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**DANCE AS ACTIVISM: EXPLORING GUN VIOLENCE THROUGH
MOVEMENT AND TEXT**

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ABSTRACT

In my thesis, I explore the potential for dance to take on an activist role, serving to springboard conversations and personal understandings of social issues in ways that conventional activism does not access. Through creative and textual research, I created a 20-minute long dance work titled “Alert” that examines the embodied experience of women after incidents of gun violence in the United States. The work considers male rage and rejection, and how women situate their bodies in order to reduce, ignore, or oppose the potential of violence. I also incorporated literary text within my creative process in order to reflect on the similarities and differences between historical questions with war and current day issues with gun violence.

Through creative process, I discovered the importance of context and negotiated the balance of explicit versus implicit content. I discuss the ways in which my dancers and I created movement and text for my work and the awareness that artistic work does not exist in a vacuum outside of current events. I conclude by describing my creative work and discussing the potential and limitations of activist art.

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INTRODUCTION

In the preface to her collection, *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice*, Naomi Jackson notes that dance can be used to further social ideals and push for social change, or it can be used to reinforce repressive ideology: "Recognition grew that dance and human rights are not such unrelated spheres, but intimately and actively engage along a continuum of exchange from the most harrowing in which dancing is banned, and dancers tortured, to the ways in which dancers can be degraded in rehearsals" (Jackson x). Movement and performance have a long history of having the potential to work towards social change. Throughout different cultures and perspectives, dance has the potential to start conversation, question beliefs, and represent rebellion.

My research aims to explore how dance and creative process can be the starting point for discussions about social issues. I specifically wanted to look at how gun violence in America can be processed through the site of the body, which resulted in the creation and performance of "Alert," a 20-minute dance performance presented in December 2018. Throughout this creative process, I also looked at how text could interweave with movement and other performance elements to create a duplicity of meaning and understanding. With my research, I questioned what it meant to sit with trauma, what it means as a witness to watch someone else process trauma, and how a dance work could spark new discussions and understandings of a social issue like gun violence in a way that other forms of activism could not. Can the embodiment of movement add more nuance and clarity to discussions surrounding physical violence?

My thesis has many different origin points, many of them personal. My awareness of the threat posed with guns heightened because I was stalked throughout junior high. The young man who stalked me, while he acted innocuous, was never hesitant to voice his love of guns. When he would contact me on social media, I would see an animated figure with a huge rifle staring back at me from my computer screen. Guns were a symbol of control and obsession to me from an early age. It became very clear to me that he thought of me as an object that could be possessed, and that if I angered him in the wrong way, he could attempt to harm me or my loved ones in order to have control over me.

Although my stalker never threatened me with a gun, that time of fear in my life made me very aware of gun violence from an early age. Whenever real events of gun violence occurred, they would have a tremendous impact on me, in part because of this history and also because of the reality of tragedy. The first, and possibly most influential, was the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida. It was 2016, and as a somewhat-out nineteen-year-old, the news that a man had marched into a queer safe space and murdered 49 strangers and himself with guns rocked me to my core ("Orlando"). Why would he want to do such a thing? What was the purpose of taking a life? How could anyone be so cruel? How was it possible to harbor so much hatred in a body?

I remember feeling hopeless, but also like I needed to let out these frustrations and confusions in some way. My whole body felt numb for that Sunday; I cried because it was all I could do to let all of that pain escape myself in some way.

I briefly considered using an artistic outlet and choreographing something, but I did not feel ready or skilled enough to take on something as serious as a massacre. I had seen too many gauche or unnuanced works of art trying to tackle big picture issues like grief or war. Even though I did not feel ready to let myself process this incident through an artistic practice, it still stuck with me. I clearly felt the potential but also the ability to misstep, what Marcel Duchamp calls the art coefficient: "[the] difference between what he [the artist] intended to realize and did

realize” (43). In particular, I kept returning to the gun as a source of violence and why that specific vehicle for mass casualty seemed to be permitted by a large population of the United States, more so than an outbreak of an infectious disease or a bombing. I remember spending hours thinking about the fact that a gun’s function is to kill and asking why a vehicle for death would be so glorified and sacred to so many American people.

There are other events that also stand out. Another key moment was the Parkland shooting, where a man walked into a high school and killed 17 high school students (Chuck). It happened in Spring 2018, and I again was reminded of the feeling of hopelessness and confusion that happened when Pulse occurred. Again, why? And why young people?

There was something distinct about the Parkland shooting, however. The survivors started speaking out—and they started to get recognition for their voices. Never before had I seen a consistent and very public platform on gun reform activism last for as long as it has lasted for the voices of activists like Emma Gonzalez and David Hogg. It gave me hope at a time where I had previously felt only despair. And along with that hope, the inkling that perhaps I could contribute to the conversation through my art.

Isolated incidents of gun violence on a local level also stick out in my memories. A week before I left for college, a man at my local mall murdered his co-worker, a woman named Andrea Farrington, shooting her in the back because she refused to date him (Mehaffey). I remember being aghast at that sort of violence. It was also a reminder that some men will go to extreme lengths to maintain control and possession over a woman and her body.

This sort of instance of violence is something that feels uncomfortably familiar. In 2015, the number of deaths from firearms in the United States exceeded the number of deaths from car accidents at 36,252 deaths by firearm versus 36,161 deaths from car accidents (Bauchner). When it comes to domestic violence situations, guns also pose a significant issue. Fifty American women will be shot to death by an intimate partner in the average month, and American women are *sixteen times* more likely to be killed by a gun than women in other high-income countries according to a 2016 study published in the American Journal of Medicine (“Guns and Domestic Violence”). Mother Jones hosts an open source database on mass shootings occurring in the United States with the first entry dating back to 1982 (Follman). Because of this, I am focusing on incidents of American gun violence from 1982 onwards.

Over and over again in media, we are barraged with stories and images of women losing their lives because a man cannot stand the thought of their autonomy. It is present in popular TV shows, like Netflix’s *You*, or in innumerable episodes of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. These narratives, while fictitious, echo the realities of the news we consume as Americans.

These are some of the events that led me to examine how dance could contribute to the heated conversation about gun violence in the United States today. Dance seems more than ever the proper medium for me, as it utilizes and highlights the body, the very site where violence occurs when someone is shot. Dance also occurs at the site of the body; there is a stark contrast between a dancer being present and alive in all parts of their body versus someone who has experienced trauma from a gunshot wound. Both of these experiences are intimately tied to the physical and kinesthetic existence of that person. Because of this shared site but vastly differing experiences, dance and gun violence felt diametrically opposed. Where guns kill and destroy, dance lives and creates. It is a place for life, where an individual can feel their heart beat, their breath quicken, and their limbs reach.

I bring up the aforementioned events as they are a part of my narrative as creator and choreographer, but also a source of bias. I have never had a comfortable relationship with guns,

and while I entered my process wanting to allow a diversity of narrative, belief, and practice, I cannot dismiss my own perspective as it undoubtedly influenced this creation.

In Chapter 1, I look at the literary texts that influenced my examination of gun violence not only through a modern lens, but also a historical one. I discuss the intrigue for me between literary text and choreographic creation, examine the shortcomings in representation of the narratives I chose to look at, and observe what I found compelling about each text when looking at creating a new work when looking at a similar but unique topic.

In Chapter 2, I recount and reflect on the choreographic process to create “Alert.” This includes a background on the components contributing to the work, my artistic thought process, struggles, obstacles, and discoveries. During my choreographic process, I investigated how women could perform emotional struggle with regards to incidents of gun violence and how dance as a medium could comment on the physical threat of violence in a unique way compared to other artistic mediums. In Chapter 3, I take the reader through the sequence of performance, highlighting the images, sounds, and movement qualities that carry the narrative and create a source for making meaning. In my conclusion, I reflect on what dance can add to a conversation about gun and domestic violence while also considering the limitations of performance-based art.

CHAPTER 1: RELEVANT TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

When looking at how the body can comment on, reflect, and question the aftermath of gun violence, I decided I wanted to explore how text could ground a choreographic work in ways that movement or sound scores alone could not. In my literature classes, I found stark similarities between the way authors would describe war and its aftermath, and the accounts I had heard or read from victims of gun violence. I became interested with how literary anti-war texts could inform, contrast, and bring new meaning to the movement I was starting to create.

I started off my process with texts and literary concepts that I wanted to infuse into my choreographic concept. These were all texts I had read or heard of before embarking on my creative process and ones that resonated with me when I thought of how different generations dealt with death and violence. Texts and sources included Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, T.S. Eliot's "The Waste-Land," Ambrose Bierce's "Chickamauga," and Childish Gambino's "This is America."

I brought the texts in as aids in creation, investigation, and thematic process, using texts to create movement material, spark conversations with dancers, and set up movement sections that echoed ideas presented in the text. While most did not wind up in the final choreographic work, they are all intertwined into the DNA of the piece, through movement generation practices, or inspiration. For example, dancers would respond to text I brought in from a specific literary work and create a movement phrase correlated with the textual phrase. I will delve more into the specifics of this encoding of these texts during Chapter 2.

It is important to note a couple of things about these texts. First and foremost, they are based in Western ideology and experience. Most of my formal English education has dealt with texts from Europe or North America, and this is reflected in the texts that I selected at the beginning of this process. This is not to say that it was bad for me to choose these texts; after all, I was specifically looking at the context of the United States and how history relates to the current moment. Still, my original selection of texts does not reflect a wider variety of location, experience, and perspective in regards to cultural backgrounds.

Along these lines, all of the texts that I could think of off the top of my head were written by men. This intrigued me; it made a certain sense, as most of the texts look at wartimes when women were excluded from participating in battle. Still, I knew that the imagery of war was not male-exclusive, so it struck me that it was such a male-dominated field.

One key text I wanted to incorporate was Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The novel deals with the pain, death, and confusion surrounding World War II and specifically the Dresden bombings (Vonnegut). One element of *Slaughterhouse-Five* that I really wanted to investigate is the nonchalance with which the narrator deals with death, even when it is clearly horrific for the characters involved. Each time any sort of death occurs—whether it is a flea or multiple people—Vonnegut follows the death by writing "so it goes" (Vonnegut 27).

I was also deeply inspired by T.S. Eliot's *The Waste-Land*, a long poem written after the end of World War I ("The Waste Land"). *The Waste-Land* is composed as a fragmented, multi-focal narrative where just as the reader starts to grasp what is occurring, the frame shifts. It is also unique in that it uses many allusions to other texts, from *Hamlet* to the Bible to Greek mythology. This layer of ever-shifting perspective and scenes adds to Eliot's attempt to grapple with death, infertility, and the loss of so much young life in London in the wake of World War I. One of the things that *The Waste-Land* grapples with specifically is how the loss of young life not only affects the current generation, but also the next generation of children. In this way, it is both a reflection of a present event and a concerned look towards what the future might hold.

Short stories by Ambrose Bierce also interested me. Bierce witnessed the tragedy of the American Civil War, and in his writings, he often found deeply ironic, deeply unsettling conclusions to conflict, such as siblings killing each other because they are on different sides of the war, or a civilian trying to act heroic but winding up dead. Bierce's stories intrigued me because they are unflinching in their portrayal of the gruesomeness of death.

I also wanted to incorporate the literary concept of Chekhov's Gun; the concept states that "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off" ("Poet's"). I was interested in the notion that an unused gun is considered bad storytelling. It also intrigued me that one of the most-cited literary tropes I had heard in my English career was in reference to an act of violence.

The Beatles are notorious for their anti-war sentiments, but one song of theirs I was particularly influenced by: "Happiness is a Warm Gun." The song is similar to *The Waste-Land* in that the narrative seems to jump and scramble a bit, but the main chorus states "Happiness, is a warm gun / ... / When I hold you in my arms / And I feel my finger on your trigger / I know nobody can do me no harm / Because happiness is a warm gun" (Beatles). The song includes evocative imagery, comparing a warm gun to the body of a woman and suggesting that there is something both sensuous and sexual in that relationship. What was interesting to me is that the lyrics alone seem to suggest a pro-gun stance but the tone of the music combined with the track record of the Beatles suggests otherwise. I wanted to research how different parts of a work of art could speak to contrasting ideas, and how one goes about making meaning out of that.

I also became very interested in Childish Gambino's music video and song "This is America" less as a text to use in my own work and more as an example of how to look at the perspective of guns in America. The music video, heralded by many as "timely" and "remarkable artistic achievement", takes a serious look at how black bodies are victimized and brutalized while also being extorted for entertainment and culture in the 21st century of the United States (Cookney).

Gambino's use of dance in particular intrigued me, as in his music video it seemed to represent oppression and ignorance more so than a form with the potential for justice or activism. Dance is highlighted in the foreground of the video, distracting from the looting, violence, and chaos occurring in the background. "This is America" presents social dance and dance for entertainment as a way to ignore injustice happening. It became important to think about how my project could either serve as an attempt at a solution without any real action versus a work meant to provoke thought and discussion. When was a work overindulgent or self-important. What was productive and what was unnecessary?

These texts and artworks laid the groundwork for the literary background I brought into my creative process. They influenced the work, whether in my consideration of structure or in the creation of my movement. While all circulating around similar themes, I also was very aware in what ways these texts were limited in scope. Nevertheless, they helped add an outside perspective and the layer of history to a work that primarily focuses on current events.

CHAPTER 2: CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

I. THE BEGINNING OF PROCESS

Every Monday evenings and Friday afternoons starting in August 2018 until early December 2018, I would work with two different casts of dancers as part of the choreographic process. Going into the process, I knew four of them to varying degrees and met two for the first time at the audition. All of them brought vulnerability and power to their dancing, depending on what was called for. I was interested in those qualities, as I wanted them to feel empowered, even if some of the themes I was interested in exploring involved loss of power or pain. I wanted dignity rather than succumbing to the difficult.

The dancers ranged from college freshmen to one senior, each with their own background and life experiences. That being said, we all had some similar traits—we were all white, American women in the University of Utah's Modern Dance Program. Because of this, I wanted to focus my choreographic interests at the intersection of womanhood and gun violence, rather than looking at gun violence and people of color or queer individuals. While both of those subjects are significant and important to examine and talk about, as a white woman with a white cast, I did not feel like it was appropriate for me to try and appropriate experiences that were not my own and put them on to bodies that also had not experienced the struggles that go along with blackness and violence.

We started each rehearsal with a check in, where I would ask how everyone was doing. This was an important activity to build trust, community, and familiarity, both amongst my cast and between myself and each cast member. Sometimes we would get a little off track to discuss something big happening in someone's life, or a big test coming up in a class, but it always worked as a good setup for diving into rehearsal after.

Occasionally, I would bring in prompts to write about and discuss surrounding gun violence. I did this so that we could use knowledge from a collective rather than just using my own perspective. What did the phrase 'gun violence' bring to mind? Had gun violence affected their lives—and how?

I found that we all had similar narratives; guns confused and scared us. Many of us had specific events in a town or nearby place where a specific instance of gun violence had happened. One dancer grew up where the Columbine shooting happened. Another vividly remembers hearing stories of her father's best friend killing himself with a gun. Everyone had a connection, whether personal or on the outskirts.

Some dancers chose to ignore or numb themselves to the news of a mass shooting. One dancer stated that she would always go down one of three paths—she would either purposefully shut herself off to the news after a tragedy, become seriously emotional and affected, or feel numb to the events even though she researched them well. It struck me that she knew herself well enough to know that she might react in three possible ways to a tragedy, even if she did not always know which reaction she would choose.

Overall, there were several reactions that our group recognized as familiar either through our own experiences or the experiences of those we knew. I became interested in the fact that while different people could react differently, patterns still emerged. Because I was working with multiple performers, I wanted to explore how unison might translate into sentiments of unity, whereas individual movement material might instead relate to dissonance within a group. These discussions allowed for a reflection on internal experience and how to translate that through group work.

As a choreographer, I recognized early on that I needed to establish a delicate balance. We were creating a choreographic work that dealt with difficult and heavy issues, but I did not want to bog the process with a serious tone the whole time. Finding time both to acknowledge the difficulty of what we were working on, but also the time for my dancers to enjoy themselves and the company around them, became an important priority to me. Building relationships and camaraderie could only strengthen the work, and also create something larger than the choreographic work itself. This process strengthened my viewpoint that the community and connection forged during a creative process is just as important to me as the work itself. While it is also vital to create a strong, rigorous piece when choreographing, this proved to be possible while still allowing relationships and community to flourish. From my observations, my dancers were more willing to dig into the hard pieces of material and give into the vulnerability that comes with performance *because* they had that bond of community. Allowing for moments of levity and lightheartedness let them also go to the extremes of emotional turmoil in order to fully realize the piece because they felt safe and valued.

II. MOVEMENT GENERATION

Creating movement for “Alert” came from different prompts. As discussed in Chapter 1, one of the main source materials for movement generation was historical anti-war texts. I would take quotes from a text, such as excerpts from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste-Land*, and read them to my dancers. They would create a movement inspired by the text segment without pantomiming or acting out the words. We would repeat this process until each dancer had a set of seven or eight movements that they would then string together, after which I could manipulate the core phrases. This technique felt very true to choreographic ideals I was looking to uphold, as it allowed me to integrate text into the creative process, and also allowed for collaboration, as my dancers generated the core movement from which I would shape the rest of the work.

I also worked with my some of my dancers to generate solos based on the unique but recognizable reactions to violent incidents. I wanted to use different movement qualities on different bodies to highlight that there was no sole way to respond to a violent incident. We worked with concepts of fear, rage, emotional distancing, numbness, and pain. This was important to me not only for the conceptual notion of creating different narratives, but also to establish each dancer as an individual with personal internal landscapes.

As a group, we created a large unison phrase that originated from each performer creating a short phrase, after which I crafted the phrases into a cohesive longer phrase. Creating a unison that worked with each dancer’s personal movement qualities and idiosyncrasies allowed for a section that belonged to each of them while also belonging to the collective. This choreographic tool of crafting a section with all members of the work allowed for the piece to be unique not just to me but also to each one of them, something I strongly wanted out of this process.

We also created duets through using the unison material and placing them into a duet with each member of the duet focused on a specific task. For example, one duet had a performer working on escaping and being alone while the other performer worked on trying to comfort or hold her partner. This allowed for the movement to stay in the same realm as other sections of the work while also creating additional context through different individual intentions.

III. CONSIDERING AUDIENCE

One thing I found myself especially interested in was the ability to derive a plurality of meanings from one movement section. This comes in part from being an English major—Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” interests me not only as an English scholar but also as a choreographer. Barthes writes, “thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody,

contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author” (Barthes 7). This notion that the power of interpretation and meaning-making lies not with the creator but with the audience is something I found especially important to ponder when creating a work where I had a very specific entry way. I found myself asking how important my personal meaning was to the presentation of the work, and if it was necessary for the audience to see the same issues of gun violence I was focusing on when they saw the piece. This question came up not only in the form and content of the piece itself, but in how to curate the experience of the audience from the time they saw promotional material to entering the performance space to the programs handed out to my pre-performance introduction.

I became interested in applying the concepts of Reader Response Theory to my understanding of the creation of the work. Another literary theory, Reader Response Theory states that the creation of a text—or in this case, a dance—comes from an audience interacting with it; “Despite the content or nature of the written words, readers create unique understandings of stories. Each person carries out his or her own very subjective reading” (Brooks 76). While a literary theory does not always apply completely to dance and choreography, the concepts of Reader Response Theory allow for an understanding of how an audience might meet creative work. Under this theory, the received art is not one of absolute truth or with only one “right” conclusion or interpretation. This turns the work into less of a stagnant object and one more of conversation and interaction. Reader Response Theory allows for responsibility in creating a mesh of form and content while not requiring audiences to “get” or completely agree on the meaning of a work.

These ideas remind me of a specific rehearsal, about halfway through my creative process. I had invited a friend in to watch my rehearsal and give feedback. After watching four of the solos we had created, she turned to me and told me that it made her think of all of the struggles she had seen women go through after being sexually assaulted and the process it took them to find themselves again. We both knew that my intention coming into the process had been to examine the trauma of gun violence on a community, but her words did not feel like they were undermining the work and process that had already been put in. After all, both scenarios dealt with violence, with violation of a body, and with trauma. And even though the specifics were not necessarily there, the same emotionality was conveyed.

This brought up a unique challenge to me though: how explicit did I want to be? I could create a dance that had no direct allusions or references to gun violence, one that I knew originated from that in the studio, but that once viewed by an audience could be interpreted as a vast number of things *or* I could find specificity either in the movement, text, or sound score to locate the piece as one relating to gun violence for the audience.

I struggled with this decision for quite some time, worrying that if I went for a more explicit presentation of my initial concept, it would come across as heavy-handed or maudlin.

IV. THE MURDER OF LAUREN McCLUSKEY

Throughout this choreographic process, I worked to consider the context of the moment when it came to discussing these issues. While I was interested in the historical element of anti-war texts and how it could contrast with the current discussion of gun violence, the focus was on the present.

On October 22, 2018, the context of my thesis work drastically changed. It was a Monday night, about an hour after the weekly rehearsal with my quartet of dancers had finished, when we all received a university alert on our phones: “Shooting on campus. Secure-in-place. More info to come” (“EMERGENCY”).

What happened next is a narrative that is both too familiar and yet surreal to recount. A bizarre dance of reassuring loved ones that I was okay and checking in on everyone I knew who might be on campus ensued. “Yes, I’m safe. Are you?” I live on campus, so my roommates and I made sure the door was locked, closed the blinds, and turned out the lights.

After the initial flurry to check in, I spent the next several hours streaming local news and looking for information on the internet to try and understand what was happening. It started to become clear that it was an isolated incident, but that the shooter had not been apprehended. Exhausted and knowing there probably would be no further information until the next morning, I went to bed. Falling asleep, I felt numb.

I recount my experiences of that night not to put the spotlight on me but to ground the night in my lived experience—one that was shared by my performers and my University of Utah peers. Starting my thesis, I wanted to look at the reactions to incidents of gun violence, and in a cruel, appalling twist of fate it turned out both my dancers and I experienced an active shooter situation during our creative process. I realized the tenuous balance between acknowledging a perspective of those located near—both in location and relationship—to a victim of a violent crime and focusing those narratives around those who lose their lives and those who are directly impacted.

At the heart of it all, the most important person in this narrative is Lauren McCluskey. Lauren was a University of Utah senior, a track athlete, a daughter, a friend to many, and so much more (Tanner and Means). Her story is now centered around her tragic murder, but I find it important to acknowledge that she is so much more than her death.

Lauren started dating Melvin Rowland towards the beginning of the semester, but upon learning that he had lied about his age and that he was a registered sex offender, she broke things off (Tanner and Means). Despite contacting on-campus police and Salt Lake City police multiple times, Lauren was unable to get sufficient help. Rowland found her on campus on October 22, and murdered her with a borrowed gun. He died by suicide later that night.

What quickly became clear to me and many of my peers is that this was not only an issue of domestic violence, but also of not listening to women’s voices. Had the University of Utah’s police force been adequately equipped to handle complaints about an ex-boyfriend stalking Lauren—that her roommates worried he had a gun in his possession—Lauren would have at least had more resources to stay safe. While University of Utah President Ruth Watkins claims that Lauren’s death could not be avoided, others beg to differ (Tanner and Means). Both of Lauren’s parents have voiced their disappointment and disagreement with Watkins’ statement and point out many steps on-campus security could have taken which are mentioned in a report created by the University of Utah (Tanner and Pierce).

As details of Lauren’s murder surfaced over the following days, I knew that the tone and focus of my thesis inevitably had to shift. Using dark irony or being sardonic no longer felt right. One example of this is a piece of text I had in the work at the time of Lauren’s murder: “Breaking news: boy kills girl, completes journey into manhood.” Aspects of the piece like this text that once felt like an apt criticism now felt cheapening and disrespectful.

Lauren’s murder also made me solidify the frame for this work. Rather than the vague umbrella of gun violence, which involves many different manifestations, I honed in on occurrences of women becoming victims because of men’s rage, rejection, and inability to accept autonomy. My movement research became about learning how to situate oneself as a woman in a world where this violence happens with enough frequency that it is a recognizable and credible threat. This specificity was not to ignore or delegitimize other forms of gun violence that are also social issues, but rather to have a defined perspective.

I chose to title the work “Alert” both because it reflected a state of “alertness” that women often find themselves inhabiting in order to protect themselves and because the notification of the active shooter on October 22 started off with “Alert.” To me, the word reflected awareness, the possibility of fear, and notification. It also felt vague enough that it could be open for personal interpretation while still maintaining personal meaning and significance.

All of these lessons were difficult, and ones that I wish could have come about from a different source. The cost was too high. Still, it crystallized the fact that when creating dance work, context is key.

V. DECIDING ON NARRATIVE ARC

At this point the insight of my mentor and peers had an immense impact on how I proceeded. After talking through my concerns of being too explicit or too vague, I realized that if I was truly interested in researching how dance could work as activist art, I needed to at least try to incorporate a more explicit statement. If it didn’t work, I could always change it, but I owed it to the work and to my intention to attempt incorporating a clearer message. I also felt that I owed it to my community of dancers and women on campus to acknowledge the specificity of violence I was processing through the work.

I started this by writing a script for one of my dancers that recounted one of my personal memories of a woman being killed by a man because of his desire to be with her. It is a story that I still get stuck on from time to time, and one that I always remember whenever I hear of a new incidence of male rage. Although the script went through many iterations, it eventually settled as the following:

I knew a man once who thought he loved a woman. All he wanted was for her to give him one chance. So, day after day, month after month, he would plead with her to give him a shot. Until one day, he’d had enough. So, he marched home, grabbed the gun off his mantelpiece, returned to work, and shot her in the back.

I was interested in the vagueness of it all—the characters are “a man” and “a woman”—while still having specificity in the order of events. It suggested both a clarity in a specific incident, while also creating the narrative of a trope; this is something that could occur again, has probably happened since.

I also used the song “Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)” sung by Nancy Sinatra to more explicitly ground the violence within the contexts of guns and domestic issues. There is a specificity in a woman singing about how her lover has killed her that again reinforces the issues of gender when it comes to gun violence.

Looking at the overarching narrative arc, I had to make many decisions about how each section created an order and how they related to one another. Putting sections next to one another versus at opposite ends of the work would create different meanings both for the individual sections and the work as a whole. Context operates in a choreographic work both through the reality of the “outside” world and through the way in which sections are layered next to each other. Because a dance work is experienced from the beginning until the end, understanding is built through the dimension of time; this influences the relationships between ideas, performers, and sections.

After reflection, I decided to structure the work beginning from a point of isolation and moving into unity. I felt that this reflected my own process of healing after trauma, moving from isolation and processing on my own into realizing that community can help to bolster me out of my pain and remind me that there are still people worth fighting for.

The process of creating “Alert” took span over three months, and brought with it many challenges, discoveries, and experiences. It involved serious personal reflection, interpersonal discussion, and real lived experience. I learned many things, but chief among them was to collaborate with my performers so as to create a work that uses more than just my own voice, to talk through creative decisions with others, and to consider ever-changing contexts.

CHAPTER 3: PERFORMANCE AND RECEPTION

I. "ALERT" EMBODIED

A white, stark downpool lights the shoulders of a woman, facing away from the audience. Layers upon layers of clothes swathe her body, an extension of her movement and perhaps an extra layer of protection. She starts to move, and as she does, she hums a soft tune to herself, while unseen voices join her from offstage, supporting her as she holds the space alone. Her movement accentuates the amount of clothes on her body, and sometimes she seems to enjoy the weight; other times, it seems to restrict her.

The chorus ends, and another woman emerges from upstage right. She oscillates between trying to connect with the woman in layers and paying attention to her own small gestures. The gestures grow larger and larger on a loop until she is flinging her limbs bombastically across the stage. She suspends with her arms reaching above her and then steps out of her movement to fully address the layered woman. "So, yeah, about two years ago, I started to feel like there was a bullet hole underneath my clavicle," the previously dancing woman says to her companion. They take a long pause to look at each other, and then the woman who spoke continues her movement phrase, this time struggling to extend everything to its fullest potential, moving like a wounded bird or a broken marionette.

The woman in layers drops her movement to follow her partner. As she does, she pauses to remove an article of clothing every foot or two. The clothes leave a trace of the dancer's pathway on the floor, echoing where they both once stood. The woman struggling to fully move finishes and raises her eyes to look at her trailing partner one more time. They take a moment, everything still except their expanding chests working to pull in oxygen. Before the moment feels fulfilled, they both exit along the diagonal the clothes have established, parting ways as if two strangers on the street rather than two individuals who have just shared an intimate moment.

A third woman enters with casual, almost lazy steps, walking along the same diagonal of clothes. As she reaches the end of the stage, she catches herself, looks to a different part of the room, and follows her gaze to her new location of interest. She does this a few more times, dancers briefly emerging from the wings to join her walk through the space and take the clothes on the ground, removing all physical traces of the first solo. Each new pass through the space becomes slightly more urgent, the pads of her feet striking the ground with increasing volume. Her ponytail whips with each new focus on a different target, emphasizing her desire for a place to rest.

She does not find it. By her fifth pass, she has started to jog. By her seventh, it has become a run, each moment looking for a new spot, a new escape. She starts to skip and jump in-between the points she finds, traveling further and faster with each step. In a new pass, she falls to the ground, catching herself and bringing herself to the edge of the space again before falling to the ground and rolling to a stop, back facing the audience, curled up on her side.

A fourth woman exits from the wing to see the walking woman on the ground. She stands there for a beat, taking in the sight before slumping into her right side. Piano music by Joohyun Park enters the space along with her slump.

She suspends in space for a moment before slumping further, each breath further collapsing her frame until she too has collapsed to the ground. As the running woman slowly crawls offstage, this new woman begins to tremble. Her shivers amplify until it pulls her to another position and she begins again, shaking until she convulses and knocks herself into a new

arrangement. Her focus, unlike the soloist before her, is internal, and her breath shakes with each shuddering moment.

Her shudders pull her through the space, unable to find something that will stop them. Another woman enters in the upstage left corner, refusing to acknowledge the person with whom she shares the space. Facing into the corner, she starts to angrily gesture at some unseen person. She jabs her fingers, stomps her feet, and grips her hands, rage visible in her fingertips and in the way her back jolts through the space.

The angry woman throws her arm and it drags her downstage until she is facing the audience. She begins her angry phrase again, this time directed at the people in front of her. As the music fades, she holds a silent scream, her arms thrown behind her, her face contorted in a way we rarely see people express their personal emotions.

The woman who was walking and running earlier enters and sits at the front of the stage, facing the audience. She starts to speak while the other woman continues to stomp and point, contrasting the relaxed way in which the sitting woman recounts her narrative. She tells the audience the story of Andrea Farrington's murder explained in Chapter 2.

She sits and looks at the audience after she has told her story, daring them to really sit with the reality of what she has said. After letting the moment sink in, she rotates to observe another woman who has entered, shrugging her neck to keep her face hidden from the audience.

As Nancy Sinatra's "Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)" begins to play, the new performer's hand swipes at her back, her fingers a stark contrast to her red top. It is impossible to ignore the story of a woman shot in the back as she continues to swipe and examine her hand. Her breath pulls her up into tension, anxiety held in her throat, before releasing her limbs into space. After stumbling upstage, she wheels around to finally face the audience. She freezes before slowly creeping to her right, oscillating between tense, tight poses and sighs of release. She finds herself swiping her back again, this time stuck in a repetitive loop, which each swipe getting faster, more desperate.

The angry soloist bursts onstage, and wraps her arms around the woman swiping at her back in a gesture of comfort, but the latter woman is not interested and seeks escape. They repeat this duet of one trying to hold the other, and the other seeking space and separation. It is a frenetic duet, one that finds resistance between solace and separation.

The shaking soloist enters to stand next to the woman still sitting on the ground, echoing their previous brief encounter. The shaking woman begins to shake again and collapses to the floor, at which point her duet partner jumps up in order to help her up off the ground. They work together, one bolstering the other up when she does not have the capacity to stay upright, swapping roles as they both stay present for each other.

The woman who wore the clothes in the first scene enters and settles in the downstage right corner, the woman with the collarbone text trailing behind her. The latter woman tries to set her hand on her partner, but the woman violently shrugs her hand off, a refusal. After three repetitions of the collarbone woman trying to calm her partner with the presence of her hand, they start to move together, the woman without her layers moving erratically, trying to shrug her partner's hand off of her. These three separate duets settle into moments of comfort, most of them laying their hands on the woman trying to jerk hands off.

All of a sudden, one woman bursts through the group and creates a new series of performer pairings to a jolting start to Doris Day's "Que Sera Sera," breaking the groups out of the patterned ruts they had begun to establish. The newly formed duet starts to dance together, shifting in a staccato fashion into new positions. They are close, but not touching, each movement an abrupt, almost violent jolt into the next one. Eventually, one of them picks the

other up and marches upstage, where they continue to jerk until they deteriorate to the floor, still jolting, this time into each other's bodies.

While this happens, one woman lies face up on the floor, unresponsive to all of the flurried, almost frantic movement happening around her. A trio emerges from the remaining dancers, two of them working to push the third into a corner. They pull and push on each other, unable to find compromise in direction. While distinct in movement from the jerking duet, this trio has a similar sense of urgency and conflict.

The trio finds common ground in noticing the woman on the floor, and as the last chorus of "Que Sera Sera" plays, they run to help her back on her feet, circling the space as Doris Day sings "whatever will be, will be / the future's not ours to see, / que sera sera" (Day). The group picks up momentum to bring them to the duet, now convulsing in a heap on the floor, and together the dancers help each other into a line as the first chords of Agnes Obel's "September Song" permeates the space. All of them start to dance in unison, sweeping from stage right to left. A dancer breaks out of the group every once in a while, only for the rest of the performers to rush to her and through physical contact and cooperation help return her to the group, the unison once again sweeping all six women through the space.

This pattern continues, until one performer breaks out to sink to the ground in the upstage left corner. Her fellow dancers help her up and for a moment she sinks into them before pushing herself out, moving similarly to the woman who had a hand on her back earlier. She travels on a downstage diagonal, letting out emotions through her face as well as her body, limbs snapping out into the space, spine contorting.

One at a time, the other dancers leave the spot from where they have been watching this woman; they calmly walk towards her and place the palm of one hand on her.. With each successive hand, the woman finds a bit more breath and calm in her body until the group is all sighing up and down together, once again moving with one another, the music fading out. They continue to breath together as the lights fade with the music.

II. AUDIENCE REACTION

There were 36 audience members for the Saturday, December 1, performance, and 51 audience members on Sunday, December 2. They ranged from close friends and family, to Honors College peers, to partners of friends, to professors, to dance majors, to prospective students who were checking out a local performance.

The reaction to "Alert" was overwhelmingly positive. Speaking to audience members after the show finished, I was able to get feedback about what they took from the show, what meaning they made for themselves, and what stood out to them.

One man, who fiercely defends Second Amendment rights, was eager to find me and tell me how much he enjoyed the performance. It was his first dance performance, and he recounted to me his process of trying to incredibly hard to understand what was happening before just letting himself watch instead of trying to decipher everything that was going on. Talking to him reminded me that we all get to make personal meaning.

Many members of the audience reflected on how they enjoyed watching the end when all of the performers come together. While not everyone articulated what about it moved them, they spoke to its power and presence.

Not everyone focused on the aspect of guns, and as a creator I was okay with that. Some instead took away lessons about domestic violence, or just the power of movement itself. My paramedic friend enthusiastically found me after the show to let me know that my performer who constantly shook and trembled did a "fantastic job" of emulating seizures.

The December performance of “Alert” was the most complete or official iteration of my Honors Thesis work, and it was a fulfilling experience to share with an audience. Regardless of the message that was taken home, I hope that every person who watched it was able to leave “Alert” with something to think about or process. I could not have made it the work it became without each and every one of my performers or my support network. It was a lesson in humility, community, and art-making. I learned that activist art not only is possible to create in a positive way, but that it can have a real impact on the creators, performers, and viewers involved.

*“But in moments of light, I know that my only way of fighting against this fatality is dance”
--Germaine Acogny*

CONCLUSION

After the second and last December performance of “Alert” I found myself both incredibly happy with the performances and process as well as with many new questions. My performers had embodied the work spectacularly; many people excitedly told me about how moved they were by their embodiment.

I also found myself wondering what exactly the impact of “Alert.” Certainly, my total audience of around 75 was not about to go and convince the Utah legislation to tighten laws around domestic abusers and access to guns, let alone address the lack of gun legislation in the United States Congress. In that way, it could feel like not a lot was done in the grand scheme of things, and I will happily concede with anyone who suggests that this performance has not impacted the culture of gun violence in the United States at the legislation level.

I will, however, note the change I witnessed within my audience, within my performers, and within myself. My cast and I had the privilege of presenting an abridged version of “Alert” at the Undergraduate Research Symposium at the University of Utah in April 2019, and after we had an engaging question and answer session with the audience. I was struck with how eager the audience was to share how they felt about violence, about fatigue with subjects like this one, and with how dance gave them new perspective. These are conversations people want to have, and I am glad that I was able to facilitate a situation where they could let themselves process their thoughts.

My dancers also were able to speak to their time throughout the process, and they agreed that having the time to kinesthetically research how it felt to move surrounding these issues gave them better agency and understanding of how to process new events as they popped up. I think that in itself is incredibly powerful, even if it is on a very localized level. I also found empowerment through this process, finding new ways to give voice to personal trauma and allowing myself to acknowledge tragedy that often would feel like something to “buck up” and move on from.

“Alert” taught me many lessons as a choreographer. Going in, I found myself wary of explicit imagery; I did not want to be too triggering or graphic because that felt easy but not necessarily productive. Through the process, however, I began to realize that it was important to still ground my choreography in some level of specificity. While this did not mean I needed to edit gun shot sounds into my sound score and have my dancers mimic a scene of extreme violence, it did mean that I needed to give the audience something to hold on to when it came to the process of meaning-making. It also taught me about the importance of structure and how relationships within a piece build over time.

Naomi Jackson in her introduction reflects on the works of choreographers who wish to highlight the injustice they see in the world:

Choreographers have long created works that represent and recreate a sense of the horror, suffering, and courage of the victims of human rights abuses, as well as the brutality of the victimizers. They also have created works that problematize or deconstruct the ways in which violence can become a part of everyday life, and search for ways to make visible the horror of injustice. (Jackson xxiv)

“Alert” felt like an acknowledgement and a peeling back of the issues surrounding gun violence and domestic abuse. While it might not have changed the world, I hope that it has begun to create small changes on an individual level.

I want to end with a thought from the final episode of a local podcast, *Cold*. *Cold* is a true crime podcast that examines the disappearance of Susan Powell from West Valley, Utah, in 2009; she is largely believed to have been murdered by her husband. The host of *Cold*, Dave Crawley, takes the last ten minutes of his final episode to discuss Lauren McCluskey’s murder, as she was killed during his process of writing *Cold*. He says “Lauren McCluskey and Susan Powell should both be alive today, along with many, many other women who have been killed at the hands of a husband, a boyfriend, a date, a co-worker, or even just an acquaintance. So I’m less concerned with the question ‘where is Susan?’ than I am [with] the question ‘why does this keep happening?’” (“An Angel of Hope”).

“Alert” also asks this question. Why are women continually victims of intimate partner violence? Why do we as a society continue to allow men to let their rage turn fatal? The reality of the matter is that we have systems in place that allow these things to happen. Had University of Utah police had a trained victim advocate or better understanding of intimate partner violence, more actions could have been taken to protect Lauren McCluskey. Likewise, if organizations like the National Rifle Association did not have so much economic influence in the United States Congress, there would be the possibility for sensible gun control reformation in United States law. By challenging these systems, we have the opportunity to work towards a safer, more equitable American society. “Alert” and this thesis was the beginning of this conversation in a more academic setting for me, but it is not the end of it. I will continue to use my voice and my art to push for a more just, more peaceful world.

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