach you your craft and doing is the only way to learn.

LESSON: Doing is the only way to proficiency.

LESSON: (For novices:) Don't worry about where you're going...just go.

LESSON: What is your style? What is your signature? Don't be concerned with these postures. Do your work and eventually, in hindsight, the pattern of your creative preference will emerge. Your personal style is never a signpost to navigate by. It's found in the rearview mirror.

During the two years of working with the Off-Center Ballet, I created fifteen new works, honed my craft, and began to find a unique movement vocabulary that I would

begin to harvest a few years later. None of these works were significant or truly transcendent; they were laboratory experiments with often exciting results but I had yet to hone my craft or learn how to use the artistic gold these years of exploration mined. There was no linear experimentation in these years; on the contrary, many different ideas were explored, some were developed, some simply abandoned. But it was here in this creative laboratory that I discovered two important ideas.

### ***The Strange Pull***

I have written about this in the earlier section on Balanchine and Robbins but I believe it warrants repeating and illustrates how my own personal “pull” was discovered.

LESSON: Find your “pull.” Dig deep and examine your own preferences. Look for something which excites you, which tugs at you, something you yearn to access and bring to life. The “pull” is a subjective, often secret, and sometimes subconscious attraction buried in your psyche.

I cannot understate the importance of this. The sooner artists can identify, explore, and follow their “pull,” the sooner their work will reveal their personal character and move from craft to art. The “pull” becomes the defining compass of your choreographic journey and ultimately it will express and characterize your whole career.

LESSON: (Again:) The best way to find your “pull” is to follow what turns you on.

### ***The Muse***

While working at Off-Center Ballet I hired ten dancers. One of them became my first Muse. Her name was Anne White. She was a tall, lanky, twenty-year-old dancer with

short “bobbed” black hair and a quirky almost Olive Oyl (from the *Popeye* cartoons) type awkwardness. There is a Japanese concept that states, “It is the flaw that makes the beauty.” This was Anne’s allure. I would give a step to all my dancers, but it was Anne whom I watched. Over the next six years I would work with her and she would become the inspiration for much of my personal artistic discovery.

LESSON: You can’t force a Muse to appear, but if one does...you are no longer alone. You have a partner in your quest.

LESSON: Some Muses can inspire for a lifetime; others fade away or are replaced by new ones. You know you have one when just the thought of him or her causes your creative pull to percolate.

LESSON: A Muse is directly related to your “pull.” If it is not, you might be lying to yourself.

### **Part 3: Pennsylvania Ballet**

#### ***Franklin Court: Commissions***

In 1990, I was offered the job as artistic director of the Pennsylvania Ballet in Philadelphia. I was thirty years old, which was young to be heading up an eight million dollar company, but I had choreographed over fifty works by that time, had been a successful teacher, and had shown my aptitude for fiscal and budgetary responsibility in creating and running Off-Center Ballet.

This was the first time as a choreographer that I had great resources available to create. There was a costume budget and shop, a music director and full orchestra, forty-eight highly trained and experienced dancers, and a magnificent theater, The Academy of

Music. I spent long stretches of time sitting, after hours, in the empty theater and letting my imagination soar.

Before becoming artistic director of the company, I was offered a commission by the then-executive director of the Pennsylvania Ballet to create a new work for the company. Normally, when accepting a commission, I would view the company and choose for myself the subject of the ballet. However, in this case, the Director requested that I make the ballet about Benjamin Franklin who, of course, was an historical figure in Philadelphia. I was hesitant about this idea as the image of a portly, bi-speckled character dancer playing a waltzing Benjamin seemed hopelessly cartoonish. But as I researched Franklin, his life, his writings, and his achievements, I became intrigued by the scope and variety of his inventions—things like swim fins (handheld), bifocals, the discovery of electricity, and a rotating glass instrument called an armonica. These inventions sparked a clear and specific metaphor to me and dance-equivalent moments formed in my mind.

Then I visited Franklin Court. Franklin Court is a white metal sculpture tracing the outline of the original home of Franklin. The home is long gone but the monument rises a hundred feet into the air and abstractly defines the house like a child's stick figure drawing. When I visited this sculpture I had the idea that we could recreate it onstage. The concept was to chop the house into six pieces, then fly them into the stage space one at a time (one for each movement of the ballet). They would hang in the air like floating space debris until, over a twenty-second period at the end of the ballet as the music of J. S. Bach (as orchestrated by Stokowski, another Philadelphia local) played, the complete Franklin Court monument would fall into place as the final chords are sounded. This

ambition and technically complex concept came together beautifully and the added element of scenic majesty brought the audience to its feet on opening night.

LESSON: Sometimes an ill-advised or impossible challenge can lead to out-of-the-box creativity.

LESSON: When a scenic element can move or “dance,” the effect can magnify the scope and resonance of the work. A dance becomes an environment. Choreography becomes a world.

### **The Golden Mean: *Dramaturgy***

*Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste* by Bela Bartok is an acknowledged masterwork of twentieth century classical music. Its driving complex rhythms and deeply emotional resonance make it ideal for a choreographic collaboration.

However, the rigor it stirred in my creative soul did not incline directly to any appropriate creative concept. The music also had an intellectual component which was complex and intriguing to me. Bartok followed mathematical formulas in creating the piece. The most distinct was the use of the Fibonacci number series as it related to the intervallic relationships in the music. Heady stuff, and I was reminded of the lesson I learned with *Strings Attached*:

LESSON: Initiate from the inside out, not the outside in.

LESSON: Intellectual concepts are often a trap.

LESSON: Intellectual concepts should be used as guidelines, not straitjackets.

Although the music whipped up my imagination, it seemed to overwhelm any attempt to delineate parameters. I felt I needed inspiration from some new and unusual

source. Bill Collins, the well-respected theater critic for the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, had recently retired from the paper and was looking for something to do. He and I had often had in-depth discussions about dance, theater, and art, and I realized he might be a creative ally so I created a position of Dramaturge for the Pennsylvania Ballet. He was to collaborate, consult, and offer ideas and guidance for the new works. After lengthy discussions between us and an immersion into the Bartok music, Bill came to me with an idea. He proposed that I look to the ancient text of the allegory of the cave by Plato. The text, rich with image and philosophical tenants, seemed to be capable of containing the world of the Bartok music while offering potent ripples of variation and development. It resonated with my continuing exploration of order out of chaos and the maze of a closed paradigm. The Plato allegory also related directly, almost metaphorically, to the repetitive and closed system of the Fibonacci number series. These disparate inspirations led to a concept for the opening of the ballet, a sequential fugue which used both the number series and the image of the shadows in the cave from the Plato. And like that, with careful appreciation given to the rules about leading with the intellect, the potent and satisfying world of *Golden Mean* was achieved.

It belongs among the top ten of my creative history.

LESSON: If you're not sure what to do...don't.

LESSON: Be open to other people's ideas and inspirations but in the end, make it "yours."

LESSON: Great themes and dense ideas can cause a work to resonate beyond the sum of its parts. They may simply percolate within the choreographer's mind but that

alone often gives a weight and power to the choreographer's intent and the dancer's commitment.

LESSON: If the music can pass the test of time, your choreography might as well.

LESSON: The abstract lasts longer than the specific.

LESSON: Listen to all the music you intend to use for the creation of a work. If after just listening to it you feel a sense of satisfaction, of completeness, of fulfillment, then your chances of creating an equally fulfilling and satisfying work are greatly increased.

### **The Golden Mean *Part 2: Re-Do***

The ballet *The Golden Mean*, created for the Pennsylvania Ballet to the Bartok score, was a very successful work with the critics, the audience, the dancers, and with my own sense of creative manifestation. It drew from a potent and personal source and manifested in a seductive and fulfilling choreographic world. Years later, when I was commissioned by the New York City Ballet, I really wanted to present this work to the New York City audiences and critics. However, it was the company's policy to only premiere new works and not to acquire a previously performed ballet. So I decided to use the Bartok music again. In addition, I planned to keep the same themes and emotional subjects.

In short, I set myself the task of saying, again and differently, something I had already said completely and successfully. The fallacy of this course of action seems so obvious in hindsight...but at the time I thought I could create an even better piece than

*Golden Mean*. The ballet was called *Triptych* (a terrible title), and failed at every turn to match or even imitate the visceral vibrancy of the original.

NOTE: I cannot defend the following concept as it is obviously ludicrous.

Nonetheless, I believe it to be true for me: Great ballets all have great titles. This is nonsense, of course, but it is eerily true for me that on those occasions when a title comes to me and resonates with its “rightness,” the work created is powerful, memorable, and passes the test of time. I do not know why this is, I only know that it is part of the intangible, illusive, enigmatic, creative magic that seems to grace one project and elude another. It has something to do with being in the right creative zone and tapping into the precise subject for you at a personal and cosmically perfect moment.

LESSON: Don’t reuse music unless you have a very different vision.

LESSON: Reworking a work to make it better is valuable.

LESSON: Reworking a successful work is foolish.

### ***The Planets: When the Music is Bigger Than the Steps***

The orchestra for Gustav Holst’s *The Planets* requires over seventy musicians. The timpani alone includes seven kettle drums. My music director explained that, as much as he wanted to conduct this epic work, we just could not fit the musicians in the orchestra pit. So I sat in the theater of the Academy of Music in Philadelphia and brainstormed. I noticed that there were boxes overlooking the stage on both sides and, although they were premium seats available to the public for purchase, I thought we might fill them with musicians so that the orchestra literally spread out into the audience. In the end we put the entire woodwind section in the two boxes stage left and the timpani



and percussion in the boxes stage right. The orchestra pit then could hold the rest and we were able to perform this epic, theatrical, fifty-minute work. The opening movement, “Mars,” faced me with an obstacle that I had never encountered before. The music is ominous and grows and grows to a twenty-second, full-on, brass-blown crescendo. My concept was that two highly athletic young male dancers, dressed in nothing more than a loincloth, would scramble around the stage, leaping, falling, raising, competing, fighting, and ultimately dying at the end of the ten-minute movement. The subtext for me was of the phenomenon of the frog and the pot: Apparently, if you toss a frog into a pot of boiling water it leaps quickly out. But if you put it in a pot of cold water and then bring it to a boil, the frog remains inside and is cooked. This was the metaphor for the “Mars” section, only I wanted the two dancers to realize that the water was starting to boil and that they had to try, however impossible it might be, to get out.

The dance was very exciting and worked beautifully until the last twenty seconds. Here the music was just so big, loud, dense, and powerful that anything I choreographed with just two men was too diminutive.

My solution was to contrast the broad, simple, and expansive vocabulary of the duo with twenty seconds of increasingly fast and complex busyness as if the dancers were trying as fast as they could, every possible combination of steps. It succeeded in being “busy” but not much else.

My second solution was to use a visual reference as an intellectual statement. I had the two men leap up with their two arms up, reaching to the heavens—a gesture from Balanchine’s famous ballet *Apollo*. This reference to *Apollo* would add a heady and

conceptual layer to the crescendo. No one recognized the reference, and the one person who did, did not really understand why I had included it.

I finally realized that what was needed here was not a step, or a concept, but an experience. I wanted to experience the hopeless thrashing about of two men at the end of a desperate, futile quest to survive. No step or bit of choreography could give me that. In the end the solution was way out-of-the-box for me and revolutionary to my understanding of the parameters of choreographic possibility. And it was so simple. I simply asked the two dancers to do *entrachats*-six (a jump straight up with the feet beating as they jumped). I asked them to do it with their arms reaching to the heavens. And I asked them to repeat it over and over again and to keep jumping again and again...until they could not.

It was a revelation to watch. Each man was jumping with all his might but getting lower and lower, slower and heavier, breathing harder and harder, their thighs muscles screaming as they fell to the floor and tried again and again to jump until they simply gave up in exhaustion and defeat.

LESSON: You can, when needed, create an experience rather than choreography.

LESSON: The physical activity of movement can provide meaning.

**Glazunov Variations: *What's in the Basement?***

After a particularly difficult economic year for the Pennsylvania Ballet the company had a mix repertory program approaching with only two ballets scheduled. We needed a third, preferably something at least thirty minutes, to fill out the evening. As the artistic director and principal choreographer I needed to come up with a solution.

However, having just depleted myself physically and creatively with the epic scope of *The Planets*, I had no vision or impulse whatsoever. But necessity demanded action. I asked the costume director, “What have we got in the basement?” We went down and sorted through the aisles of costumes. Most of them were for well-known works like *The Nutcracker* or *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Swan Lake*; these were too recognizable to be useful in any other context.

Then we came upon a set of magnificent, regal tutus. These were beautifully made, elegant and immaculate. I learned that they had been lent to the Pennsylvania Ballet a few years earlier by the American Ballet Theater, and apparently we had yet to return them. So, I decided, this would be the third ballet for our series. There were costumes for twelve women and four men so I made a ballet for twelve women and four men. I wanted something strictly classical, in contrast to the more contemporary style of *The Planets*. So I gathered all the music of Alexander Glazunov—a Russian composer of fairly trite, but energetic, romantic, and highly “danceable” music. Over the weekend I selected various pieces and assembled a collage of music forty minutes long.

On Monday, with virtually no more thought than that, I entered the studio and began choreographing. As a younger choreographer the idea of being so completely unprepared would have terrified me and caused great anxiety, but by 1993 I had developed enough confidence in my craft and vision that I could truly enjoy the challenge of embracing uncertainty. All I knew was that I wanted to use a traditional ballet vocabulary (no looking for new twists on classic vocabulary here). I also wanted to challenge my dancers who had been training with me for three years and had very strong

technical and stylistic abilities. So with that, we created *Glazunov Variations* in one week and premiered it the following week. It was not a groundbreaking work, it was not innovative, it was not epic like *The Planets*. It was, however, a simple ballet, traditional in structure and satisfying in its modest way.

LESSON: Embrace uncertainty.

LESSON: At some point, you should trust yourself.

LESSON: No need to be precious about your vision. Sometimes a work can be made to order.

LESSON: Ask yourself, “What’s in my basement?”

### **Dumbarton Oaks: *The Power of Music***

It seemed like a no-brainer: Tap into my history and experience of working with Balanchine, pick a piece of Stravinsky music that he had not choreographed, use a Balanchine style of vocabulary and choreographic invention. Voila, a successful piece based on a well-known and popular genre.

I also had a terrific visual component. Dumbarton Oaks is a small estate in Washington, DC. It now is a museum where one can tour the estate, the gardens, and view an exhibit of ancient Coptic fabrics. It was these fabrics that interested me. One in particular portrayed several goddess-like women in provocative poses. The reds and browns of the old fabric were very earth-toned and rich, and the fabrics were so old that they had frayed and deteriorated, giving the image an interesting architectural asymmetry. I had one of the fabrics copied and made into a backdrop for the ballet sixty by forty feet.

The ballet had a simple premise. I imagined wealthy owners of the estate, riding horses, having picnics, and running through the lush gardens, and added to the mix was a goddess-woman based on the fabrics. She was a Puck-like figure who stirred things up for the humans. It was to be a fun, frolicking piece.

And it worked very nicely for the first two movements.

The last movement was problematic. As much as the first two-thirds inspired me, the last was illusive. The music jumped in with alacrity but then quickly changed directions and then changed again. The structure was desultory and fragmented as if taking a brisk walk with a schizophrenic. There were constant changes of direction and intent. When the piece ended there was a sense of dissatisfaction, as if the first two courses of a meal were rich and fully satisfying but then the last was missing a central ingredient.

I came at the third movement three different times with three different concepts, vocabularies, and structures. I finally decided on a strong and clear structural architecture to force upon the music: a concrete ending. But still, the experience was the same: an exciting and satisfying first two courses followed by an unfulfilling end.

LESSON: It is difficult to create a satisfying work with unsatisfying music.

LESSON: Listen to the music you have selected: It should feel complete in and of itself.

**Da Mummy, Niet Mummy: *Muse, Intention, Spark***

By this point in my choreographic career I had created and premiered over seventy original works, yet I had never accepted for myself the title of “choreographer.”

Although I had been making dances since childhood, I felt a reverence and respect for the title of choreographer and simply refused to acknowledge my own accomplishments. Finally, at this stage, I felt I had more than paid my dues, earned the title and, for the first time, felt in control of my craft.

To have mastered craft, one needs to feel confident that he or she can perform the many kinds of alchemy needed to transform an idea into a physical reality. Craft, simply put, is the ability to achieve an intention.

Appropriately, it was here, in 1994, at this point of artistic satisfaction, that my creative foundation collapsed and the driving intention of my choreographic mandate turned toward a new direction.

I had just attended a performance of the Netherlands Dance Theatre and saw a work of Jiri Kylian (one of my favorite choreographers). During one of the sections (unfortunately, I do not recall which work it was) there was a pas de deux which moved me to tears in that inexplicable wonderful way that dance can sneak into your subconscious and elicit emotion. I was shaken by the realization that out all of my work, I could not recall one which caused me, or anyone else, to literally shed tears. This could be viewed as a trite goal but it pulled at me. Up until then all of my work was driven by the desire to match the powerful music I chose with an architectural adventure and a poignant physical and theatrical vocabulary. My “pull” was one of elegance of movement design, surprise, innovative twists of form, and an overall thematic exploration of order out of chaos. I had never considered that an emotion could and perhaps should be the

*raison d'être* of a work. I became determined to achieve but one goal in my next work: to create something that could make people cry (if not the audience, then at least myself).

LESSON: Always have a clear intention of what you want to achieve.

I embarked on an exploration of movement, mood, and intention driven by my own acceptance of my personal secret fascination with three ballerinas in my company. I had theatrical lights with colored gels hung in the main rehearsal studio and called rehearsals at night just with my three “muses” (the three male dancers, as their partners, were added later). Each session was improvisational in form, switching between a varied selection of musical choices. An image kept coming to me of these three otherworldly muses inhabiting what I described to my set/lighting designer as the catacombs underneath Notre Dame Cathedral. We dressed them all in black “Louise Brooks” wigs and I settled on a Shostakovich piece for two pianos and had it orchestrated for an electronic orchestra. It was, at this point, a deeply personal work—one that I was very secretive about (refusing advance interviews with the local dance critics). I was fully committed to the lesson about following your “strange pull,” but I had yet to find a path toward my emotional destination: to illicit tears. It was during one of those evening improvisation sessions that I first encountered and recognized what I now call THE SPARK.

It was a simple accident. Anne White, the dancer who was doing a central pas de deux, had gotten confused about which of the four versions of a lyrical arm “porte de bra” I wanted her to do. She started an arm gesture but then abruptly changed to another version. It was an awkward kind of “rebound” gesture as if a video suddenly played

backward for just a second and then continued forward. This was movement I would never have thought of; movement that was original but odd. It created a kind of quirky broken quality, as if the dancer were having some kind of physical impediment or unintended tick. It was captivating to watch. However, this movement came out of nowhere and was not related to the rest of the ballet vocabulary. In the past I might have just set this movement aside because it did not “belong” to the world of the ballet I was making. But instead, I chose to start the whole piece over. I redefined the vocabulary and created a world which built up tension slowly and deliberately until reaching the climactic moment—a place where the music, in contrast, grew suddenly exquisitely and painfully delicate. Here, I had Anne go into the improvisational material and it was as if she was struck by an internal short circuit, a handicap of sorts which prevented her from carrying out even the simplest gesture. Behind her I had the man (her partner in the pas de deux) try to smooth out her arms and calm down her spasms. But she grew more and more stuck in this rebounding hiccupping. The effect was so upsetting and unsettling...but at the same time exquisitely beautiful. It was a “painful beauty” as described by my father who, upon viewing the premiere, cried.

LESSON: Don’t give up until you achieve your intention.

LESSON: Know your emotional intention.

LESSON: Create emotion, not just movement.

LESSON: Change your intention if a better one presents itself.

LESSON: If something doesn’t feel right, fix it. So many times I have heard choreographers, when confronted by a criticism of a specific moment in a dance, say, “I



know, it never felt right to me.” But this red flag was not given the consideration which would lead to action. How you feel about your work is your internal physician. It will tell you when something is off. It can’t tell you what to do, but it can tell you where to focus. It can’t explain the cause but it can point out the symptom.

LESSON: Don’t be limited by the blinders of your own intention.

NOTE: I feel I must take a moment here to explain, define, and drive home the enormous importance of the SPARK. I will try to illuminate the concept by stating what I know about it from several different angles.

My definition of a SPARK is: an unexpected, unintended choreographic accident or event which leads an artist to discover original and unexplored ideas.

Artists evolve until they reach a creative ceiling. The SPARK can make the ceiling a floor again, or a wall, or a ladder, or an infinite number of paradigm shifts which allow an artist to see new and unexplored possibilities.

Albert Einstein said, “Problems cannot be solved with the same mindset that created them” (“Quote by Albert Einstein”). The SPARK is the catalyst for creative evolution.

It is not what is commonly called “inspiration.” Inspiration is a word that has an almost magical, spiritual, and otherworldly connotation. Like a dream or an apparition, inspiration “comes to you.” It is received in passivity. For me, inspiration is the discovery of the “pull,” a yearning that mysteriously seeps into your psyche somewhere during the experience of human existence. The SPARK, on the other hand, is active. Two specific stones are hit together in just the right way and a flash of energy is released—energy that,

if fed properly, can ignite into flame. Sometimes it requires hitting a lot of different stones in a lot of different ways in order to find it.

LESSON: A SPARK is rarely found by looking for it, but instead it is something seen in the periphery while you were looking for something else.

LESSON: A SPARK is an “accident” which leads to creative evolution.

LESSON: A SPARK is not a destination. The destination is the intent to access the creative pull that first brought you to the studio. A SPARK is the gold you hope to trip on along the way.

LESSON: If a SPARK occurs, pay attention.

LESSON: The hardest part of finding a SPARK is recognizing it when it occurs.

LESSON: The second hardest part is knowing what to do with it when you see it.

LESSON: Often a “crazy” idea is actually a SPARK waiting to be perceived.

LESSON: A great idea is rarely one you thought of, it’s what tapped you on the shoulder while you were looking for a great idea.

I have had a few encounters with a truly transcendent SPARK. I am sure there have been many others which I missed or failed to recognize. But I know that all the important discoveries in my work have come from this phenomenon, and each time the scope of my choreographic possibility was forever expanded.

#### **Part Four: Freelancing: The Good/The Bad**

After directing the Pennsylvania Ballet for four years the demands of running a major company were overwhelming my artistic development. The time had come for me to reimmerge myself into the singular activity of choreographic exploration and

development. I resigned from the company in 1994 and began working as a freelance choreographer. During these years I worked with various companies including the San Francisco Ballet, The National Ballet of Amsterdam, the Royal Ballet of Flanders, and The New York City Ballet. The advantages of working freelance are that an artist can focus all of his or her attention on feeding, researching, exercising, and creating work in a direct and focused manner. The disadvantage is that each work is created with a different company so the opportunity to establish relationships with dancers who know and grow with your work are few and far between. Another disadvantage is that the freelancer never knows more than a year or so ahead what companies he or she will be working with.

The following adventure was an oddity of the freelance existence. It was something I never should have done and which changed me forever.

**Children of the Titanic: *Just Say, “Yes.”***

I was contacted by Dušan Rapoš, a Slovak film director and composer. He wanted to commission me to choreograph a full-length ballet, *Children of the Titanic*, for which he had written both the libretto and the music. To undertake the creation of a full-length ballet is a serious commitment of both time and creative energy, and I was not inspired either by the music or the libretto so I respectfully declined. Mr. Rapoš was not easily rejected. For some reason, he was convinced that I was the only person who could make his vision come to life and so, for two years, he badgered me with requests. Not wanting to be rude, I found excuse after excuse to put him off. Finally, I simply told him that he

could not possibly afford my fee for such a work, and quoted him an outrageous amount. He agreed to my fee and sent me a ticket to Bratislava, Slovakia. So I went.

When I arrived, I found the Slovak National Ballet to be a shambles. The country was not many years out of Communist rule and the theater was run down and dirty, with old torn curtains, and sets and costumes that must have been fifty years old. The dancers were also tired, pale, run down, underpaid, and uninterested in being in a new ballet that would require many weeks of rehearsal.

I had a choice to make. I was afraid that my reputation as a choreographer would be diminished by the poor quality of the music, libretto, production values, and dancers. I did not see how I could create anything there that would not embarrass me artistically. The choice was clear: I should decline the commission and return to New York.

However, I made a different choice which ultimately led to one of the most important lessons I have learned as a choreographer. I decided that I would put my artistic imperatives aside and use my talents to try and give these downtrodden dancers something that would challenge them, and make them feel good about themselves and their theater. I knew that for me as an artist, the final product would not be something I would ever want critics to see; but, as this was before the Internet, I knew it was unlikely that anyone would hear about this outside of Slovakia.

Over the next two months, I invented choreography that was for the dancers, not for me. It required a great deal of imagination and choreographic craft on my part, but the difference was that my choreographic ego or personal pull was not the driving force. This was something I was creating as a gift for these dancers, and the end result was

unexpected. As a freelance choreographer, the experience on opening night of a new work is a mixed one. You sit in the audience and hope that the work you created will be successful. You have formed professional relationships with these dancers, but you will, most likely, never see them again. You create the work and move on. The impact you have on the dancers, the audience, the community is often negligible.

Opening night of *Children of the Titanic* was a very different experience. First of all I was not concerned with how my choreographic artistry would be judged; artistry was not my agenda. What I had spent my time and talent on was teaching these dancers that they could be better, bigger, more proud of who they were as dancers and people. I had given them challenges that were beyond their experience and then helped them to succeed. When I watched the performance, I did not see my choreography, or worry about its success. Instead I saw a whole company of dancers who had grown and changed and who were achieving something that was extraordinary for them.

After the performance, I said goodbye to a few of the dancers and to Mr. Rapoš and prepared to go back to my hotel when one of the dancers grabbed me and told me that I had to come back stage. When I arrived I saw over a hundred people: the dancers, the stage crew, the costume designer and seamstresses, the conductor, and the musicians, all standing in a single file line that snaked throughout the theater. They were all lined up to thank me and to say goodbye. Although the artistic merits of the project were dubious, the profound personal impact it had on all of us cause me to categorize it as one of the most “successful” works I have ever done.

LESSON: Sometimes the miracle isn’t found where you expect it.

LESSON: The experience shared with the dancers can be more rewarding than the work itself.

LESSON: Don't let your ego limit what you say "yes" to.

The ideal situation for a freelance choreographer, in my view, is to find a resident choreographer position with a company that has the resources and talent consistent with an artist's style. I was given that opportunity with the Royal Ballet of Flanders where, over an eight-year period, I was commissioned to create eight new works.

***Bach in Four Voices: Another Spark.***

As I have stated previously, the SPARK is something that catches you while you are chasing something else. In working with the Royal Ballet of Flanders, I once again recognized a SPARK that would expand the depth of my choreographic scope. *Bach in Four Voices* was truly an experimental work. In four movements I explored four completely different kinds of choreographic paradigms. These did not blend to form a cohesive whole; instead it was like four separate sketches, each of which might, in the future, be turned into a more fully realized work. I knew this approach would not likely produce a fully satisfying work but I felt I needed to explore. The cycle of my personal artistic inspiration had once again come full circle from discovery, development, and implementation, to overuse, and finally exhaustion. I was feeling the subconscious pull toward something new but could not pinpoint a direction. It was while working on a solo for a male dancer in the third section of this work that I found what I was looking for. Billy Forsyth invented a complex improvisational system using points in space and the connections and lines created by moving disparate body parts through the three-

dimensional grid. I worked with Billy for a few days in his theater in Frankfurt, Germany, and experimented with his system for my own work. What I found was that the intellectual puzzle of it was fascinating, but the movement it generated—while often unpredictable—was not exciting me in other than a heady way like solving a Rubric's cube.

What interested me was the sophisticated focus on lines as illustrated by the body as a whole and the limbs in isolation. Once a line is established it defines the whole world around it. If you add an additional parallel line, the geometry is strengthened and a relationship is created between the two lines. What began to fascinate me was that as I worked with the relationships of lines I discovered that specific relationships had an emotional resonance. For example, two dancers making parallel lines created a sense of solid foundations: a safe, comfortable, stable emotional environment. But if you slightly tilted one of the lines it created an uncomfortable, unstable environment like a dissonance. Or if you wrapped a dancer's arms into a circle and surrounded a straight line it felt alarming, like the line had to move, had to escape. The more I explored this extremely abstract vocabulary the more levels of emotional resonance I discovered. This new direction was just hinted at in *Bach in Four Voices*, but that SPARK led me to the next work for The Royal Ballet of Flanders.

### **Symposium: *Abstract Meaning***

Leonard Bernstein's beautiful, complex, and thoroughly danceable piece *Symposium* is a work for violin and orchestra which has rarely been used by choreographers. It was a perfect world for me to explore fully this new abstract

emotionalism that I was developing. Now in a forty-minute piece with an ensemble of four men, four women, two principal women, and four principal men, I could create a complete work with a consistent and deeply layered structure. The process was an invigorating one and the result was a work of crisp steps, tricky patterns, and a range of emotions from dangerous to passionate to playful, all using this totally abstract vocabulary of interweaving and kaleidoscope-like geometry. I count *Symposium* as one of my most original works.

LESSON: Lines can have meaning.

LESSON: The relationship between lines can create emotion.

LESSON: You will have “unsuccessful” work. Embrace it. It may point to way to your future.

### **Circle of Fifths: *Image***

My third work for the New York City Ballet was set to Philip Glass’s “Violin Concerto.” Normally, I am not inspired to choreograph by the repetitious theatricality of Mr. Glass’s music, but the moody second movement of this score haunted me. It is deceptive in its simplicity. The whole eight minutes of the movement does nothing more than play two notes: the “one” or tonic of the tonal center and the “five” or dominant harmony. Over and over again, from one to five, as the orchestration embellishes around these two notes. I was blessed with three extraordinary dancers: Albert Evans, Peter Boal, and the incandescent Wendy Whelan.

There are two important conceptual changes I made with this work. The first was to choreograph *through* the music rather than *to* the music. In the first and last



movements of the ballet I mapped out the music in counts that I used to create steps that perfectly matched the changes in the music. This had been my most common method of relating movement to music. However, this time, I created long stretches of choreography that were confined to the music in broad strokes. For example, the dancers would have a series of several choreographic events that had to be completed by a certain point in the music, but the tempo that they executed those phrases were completely up to them and would vary significantly each time. This kept all three of the dancers in this pas de trois always present, always in the moment and spontaneous, and always interacting with each other.

The second device of note was the deliberate placement of an image in the most emotionally resonate moment. It was a simple image: Wendy stood in “first position” the first and most basic of all ballet vocabulary. Albert stood directly behind her and circled his arms forward around Wendy, touching his fingertips together, closing off the circle like he was making a hula hoop with his arms (this too is the most basic arm position of elementary ballet vocabulary). The effect was that Albert’s hands covered Wendy’s eyes, like a blindfold. This image was powerful because it not only was memorable and burned itself into the mind’s eye, but because it was also emotional. The basic ballet positions resonated innocence, naiveté, vulnerability. The powerful arms of the man limited her, blocked her, defined and controlled her. Then, as the haunting violin rose and fell from the one note to the other, Wendy did the first and most simple ballet move, a plié (bending her knees outward and then straightening them again). This movement lowered her just a few inches to where her eyes could peek out under the blindfold of the man’s

hands. This was striking in its simplicity and the powerful emotions it resonated. *Circle of Fifths* was my most successful work to date in that it has been revived twice by New York City Ballet (a very rare occurrence) and it has been set on many other companies.

LESSON: Don't be chained to the music.

LESSON: You can use music as ambiance or an environment.

LESSON: One good image is worth a hundred good steps.

LESSON: It is ironic but true that although an image is technically stagnant, it is more valuable to a dance than movement.

## CHAPTER 5. REFLECTIVE COMMENTS

### *Volatizing the Esters: 2013, Calm After a Storm*

As I reach the end of this choreographic memoir it is fitting that the work I have just premiered, as of the writing of this, reaches a pinnacle of an evolutionary artistic journey. All the past experiences and lessons that I have discovered along the way or identified in hindsight played a role in this work and the success of it validates those lessons.

Having identified and articulated the lessons, I now was able to practice a repeatable process as determined by those lessons, and I found myself fully prepared to create this new work. Not to say that it was easy, but the process I practiced was true to the lessons and I felt bolstered and guided every step of the way. I had not anticipated, at the beginning of this study, that what I analyzed and articulated here would actually profoundly improve my own creative ability. But now I have these tools and concepts fresh in my head and immediately available for guidance.

LESSON: Establishing a personal process gives your confidence a foundation.

LESSON: Like everything, your personal process should evolve.

Here is a brief outline of the process I followed in creating *Volatizing the Esters*. As suggested by the lessons, it all stemmed from a single creative “pull” and grew organically from that.

*Volatizing the Esters* is an expression which refers to the act of swirling the wine in a glass in order to release the hidden and subtle complicities of the wine—a very appropriate title for a work which developed into an epic, intense, and highly theatrical world. For this work the pull that inspired me was the second movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7*. This giant orchestral work would seem impossible to match in choreography and without having perhaps a cast of a thousand and a mountain for a stage. But my choice was to match the orchestral passion with internal rather than external power. An image came to mind of a frail, vulnerable, female dancer, dressed in wispy, transparent gossamer. Her movements would be entirely modern-based, gestural and focused. I imagined a world where the ghostlike woman in Pina Bausch's "Café Müller" was transplanted into the ritualistic sacrifice from another of Pina's masterworks, "The Rite of Spring." In my work, the "Fragile Muse," as we called her, would be surrounded by the others, imprisoned by them, and would be dancing small, personal, emotionally charged movements. I also envisioned a dark blue carpet cut into a twenty-by-twenty-foot square. This carpet would define the space for the Muse and the other dancers would move outside of the carpet like a moving but impenetrable wall. My entire inspirational "pull" for this ballet hinged on one moment when the Beethoven movement reached its most theatrically powerful crescendo. I imagined my Fragile Muse falling and spinning to the floor in the center of the carpet and simply sitting, pulling her knees up like a frightened child. And then the dancers would pick up the ends of the carpet and run clockwise, spinning the carpet and turning the Muse slowly as if on a giant turntable.

This image, in combination with the music, created an over-the-top passionate, theatrical moment.

The rest of the ballet grew out of this image, not only in relation to it, but also creating the necessary world and context where this over-the-top ending would be justified and wholly satisfying.

In the end I created a complex world of sequential and personal storylike movements. The music collage I edited included ten different pieces of Beethoven's music, including some of the famous piano works like "Moonlight Sonata" as well as other lesser known works. By the end, *Volatizing the Esters* was a fifty-minute work involving nine dancers. The entire work is designed to take the audience on a journey into a personal, theatrical, and character-driven world. And all of it set up, developed, and built up to the bombastic "turntable" moment.

LESSON: The preparation for an inspirational "pull" moment must be appropriate to the dynamic level of the crescendo. In other words, you have to set up your big moments.

LESSON: When you succeed, you are calm.

No one ever knows when or why certain creations soar while others flail. I can never tell, at the outset, whether a particular work will satisfy and achieve that "rightness" which makes a work fulfilling and resonant.

*Volatizing the Esters* points toward a new direction in my creative journey. It achieves a variety of specific emotional vibrancies through abstraction. There is no story to the ballet; instead, a series of implied and resonate relationships. The comment I heard

most frequently from the audience after the performance was how they felt that they knew these dancers and their characters even though there was no story. *Volatizing* sums up my whole journey as a choreographic artist up until now. As I sat in the theater on opening night, I did not have my usual anxiety about how the performance would be received or how the dancers would perform. Instead, I felt absolutely nothing but a simple and profound sense of completeness—the way one feels when one has fully and personally expressed himself or herself. It is a small thing. It is everything.

The next day I was depressed. I did not really know how I had made this piece and why it worked so well, so how could I be sure that I could ever create anything successful again?

LESSON: Choreography is a journey and should have a clear departure point and destination.

LESSON: Know your starting point and love your destination.

LESSON: Just because you did it once doesn't mean you can ever do it again.

LESSON: Usually, after a period of great creative output, you have to replenish yourself.

The process of mining my choreographic history and distilling from it lessons, concepts, patterns, and practices has helped me identify the tools I need to have a chance to create something valuable again. These concepts, now that I have researched them, reveal to me a very practical process to explore and successfully create choreography. I hope it will be of value to all choreographers, both professional and aspiring.

LESSON: Be grateful for every stupid, infuriating, frustrating, extraordinary moment you have.

### **Summary**

An unintended result of this thesis study is that, in reviewing the literature on choreographic craft and process and in examining my own experience and education, I have discovered the foundation of my own choreographic process. Many choreographers are highly cognizant of and articulate about their working process. Their work begins with process and develops from there. Others, however, cannot easily articulate their process and in many cases are not even aware that they have one. They rely on instinct, experience, intuition, preference, and judgment. They do not start with a process, they just start. Up until writing this study I fell into that second category. I have discovered, through this study, that there are ten main philosophies which guide all my work. These are foundational ideas for me and highly subjective. They are creative Rosetta stones which ground my personal paradigm as well as guide all creative activity. They are best summed up in the “lesson” statements distilled from this thesis. They are:

1. Follow your “strange pull.”
2. Know your starting point and love your destination.
3. The music must be able to stand alone.
4. Know what you want, but let your dancers find it for you.
5. Be open to a better idea.
6. Embrace the Muse.
7. Create emotion, not just movement.

8. One good image is worth a hundred steps.

9. Follow any SPARK.

10. Trust your dancers.

These ten ideas have acted as inspirations, editors, sirens, critics, cheerleaders, and compasses. Knowing about them has given me a foundation, a method, and a confidence that I have never before experienced. It is a privilege to be a creative artist and it is my hope that this study can serve as a positive and useful guide to all those who follow.

LESSON: Be grateful for every stupid, infuriating, frustrating, extraordinary moment you have.



## **APPENDIX: THE LESSONS**

### **Guidelines for Choreographic Inspiration, Craft, and Artistry**

These lessons are suggestions. They offer guidelines to student and professional choreographers. Although they are subjective, the lessons were selected for their universal usefulness. They are presented here in no particular order.

LESSON: If you are going to do something...do it full out!

LESSON: Whenever possible (when doing so doesn't compromise any vital part of the choreography), change the step to exploit the specific talents of your dancers.

LESSON: Preparation should be a suggestion, not an end. It limits you and your dancers.

LESSON: Preparation gives you the foundation to embrace uncertainty.

LESSON: Working out steps by yourself is valuable...trying to make dancers imitate you is not.

LESSON: Speak as little as possible.

LESSON: Know what you want, but let the dancers find it for you.

LESSON: Be specifically vague.

LESSON: Whenever possible, witness a master choreographer at work.

LESSON: Ask your dancers to be "bigger." They can, they will, and it reminds everyone that, in dance, the extraordinary is always expected.

LESSON: A step must have a reason to exist. I do not intend to imply that a step must express or be related to an emotion, or story, or character as in the Robbins *Watermill* sessions, but simply to state that every step is connected to the context of the step which preceded it, and in an abstract and purely linear process, must be consistent with the paradigm of the whole.

LESSON: Sometimes a dancer can also serve as a compass.

LESSON: If your dancers have to think about what step comes next, rehearse them more. If your dancers lose their joy and spontaneity, you have rehearsed too much.

LESSON Repetition is needed only until the choreography moves from a dancer's brain to his or her body.

LESSON: Almost right is not right.

LESSON: When something is "right," you know it instantly and instinctually. It is a feeling, not an understanding.

LESSON: Choreography is a wrestling match where you win by being pinned, not by pinning.

LESSON: Don't force things together.

LESSON: Pushing through an obstacle is valuable but make sure you actually get through to something "right."

LESSON: Pulling is always better than pushing.

LESSON: If you can avoid it, don't grow old.

LESSON: Having a hard time? That's okay. Choreography is difficult.

LESSON: There is always more to learn.

LESSON: Honor the importance of what you do: Let your dancers feel it.

LESSON: Learn to recognize the difference between fine tuning and fussing.

LESSON: If time drags in rehearsal, you are probably off track.

LESSON: Great mentors are your creative parents. Take advantage of the time you have with them.

LESSON: Find your “strange pull.”

DEFINITION: Your pull: Something that turns you on.

LESSON: Art comes from trying to experience a personal yearning.

LESSON: Mine your own passions. You don’t have to tell anyone, but don’t lie to yourself.

LESSON: Choreographers don’t wait for permission to start creating.

LESSON: Every opportunity to choreograph is valuable.

LESSON: Be open to a better idea.

LESSON: Shape the paradigm of your work to create a world where the disparate talents of your cast can exist and shine together.

LESSON: Embrace “impossible” challenges; they can lead to unexpected creativity.

LESSON: Casting is everything.

LESSON: If a dancer has something special but is “wrong” for your piece, reconceived your piece (if possible).

LESSON: (For novices:) Find a way to learn your craft. Practice anywhere and everywhere you can. Ask fellow dancers to work with you. If you don’t have access to

professional dancers then choreograph anywhere you can. Choreograph for children, or recitals, or weddings, or high schools, or cheerleaders; all of it will teach you craft and doing is the only way to learn.

LESSON: Doing is the only way to proficiency.

LESSON: (For novices:) Don't worry about where you're going...just go. What is your style? What is your signature? Don't concern yourself with these postures. Do your work and eventually, in hindsight, the pattern of your creative preference will emerge. Your personal style is never a signpost to navigate by. It's found in the rearview mirror.

LESSON: Find your "pull." Dig deep and examine your own preferences. Look for something which excites you, which tugs at you, something you yearn to access and bring to life. The "pull" is a subjective, often subconscious desire or attraction buried in your psyche.

LESSON: (Again:) The best way to find your "pull" is to follow what turns you on.

LESSON: You can't force a Muse to appear, but if one does...you are no longer alone. You have a partner in your quest.

LESSON: Some Muses can inspire for a lifetime; others fade away or are replaced by new ones. You know you have one when just the thought of him or her causes your creative pull to percolate.

LESSON: A Muse is directly related to your "pull." If it is not, you might be lying to yourself.

LESSON: Sometimes an ill-advised or impossible challenge can lead to out-of-the-box creativity.

LESSON: When a scenic element can move or “dance,” the effect can magnify the scope and resonance of the work. A dance becomes an environment. Choreography becomes a world.

LESSON: Initiate from the inside out not the outside in.

LESSON: Intellectual concepts are often a trap.

LESSON: Intellectual concepts should be used as guidelines, not straitjackets.

LESSON: If you’re not sure what to do...don’t.

LESSON: Be open to other people’s ideas and inspirations but in the end, make it “yours.”

LESSON: Great themes and dense ideas can cause a work to resonate beyond the sum of its parts. They may simply percolate within the choreographer’s mind but that alone often gives a weight and power to the choreographer’s intent and the dancer’s commitment.

LESSON: If the music can past the test of time, your choreography might as well.

LESSON: The abstract lasts longer than the specific.

LESSON: Listen to all the music you intend to use for the creation of a work. If after just listening to it you feel a sense of satisfaction, of completeness, of fulfillment, then your chances of creating an equally fulfilling and satisfying work are greatly increased.

LESSON: Don’t reuse music unless you have a very different vision.

LESSON: Reworking a work to make it better is valuable.

LESSON: Reworking a successful work is foolish.

LESSON: Embrace uncertainty.

LESSON: At some point, you should trust yourself.

LESSON: No need to be precious about your vision. Sometimes a work can be made to order.

LESSON: Ask yourself, “What’s in my basement?”

LESSON: It is difficult to create a satisfying work with unsatisfying music.

LESSON: Listen to the music you have selected: It should feel complete in and of itself.

LESSON: You can create an experience rather than choreography.

LESSON: Know your emotional intention.

LESSON: Create emotion, not just movement.

LESSON: The physical activity of movement can provide meaning.

LESSON: Always have a clear intention of what you want to achieve.

LESSON: Don’t give up until you achieve your intention.

LESSON: Change your intention if a better one presents itself.

LESSON: If something doesn’t feel right, fix it. So many times I have heard choreographers, when confronted by a criticism of a specific moment in a dance, say, “I know, it never felt right to me.” But this red flag was not given the consideration which would lead to action. How you feel about your work is your internal physician. It will tell

you when something is off. It can't tell you what to do, but it can tell you where to focus.  
It can't explain the cause but it can point out the symptom.

LESSON: The hardest part of finding a SPARK is recognizing it when it occurs.

LESSON: The second hardest part is knowing what to do with it when you see it.

LESSON: Often a "crazy" idea is actually a SPARK waiting to be perceived.

LESSON: Don't be limited by the blinders of your own intention.

LESSON: A great idea is rarely one you thought of, it's what tapped you on the shoulder while you were looking for a great idea.

LESSON: Sometimes the miracle isn't found where you expect it.

LESSON: The experience shared with the dancers can be more rewarding than the work itself.

LESSON: Don't let your ego limit what you say "yes" to.

LESSON: Lines can have meaning.

LESSON: The relationship between lines can create emotion.

LESSON: You will have "unsuccessful" work. Embrace it. It may point to way to your future.

LESSON: Don't be chained to the music.

LESSON: You can use music as ambiance or an environment.

LESSON: One good image is worth a hundred good steps.

LESSON: It is ironic but true that although an image is technically stagnant, it is more valuable to a dance than movement.

LESSON: Establishing a personal process give your confidence a foundation.

LESSON: Like everything, your personal process should evolve.

LESSON: Choreography is a journey and should have a clear departure point and destination.

LESSON: Know your starting point and love your destination.

LESSON: The preparation for an inspirational “pull” moment must be appropriate to the dynamic level of the crescendo. In other words, you have to set up your big moments.

LESSON: When you succeed, you are calm.

LESSON: Just because you did it once doesn’t mean you can ever do it again.

LESSON: Usually, after a period of great creative output, you have to replenish yourself.

LESSON: Be grateful for every stupid, infuriating, frustrating, extraordinary moment you have.



## WORKS CITED

- “Ballet.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. 2013. Print.
- Barks, Coleman, trans., and John Moyne. *The Essential Rumi*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996. Print.
- Blom, Lynee Anne, and L. Tarin Chaplin. *The Intimate Act of Choreography*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982. Print.
- Burrows, Johnathan. *A Choreographer’s Handbook*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Butterworth, Jo, and Liesbeth Wildschut, eds. *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Costas. *Balanchine: Celebrating a Life in Dance*. Windsor: Tide-Mark Press Ltd., 2009. Print.
- Cunningham, Merce. *Changes: Notes on Choreography*. Ed. Francis Starr. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: Something Else Press, 1968. Print.
- Ellfeldt, Lois. *A Primer for Choreographers*. Long Grove: Wave-Land Press Inc., 1967. Print.
- Fischl, Eric, and Jerry Saltz. *Sketchbook With Voices*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2011. Print.
- Fraleigh, Sondra Horton. *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1987. Print.
- Gilfond, Henry. Foreword. *Pre-Classic Dance Forms*. By Louis Horst. 1953. New York: Kamin Dance Publishers, 1960. Print.
- Hastings, Baird. *Choreographer and Composer: Theatrical Dance and Music in Western Culture*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983. Print.
- H’Doubler, Margaret N. *Dance: A Creative Art Experience*. New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., 1940. Print.

- Horst, Louis. *Pre-Classic Dance Forms*. 1953. New York: Kamin Dance Publishers, 1960. Print.
- Horst, Louis, and Carroll Russell. *Modern Dance Forms in Relation to the Other Modern Arts*. Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, Inc., 1961. Print.
- Humphrey, Doris. *The Art of Making Dances*. Hightstown: Princeton Books, 1959. Print.
- Macaulay, Alastair. "Luminaries and Hopefuls Join to Ensure Choreography's Future." *New York Times* 7 November 2010. Web.
- Massine, Leonide. *Choreography: Theories and Exercises in Composition*. London: Faber, 1976. Print.
- Minton, Sandra Cerny. *Choreography: A Basic Approach Using Improvisation*. 1986. Champaign: Human Kinetics, 2007. Print.
- "Modern Dance." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. 2013. Print.
- Nagrin, Daniel. *Choreography and the Specific Image*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001. Print.
- "Quote by Albert Einstein." GoodReads. n.d. Web. <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/387336-problems-cannot-be-solved-with-the-same-mind-set-that>.
- Schrader, Constance A. *A Sense of Dance: Exploring Your Movement Potential*. Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1996. Print.
- Seibert, Brian. *Jerome Robbins*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2005. Print. Library of American Choreographers.
- Smith-Artaud, Jacqueline M. *Dance Composition: A Practical Guide to Creative Success in Dance Making*. 1976. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Sofras, Pamela Anderson. *Dance Composition Basics: Capturing the Choreographer's Craft*. Champaign: Human Kinetics, 2006. Print.
- Spier, Steven. *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography: It Starts From Any Point*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Taper, Bernard. *Balanchine: A Biography*. New York: Times Books, 1984. Print.
- Tharp, Twyla. *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003. Print.

Winearls, Jane. *Choreography: The Art of the Body*. Princeton: Princeton Book Co. Publishers, 2011. Print.

## BIOGRAPHY

Christopher d'Amboise was born in New York City into a family of dancers, and has had many careers: dancer, choreographer, director, and playwright. As a Principal dancer with New York City Ballet, he worked closely with both George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, originating works as well as performing major repertoire. On Broadway he earned a Tony nomination costarring with Bernadette Peters in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Song and Dance*. As a choreographer, d'Amboise works both in theater and ballet and has created over 100 works seen worldwide. As a writer, he has created original works for the stage including *The Studio*, winner of a 2007 Garland Award. His production company Moving Story supports innovative projects which integrate dance and storytelling.