



MOVEMENT FOR ACTORS: PRACTICE, PERFORMANCE, AND COLLABORATION
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ABSTRACT

Among the wonderful arms of the University of Utah's College of Fine Arts, two phenomenal entities have especially piqued my interest in research: the Marriott School of Dance and the Actor Training Program. Both programs create either dance theater or physical theater. Both facilitate successful learning through various processes and productions. As a major in the Modern Dance Program, I researched the effect of collaborative experiences for students from both departments. I incorporated my own movement research based around the practices of artists such as Twyla Tharp, Anne Bogart, Crystal Pite, Akram Khan, Sidi Larbi, and the creators of Frantic Assembly.

Through a creative process with six individuals, I learned educational benefits of collaboration with embodied movement techniques towards theatrical communications. In the following article I discuss the base for my research, the steps of the creative outcome, and the cumulative outcome of the final film, entitled *Grey Area*.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout my time in the School of Dance, I have fallen in love with the concept of athletic storytelling. But not just any story, the story of the specific individual moving. I have watched my program parallel to the theater department and have left performances from both wondering why they are not working in tandem. This idea sparked a paper focused on interviews and background research circling the idea of Movement for Actors: Practice, Collaboration, and Performance. The concept drew me in.

Following an initial semester of research, the work began with the acceptance of an Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program grant, followed by a project lasting from March to November of 2020. I learned how I work in a collaborative space, how I work in different mediums, and how all that can culminate into a final performance-based project. *Grey Area* was a final film created as a result of these themes. This film held together the most valued conceptions of human collaboration and cooperation, despite the reality that we are in times of separation and quarantine.

This project brought about a sense of creation during a time where it has been hard to feel hope and passion for one's art. The research helped me grow farther beyond what was initially laid out. This research is continuing on through my graduation through collaboration on a play about the life of author, J.R. Tolkien, written by a local student, through an internship with Flying Bobcat theater company, and through the constant interest and adoration for reading the artistic geniuses of those who have come before.

Movement in life is vital to live fully. Movement in theater is vital to helping stories be told to their fullest. Movement is what brought eight people together to create a devised work that is forever logged in a screen dance format for all to enjoy.

CHAPTER 1: RELEVANT TEXTS AND RESEARCH

Well-known dance and theater scholars like Mary Overlie, Anne Bogart, Rudolph Laban, and others, have spent their creative careers focusing on the need for thorough implementation of movement in theater. (Wright) We have seen an astounding amount of success in projects where participants have taken the time to create the movement for a character. These skills come mostly from modern dance practices and are slightly modified to approach actors and singers through the implementation of alternative vocabulary. They are sometimes approached in theater, but their goal of affecting a student actor's training is not often seen. (Harbold, *Personal Interview*, 2019)

Historically, dance and acting have had different comfort levels when engaging in what may be considered the strength of the other. When the choreographer of the Broadway musical *Oklahoma*, Agnes DeMille, initially set forth in choreographing this musical in 1943, there was doubt. Nevertheless, her determination made dance a vital and seamless addition to telling the story theatrically. After her creation, musicals took on movement, not to simply entertain, but to move the narrative forward with dance. Value was placed on the human body and its power to narrate a story without words. (Vine)

Another artist who changed the world of physical theater is Pina Bausch, Artistic Director of Tanztheater Wuppertal in Germany. Her innovative work from the 1970s through the end of the century brought narrative into dance in a raw and honest way. (Servos) Suddenly purpose, story, and the power of words were being mixed within the world of movement and the truthfulness of the human body. Her work sparked a desire for the real and the messy. Rawness in movement created impact.

Since these artists, the dance and theater worlds have gone through trends of abstraction, plays without movement and musicals without dancing. As well, movement in educational programs has become the least important part of many school curriculums. But there are current artists and companies choosing to bring new life to the movement. The body in movement is becoming vital in theater. (Harbold, *Personal Interview*, 2019) The companies focusing on movement narrative who provide the biggest inspirations for me are Kidd Pivot, directed by renowned choreographer Crystal Pite, Frantic Assembly, and Phantom Limb. These companies have achieved success in the modern art world when it comes to combining movement with theater through the effective use of collaboration. However, this skill is not as easy as it may sound. It requires practice, and collaborative opportunities aren't always compulsory elements in collegiate settings. (Fetzer, *Personal Interview*, 2019)

Theater has always been ahead of its time. It is not afraid to approach the realities of the world. Even more so now, it has really begun pushing the norms of what is shared on the stage. Currently modern dance choreographers are more regularly being hired for straight plays and musicals in the professional world. Actors may have a difficult time relating to heavy topics brought up in their work. Many actors approach these subjects with a method acting approach. Method acting technique involves the absolute embodying and becoming of a character. It requires emotional recall to achieve the informed state. Unfortunately, while this approach can work, it can often end up being unhealthy for the individual. What physical practices can bring to the table are the opportunities to work with a non-emotional body and follow its natural impulses to achieve a desired state. It, in turn, generates a healthier and more effective approach to acting. (Harbold, *Personal Interview*, 2019) (Intimacy Directors International)

In addition, movement training for actors is more than just dancing or choosing to dramatically pick up a cup. It gives actors a fully functioning tool belt to assist in gaining full-body awareness. This awareness can help support all acting choices and turn a mediocre performance into an impactful experience. The audience does not need a separation of movement from storytelling—people want a collaboration between the two. There is a need for theater people who know acting and how to create content, but also a need for people adept in movement who can fulfill expressive physical potentials. All aspects of embodied creativity are necessary to create an amazing piece of art.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I held interviews with Emeri Fetzer, current Communications Specialist for the University of Utah’s College of Fine Arts and company member of Punchdrunk and Phantom Limb, as well as with Alexandra Harbold, professor with the University of Utah’s Theater Department and co-founder of Flying Bobcat physical theater company here in Salt Lake City. I also witnessed a movement-based rehearsal for *The Odyssey*, helped privately coach an acting student from *The Odyssey*, attended a Frantic Assembly workshop, and sought out physical theater-based shows. Through these experiences, I saw the most important part of all this research: collaboration. This was seen in rehearsals with Daniel Charon, artistic director of Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company and Harbold. To create an effective piece of theater with a vision like Harbold’s, with *The Odyssey*, help is greatly needed. Fetzer had said, “every single process I have been in has been so mega collaborative.” (Fetzer, Personal Interview, 2019) The importance of collaboration to create full-body and full-sense theater is indisputable. Doing theater without this 360-degree lens is not an option. As Harbold said in an interview, “the actor may be saying ‘I love you,’ but if the body isn’t portraying it, the line is invalid, and no one will believe the actor.” Sight travels faster than sound. (Harbold, *Personal Interview*, 2019)

Following the initial research, I entered the 2020-2021 school year with the hope that this collaborative training, and these concepts of problem solving through the use of the body would help push a creative process forward. I knew that movement training for actors is more than just dance or choreography. Through physical investigation, actors can gain full-body awareness to support their acting. In turn, their entire performance is affected. Often, actors are often not given the opportunity to be trained physically.

A story can be told more effectively and with more potent impact when movement is at the core. As movement creator and respected choreographer, Crystal Pite said, “Humans move. Our arms reach out; our knees collapse; our heads nod; our chests cave in; our backs arch; our fists clench; we jump; we shrug; we pick each other up; we push each other away. For me, this is language.” Language must be shared. The best way to share it – art. (Cohn)

The creative process about to be described to you is heavily influenced by the past experiences and studies listed above. It is also touched by the words and ideas of Twyla Tharp and her books *The Creative Habit* and *The Collaborative Habit*. Both books were part of my preparation heading into a collaboration with performance artists. I also kept Anne Bogart and Tina Landau’s, *The Viewpoints Book* in my rehearsal bag at all times, ready to pull it out and snatch a plan for creation and movement. These three resources and my prior knowledge acted as a secure base for the work to take route and be fully grounded in the confidence that movement is necessary

CHAPTER 2: CREATIVE PROCESS

My Undergraduate Research Project, funded through the Office of Undergraduate Research, began with a collaboration. Actor Training Program senior, Keira Stogin, my dear friend and past collaborator, came to join me for a newly devised work. We began the summer of 2020 planning and plotting themes, ideas, concepts, and more. The summer prior, we even worked in a collaborative setting back in a small town in Northern Idaho. We worked as co-directors and produced *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

After that project had concluded we had a basket of tools at our disposal for an even harder creative process: devised work. There were many meetings discussing the purpose that would need to be shared within the work. We ended the initial brainstorm with these thoughts:

“What makes you feel powerful enough to talk about?

Interpersonal Relationships.

Anxiety.

Grey area.

Complicated is a simple thing.

How you were raised?

Miscommunication.

Knowing the source of the fire doesn't make the building stand back up again.

To feel To feel To feel.”

Keira and I were equal collaborators—my specialty being movement, and hers, text. We created an equation that worked for us, to create a devised work. There was no script, no previous knowledge, just the above thoughts. I was taking choreographer Twyla Tharp's words to heart, “The most productive artists I know have a plan in mind when they get down to work...but there's a fine line between good planning and overplanning. You never want the planning to inhibit the natural evolution of your work.” (Tharp, *The Creative Habit*, p. 118)

I worked to bring together a team of artists, ready for the challenge of collaborating and creating. With COVID-19 being a reality during this process, what would have been an intricate group physical theater piece, similar to work often done by Crystal Pite or Anne Bogart, had to become a safe and socially distanced film. Partnering wasn't an option for the most part, and an audience was not going to be an option in November of 2020.

The cast brought together six individuals: Keira Stogin, Connor Johnson, Jessica Graham, Arin Lynn, Aria Klien, and Nick Weaver. This group consisted of three acting majors, one musical theater major, and two modern dance majors (not including myself). A schedule was created involving individual outdoor rehearsals both on campus and at Liberty Park. We were in luck, because a handful of the artists were roommates or significant others, allowing for physical connection to be possible.

Keira and I took the thoughts of themes we had above, put them in an acquired order, that is, all except one. The one subject that seemed to cover all the rest was the idea of ‘grey area.’ Through concept discussions we knew this would be our focus. *Grey Area* became the title. It was as though this was the title of the series, and every other theme was a mere chapter.

The following became the order and the assignments of each artists with a theme:

1. What makes you feel powerful enough to talk about? *Jessica Graham*
2. Interpersonal Relationships. *Keira Stogin, Connor Johnson, & Jessica Graham*
3. Anxiety. *Aria Klien*

4. Complicated is a simple thing. *Nick Weaver*
5. How you were raised? *Keira Stogin*
6. Knowing the source of the fire doesn't make the building stand back up again. *Arin Lynn*
7. Miscommunication. *Nicker Weaver & Connor Johnson*
8. To feel To feel To feel. *Arin Lynn & Aria Klien*

Almost every night of the week, one duo, trio, or solo would have a socially distanced rehearsal. The only group that was within a quarantine together was the trio. During the first week of rehearsals, we started with what the focus of this research is: movement. Using improvisational prompts based around storytelling and points of focus and music, each mover was recorded moving in ways their bodies naturally let loose. This first week also consisted of improvisational conversations amongst partners. What this entailed was a completely physical conversation, no words allowed. Movement was not allowed to be literal, and the other partner you were "talking" to did not need to follow you. This created beautiful amounts of flow and created a sense of connection between fellow movers. Following these initial rehearsals, artists came to the second week ready for interviews.

I knew I wanted the power of words and the power of live speaking in *Grey Area*. The charisma of devised physical theater is the sweet combination of the entire body, not just the voice or the moving limbs. Initially, we had considered mashing-up a series of literature, such as Shakespeare and poetry. But, in an effort to get the real and raw from each of our performers, interviews occurred. Each interview came with a set of questions specifically chosen for whatever theme was the artist's focus. Artists didn't choose their themes; they were a somewhat random selection on my part. I recorded the audio from all the interviews, giving us the chance to pull words straight from the artist's mouth, eventually having them go towards a script.

The goal after each interview was for Keira to sit down with the audio and create a monologue or dialogue of the person's own words. Through various editing stages, we started creating our script. We then would take the newly devised scripts to the next rehearsals with the artists and open the door to have them help edit and improve, in order to ensure their sections were really representing what they believed and what was their truth.

Movement rehearsals included the previous basis of improvisation. Depending upon the specific performer and their comfortability with moving, each rehearsal would start with an improvisational practice matched with music, or a led meditative practice in which I spoke throughout, leading the mover through a series with their eyes closed. Both of these ideas helped warm up the mover, but also, it helped them remember and regain awareness of every centimeter of the body. It created a complete awareness need to be able to create. Then, we would work based upon the individual mover's themes. For some, we would record their improvisations, watch them back and relearn. For others, I would choose set choreography and place it on them, and for the rest, we did a practice I found to be my favorite. We played 'stop & go.' This is a commonly used practice in modern dance. We create a pulse or intention, and the mover flows with that till the director calls a halt. We then go back and repeat what just happened to the best of our ability. This idea involves repetition, but the best part of it is the opportunity for the mover to move with integrity and bodily honesty. Once the phrase is created based on this process, we then take time modifying it, or adding details and distinctions. We also play with repeating it, inverting it, retrograding it, etc.

During this time, I had to schedule extra movement times with the actors specifically. One of the biggest lessons learned during this time was that asking non-movers to move in a

form reflecting modern dance can bring on an array of raw emotions. It was constantly a new challenge trying to ride the vulnerability required to move and release the body. It becomes even more difficult under the pressure of a deep and creative process. This is the area where my research felt the most needed. It required extra workshops focused on moving to be able to start to see a blended coherency among all the movers. For the actors, I found that I had to practice separating movement from emotion. It had to be simplified so it wasn't charged. One might think that would be the opposite of what was wanted, but it actually kept tears away and helped the actors get out of their heads. This aspect challenged my personal growth in empathy, working towards a healthy process and a safe learning space for all involved. It paralleled similar to the growing studies of intimacy directing and the importance of respectful and healthy separation between the body and mission. What is ironic is that this practice actually creates more coherency and emotional ties between the body and story, in the end.

By the middle of October, we had our script, almost too much movement, and a clear intention. Now it was time to make a conjoined piece off of eight individual chapters. A large portion of this step came from audio contributions. School of Dance, Modern Dance Program Head at the University of Utah, Michael Wall, is a musician who creates complicated and satisfying music that is always available for students to use without concern of liability. We used nine of Wall's pieces as our score to start creating coherency among our ideas of *Grey Area*.

Keira set up a COVID-safe outdoor recording studio in our backyard, and during their designated rehearsal times, each artist came to record the audio for their section. Some of the script was live, but much of it was pre-recorded for effect and purpose. These spoken tracks were then laid on top of and edited into the music, allowing for comedic affect, powerful crescendos, and a timing to match movement.

During the Halloween season, nearing the end of the process, we created an abbreviated version of the piece to have the chance to perform live at the "Botanical Festival" held at Red Butte Gardens in Salt Lake City, Utah. Leading up to this performance, I was unsure if it was worth the time performing live when I knew the final product was going to have to be a film of sorts. I acted as the sound cue and overall orchestrator for the group, and the performers looped through this abbreviated performance at least eight times throughout the night. They pulled in the crowd, gained confidence, and material started clicking. It was a much-needed blessing and pat on the back at this point in the process.

I was able to use this experience to record and edit together the material to then send out to mentors and teachers, asking for feedback. UROP mentor and School of Dance professor Natalie Desch, School of Dance professor, Satu Hummasti, and theatre professor, Alexandra Harbold, all graciously looked at the work to help analyze and ask questions. What was so amazing about this process was the way the feedback was given. They all believe art is subjective, and feedback, unless it's tech-related or possesses logistics of that sort, should only be a suggestion. I was asked so many questions about my work. The feedback I received relayed what stood out or was noticed but didn't involve the judgement attachments of "good" or "bad." This feedback created opportunity to see my work through other's eyes to ensure that what I believed in was accurately being communicated to the audience.

While at Red Butte, we realized an ideal location for filming would be the Red Butte gardens. Thanks to their amazing hospitality and willingness to help young artists, we reserved the Rose Garden for the weekend of November 7th and 8th. During this weekend, each theme had their filming time of roughly an hour. Masks were required the entire time by me, and the two

tech hands were brought on to assist. All artists were also required to wear masks unless performing alone, in which case being outdoors and completely socially distanced was easy.

One thing difficult about the filming situation was the fact that we were outside and trying to create a coherent film that still had the integrity of what could be with a live stage piece. This idea had to be adjusted due to lighting with regards to film and the outdoors. At this time, I was also taking the Screen Dance course offered in the School of Dance to assist me with the techniques needed for filming. Thanks to that class, I decided that I would use filming as an opportunity to show details and individuality, rather than just recording a live performance. I wasn't prepped for was the potential of snow and rough weather conditions in the midst of having an entire tech set-up in a garden with no shelter.

During the filming, on November 7th, the weather was spotty with snow and rain slowly coming down at times. But it was consistent. However, in the middle of the rehearsal on November 8th, the snow came. This was the day the whole piece was to be run, three times to attempt a coherent film cycle. Now, each small section didn't have snow, but the beginning, transitions and the ending were filmed with six inches of freshly fallen snow. This was yet another area where improvisation and the ability to problem-solve became lifelines.

The rough weather affected each artist differently. It was an interesting observation to see how the movement training with the actors was helping them push through. There was a full level of commitment asked. This collaborative team had grown together in their trust of their physical bodies and each other's contagious energies. This resulted in such full commitment, you would have almost thought there wasn't snow around. The body has power and will do what is necessary, even despite logic.

CHAPTER 3: PERFORMANCE AND FEEDBACK

The final film was 31 minutes and 53 seconds. It was what we considered a complete thought on an analyzation of the *Grey Area* we see in our lives. The final product changed frames and perspectives, purposefully intertwined with sound and movement. We created a website to host the film for a limited time, allowing it to have full availability to all. The School of Dance, College of Fine Arts, and the theater program all helped with publicity. These were yet more steps taken to work towards the future collaborative opportunities between the two schools.

The final film was well received maxing at 48 views on YouTube, not including the friends and houses we know of who watched the film in groups. The feedback and appreciation for the hearts expressed was overwhelming. Most explained a sort of intoxication with hearing an individual's voice while seeing their bodies fully represent those thoughts. We did, however receive some feedback on the quality of the audio when individuals were speaking live. Due to the snow and not wanting to risk ruining good technology, our mics got put away in an effort of caution. This is the one thing I would have appreciated a redo on. In hindsight, more research and planning could have been useful when choosing a mic for the outdoors and when planning a shooting schedule.

The most impactful feedback, however, was from those involved in the creative process. The modern dance students both discussed how their interest in text work had grown. They found it much more powerful than past experiences of speaking in pieces. On the other hand, the acting students left sharing how much power they had found in engaging their bodies. The movement opened up their bodies, so when there was live speaking, they felt even more in tune with their bodies and the stories being shared.

The takeaway that touched me the most was mentioned by the musical theater student and cast mate, Aria Klien. "We should collaborate so much more!" The ability to combine geniuses and create a product that means this much to the collaborators is a gift. It is not something we can take for granted. It was clear in the performance, clear in intention, and was positive learning process for those involved.

For future endeavors, I aim to take this feedback and continue to grow with it. I learned the importance about caring for the individual in a creative process, the power of just needing to move, and the intensity text can play without be under or overwhelming. This was my first devised work and is now a base I can rely on for future collaborations and creations.

CONCLUSION

You can't ignore the power of the body in movement. "The movement was political, aesthetic and personal, and it altered the way artists thought about their processes, their audiences and their role in the world." (Bogart, *Viewpoints*, p. 3) Bogart says this regarding the history of movement in theater and the purpose of the human body. In regard to this research, it emphasizes the importance of these concepts for the ever-learning artist.

We live in a world constantly looking to find division. The group of artists I had the opportunity to work with agreed that the loss of connection between the theater and dance programs at the U of U, and within the professional world is truly sad. They especially felt this way after given the chance to collaborate. Now that this has occurred, we hope to see more students head towards this type of collaborative route. There is no harm, only good and learning.

Many professional artists are starting to work more regularly towards these outcomes, so if we can have this availability and support in the college setting, it could only be a blessing, supporting our young artists for their futures. Support is always good, but support for even more creativity and collaboration? You can find yourself endeavoring a completely full creative process that is specific and vital to the growth of an artist.

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