

The Contemporary Continuum: Intertextualizing Concert and Commercial Dance

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By

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## Introduction

This project will explore my understanding of western contemporary dance as a spectrum connecting concert and commercial dance. Using my personal experience within several educational environments including competition studios, a modern-based collegiate department and a European university, I characterize concert and commercial dance through key descriptors. This outline will serve as the basis for comprehending how the two opposing styles are deeply intertwined in any contemporary practice today. I conclude by recognizing the eclecticism of training and suggest an active choice to broaden it by using the spectrum as an artistic referencing method as we move forward in the field of contemporary dance.

Commonly being understood to exist on a vertical hierarchy, concert dance was seen as high art while commercial dance was regarded as lower art. Recently, however, a "...horizontal spectrum..." has been suggested, where concert and commercial dance are given equal value within the field.<sup>1</sup> This balanced lens will be the platform for this discussion. I'll be offering my understanding of both concert and commercial dance and the contrasting elements they encompass, but with no value judgement. As I begin by describing these seemingly polar sides that are necessary to understand contemporary dance, it is not my intention to rigidly categorize concert and commercial dance, but rather to provide a compatible tool to more clearly understand the artistic choices you make.

In discussing the awareness of complementary opposites, I draw from the ideas of Sun Tzu, who philosophized the necessary presence of opposing forces. Highly influenced by yin-

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Kaplan. "Mapping: The Relationships Between Concert and Commercial Dance" (2013). *Dance Master's Theses*. [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/dns\\_theses/8](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/dns_theses/8)

yang, Tzu explains that polarized forces are conversely “two necessary sides of the same system.”<sup>2</sup> Serving as a clear inroad for understanding the horizontal spectrum, contemporary dance would not exist if the seemingly polar forces of commercial and concert weren’t in opposition. Together, they cultivate the intricate system of contemporary dance.

Additionally, Tzu claims that instead of a brute opposition between these forces, opposites “create and feed the other in an endless” conversation.<sup>3</sup> These sides are not just complements to each other, but completions. Contemporary dance could not exist without concert or without commercial practices, otherwise western dance would be a straightforward artform with little complexity throughout the various subgenres it encompasses.

This project is merely the beginning of an ongoing investigation that will likely never conclude; an analysis of a practice that is never finished as indeed the field of dance continues to shift. My understanding of contemporary dance will surely develop and evolve as my practice deepens in time, however this current product is representing a screenshot of a never-ending process, fated to flux.

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<sup>2</sup> "Complementary Opposites: The Levers of Competition," Sun Tzu's Art of War Strategy, 1, accessed March 27, 2017, <http://scienceofstrategy.org/main/content/complementary-opposites-levers-competition>

<sup>3</sup> "Complementary Opposites: The Levers of Competition," 1.

## **Section 1: Defining the Poles**

The dialogue involved in this research pertaining to western concert and commercial dance includes terms that have embodied multiple understandings across various contexts. Therefore, to introduce this conversation and frame the research more specifically, my current understanding of concert and commercial dance will be outlined for the purpose of this discussion. Growing up I spent a decade of my adolescence attending classes at commercial-based studios and subsequently dove into a concert-based curriculum in higher education for the last four years. Inherently, my research, embodied as well as scholarly, will inform the endorsement of these claims. To define these massive styles of concert and commercial dance, central characteristics and key descriptors will be provided to epitomize both. These descriptors represent concert and commercial dance in their purest forms, which I subsequently claim rarely exist anymore. To comprehend both practices as poles along a spectrum, however, introducing them as concrete categories will provide an inroad for grasping their necessary opposition.

### **Commercial Dance**

For the classification of commercial dance, I have specified three focal attributes that define the style for what it prioritizes as an art form: an emphasis on quantity over quality, a prioritization on product over process, and a monologic tone. Beginning with valuing quantity over quality, the example of competition-based studios will serve as a prototype for this descriptor. Commonly found in the suburbs of America, competition-based dance studios typically teach students through high school students of 18 years old at most. Students learn specific choreography over the course of several months during the school year. They compete at regional competitions during the spring against other studios, seeking awards and rankings based

on the style, age group, and number of dancers in the piece. These three-day long events bring together studios from across the country to be scored against one another and given titles and ranks based on their performances. Evaluation of each dancer is determined by the level of mastery of a brief 2-3 minute dance, demonstrated through an engaging stage presence and movements that are appropriately challenging for their age.

The understanding of challenging began to change however; young dancers have raised the standards of this term and have continuously adapted. This led to virtuosic movement evolving to being understood as the quantity within a specific step. For example, instead of a dancer focusing their attention to their anatomical placement in a basic pirouette to efficiently execute one or two pirouettes, they instead whip around and go for four or five continuous turns, all to impress the judges for a high score. This dichotomy between physical efficiency and audience engagement is strongly at play in commercial dance; it commonly leads to an emphasis on how high, how many, and how fast movements are presented. Because commercial dance, specifically in the example of competition-based studios, is designed to be seen by a panel of judges, the audience inevitably becomes the focus.

As virtuosity being recognized in commercial dance as faster, larger, and higher movements that continue to raise standards and challenge limits, the second descriptor of commercial dance emerges: product over process. Prioritizing the product of the work, commercial dances are made directly for the sake of the audiences' entertainment. A strong illustration of this emphasis is seen on the television show, *So You Think You Can Dance*. Impressively beginning its fourteenth season in 2017, the show has attracted millions of viewers

and voters each year.<sup>4</sup> Each week on the show, dancers ages 18-30 perform solos and duets within multiple styles and are eliminated by the viewers' feedback as well as the judges'. This show incorporates audience members to help make the decision of who isn't performing well enough and should be sent home; a platform where decisions regarding who stays and who is voted off the show are based solely on the performances on stage. This concept of valuing what is performed, as opposed to the process of creating it, is largely at play in the world of commercial dance. Concentration on the presented product stems from the imperative presence of the audience. The audience and the judges on the show only see 2-3 minutes of dancing from each contestant before they decide who can continue forward in the competition.

Because the audience is vital in the presentation of commercial dance, the viewers' satisfaction within their experience is imperative for the success of the style. This encompasses the third definer of commercial dance, the monologic tone of communication. By requiring the audience to witness the work to simply view and take in what's given, commercial dance can be seen as a monologue of sorts, as opposed to a discussion. With little ambiguity involved in the meaning of the movement, the choreographer is simply showing a piece for the audience to enjoy and understand. This monologue is digested when the dancers strip away a certain sense of 'self' and become the person/creature/being that the dance requires them to be.

For example, in the Cirque du Soleil show, *DRA-LION*, a story portraying the historical and cultural significances of lions and dragons in Chinese culture are shown "represented by

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<sup>4</sup> "So You Think You Can Dance: Fox TV Show Ratings," TV Series Finale, September 13, 2016, 1, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/think-can-dance-season-13-ratings/>.

human beings.”<sup>5</sup> Dancers essentially become the character or creature to avoid any ambiguity and to completely immerse them in the environment of the dance. Similarly, competitive studios will commonly incorporate props, hard-to-miss hairpieces, or a literal, representative costume that complements the mood of the movement or the historical frame of the piece. This effort of embodying the lions or the trees or the 50’s pinup girl without abstraction is intentionally chosen for the audience’s entertainment.

In defining commercial dance with concepts such as a monologic tone, and emphases on product over process and quantity over quality, the artistically complementary discipline that exists on the opposite end of the continuum of contemporary becomes concert dance. Forms of modern, post-modern, and even post-post-modern exist here in their purest forms. My experiences in a higher education curriculum will guide my understanding of concert dance as I discuss three corollary concepts central to recognizing the form.

### **Concert Dance**

While commercial dance is concerned with the audience’s understanding and pleasure during a performance, concert dance is considerably more exploratory within the development and presentation of the movement. Considering the vital role of the audience to receive in commercial dance, the audience is enlisted with a different responsibility on this concert end of the spectrum. Instead of providing the answers or concrete ideas for the viewers through a detailed costume or a total transformation into a character, performances featuring concert dance are platforms where questions are being asked and investigated by both the dancers and the

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<sup>5</sup> Isabell Eberhardt, “Tag Archives: Barcelona Dralion by Crique du Soleil in December 2013 tickets,” Your Next Stop Barcelona, 1, accessed March 10, 2017, <http://www.nextstop-barcelona.com/tag/barcelona-dralion-by-crique-du-soleil-in-december-2013-tickets/>.

witnesses. Seen more as a discussion than a monologue, concert dance is less direct in that answers are not given. Abstraction and interpretation are prized in concert dance; thoughts are provoked and considered.

Contrary to the commercial understanding of virtuosity, where the larger, faster, higher, and amount of a certain movement determines the difficulty, concert dance understands virtuosity by how shapes are filled. The images that commercial dance creates are clear endpoints, or static moments. Concert dance fills transitions in and out of potential endpoint through focusing on the kinesthetic methods within movement. This close analysis and importance given to the quality rather than the quantity of movement is the first definer of concert dance. The quantity of movements in commercial dance could represent the number of turns, a high leg extension or a powerful leap. Referencing a connect the dots image, these moments of recognized virtuosity in the commercial form would represent the dots. The value of quality over quantity in concert dance is represented by the lines in between. The varying shades of effort, the transitions in space, or bodily connectivities allow these in between moments to be prioritized over the dots themselves in concert dance.

These lines in between, the connecting material that structure a piece into more than shapes and pin-points are a driving force behind concert dance. Entering my first year in a modern-based collegiate department, our freshmen technique class was structured around the teachings of Bartenieff Fundamentals, a practice of “patterning the body according to principles of efficient movement functioning.”<sup>6</sup> In my second year, we studied Laban Movement Analysis, which incorporated studies of effort in time and space as another approach to understanding

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<sup>6</sup> Peggy Hackney, *Making Connections: Total Body Integration Through Bartenieff Fundamentals* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 34.

movement. There are many valid techniques that immerse students into the movement and cognitive patterns that concert dance engulfs; Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenieff Fundamentals were simply the first two I became acquainted with that represent this attention to quality over quantity.

Continuing with an emphasis on process over product and how it appropriately exemplifies concert dance, I draw from a choreographer I worked with this past fall while attending The University of Stavanger in Norway. Yael Flexer and members of her London-based company, Flexer & Sandiland, taught technique and repertory classes for a week, with a public performance on the last day. We spent 5-6 hours in the studio each day for six full days, creating new material. While we were performing alongside her company who brought a polished full-length show to perform, we did not simply learn the choreography they had made and step into it like new shoes. Our studio time was spent crafting movement from our experiences within the task, a creative process that was informed by our understandings of the concepts at hand, and not just our bodies executing predetermined movements that other bodies had produced, an exploratory approach that's common in concert dance.

The performance itself was attended by 25 people at most. Because of the extensive time we spent curating and negotiating material in the studio, the performance itself was emphasized much less. Our experiences with each other benefitted the company's material, it informed our rehearsal ethic, and provided us with a new set of choreographic methods. In this setting, creating and experimenting was far more valuable than any sort of evaluation we received regarding the singular presentation, thus expressing the value that concert dance places on process over product. The continuousness of concert dance underlines this notion of process; works in progress are part of the culture of showing as versions are shared and reworked.

Changes are made as a result of dialogue and feedback, which provides an inroad into the third descriptor of concert dance, which highlights this conversational tone.

The third descriptor for concert dance is its dialogic tone, which opposes the monologic tone that commercial dance values. Seen more as a discussion than a monologue, concert dance invites those viewing a performance to create their own understanding as a means of experiencing the performance. The audience is indeed imperative, like it is for any form of contemporary dance, arguably, however the performer's experience is valued more in concert dance than it is in commercial. Carte Blanche, a Norwegian dance company, created a full-length piece that epitomizes this dialogic tone of concert dance as the experience is shared between performer and viewer.

The creation of this piece, *We Are Here Together*, was heavily influenced by "cannibalism, rituals, [and] the movement of the masses," a human subculture that's severely invisibilized and publicly averted.<sup>7</sup> This performance reflected each of the dancer's personal illustration of this culture through the motion of their bodies, which isn't something that's as easily understood. They were each exposing their understanding of this community. In the middle of the piece, the movers onstage had stripped their clothes almost entirely. They had taken a large bucket of pig's blood and sensually lathered it onto their own and each other's bodies as they began to transcend into a raw mass of exposed humans. The dancers moved wildly untamed, as if the corners of their bones couldn't limit the primal contortions of their bodies. This non-literal yet highly visceral performance made a culture surrounding taboo values accessible to the public eye. This form of human culture that's remains full of uncertainty and

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<sup>7</sup> "WE ARE HERE TOGETHER." Carte Blanche, 1, accessed April 18, 2017. <http://carteblanche.no/en/forestilling/weareheretogether/>.

unanswered questions provided the performers with a platform of investigation that didn't necessarily have an absolute illustration. Because of this, the audience had an equally nuanced connection to the piece, equalizing them as part of the performance, a central concept of concert dance.

Coming directly from the title of the piece, *We Are Here Together* addresses the audience and the performers as equally integral for this piece to exist. Acknowledging the various places the audience and dancers are coming from, both parties are engulfed into this work to “meet in this place, at this time, now” to begin their collective movement.<sup>8</sup> The audience is known to be in their chairs, “thinking, sensing and being moved”, while the dancers are “on stage moving you – and [themselves].”<sup>9</sup> This inclusive acknowledgment of both entities for the sake of a shared experience is what a dialogic tone underlines in concert dance. The dancer's self is not only recognized, but essential for the piece to fully embody itself. The audience is needed for this embodiment to flourish as well, to create a collective communicative environment, or a dialogue.

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<sup>8</sup> “WE ARE HERE TOGETHER.” Carte Blanche, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Section 2: Somewhere in the Middle

Concert and commercial dance have been introduced and explicitly framed for the purposes of this discussion regarding the spectrum of contemporary dance. Unpacking their polarities and epitomizing descriptors, I devote this next discussion towards the claim that work made today in the western world of contemporary dance integrates elements from both sides of the spectrum; that everything exists somewhere in the middle. Referencing a connect the dots image once more, both the dots and the lines are necessary to create an image, just as contemporary dance exists as an integration of elements from both concert and commercial practices.

Because this project is only just beginning and these concepts will continue to develop alongside my understanding of the practice, this section will likely seem incomplete, innately because it is. This section discussing the cross-over that inevitably exists in all contemporary work will hone in on one of the dichotomies that contrastingly define concert and commercial dance. Using process versus product and how they separately define concert and commercial dance respectively, I use performance structures and rehearsal processes to argue their intertextuality. Performance structures initially reflect values of presentation, simply because that is what a performance is understood to be. However, I draw from competition studios and collegiate dance departments once more to dive into the ways that the presentations of products can be a means to view concert and commercial dance more complexly.

Commercial dance, in a pure form, values product over process. This means that the presentation is superior to the studio time through which the pieces are made. Recalling my experience in commercial studios, the classes I took were all prescribed to support my

performance in competition. While the majority of the classes were centered around theatre-based tap and jazz that upheld each of the values of commercial dance, I also took modern, ballet, and Pilates weekly. These secondary focuses served as an intertext with concert dance because of the inclusion of classical training, even if they were given less value in my training. The inclusion of modern and ballet in a commercial studio places the classes taken and the rehearsal schedule of competition studios in the middle of the spectrum, instead of remaining strictly on the commercial side.

In addition to the classes I took when I was younger, the regional competitions I attended also incorporated an overlap of artistic elements. While competitions are often argued to encapsulate the purest form of commercial dance, concert values are still present. Because the goal of competing typically is to score high, the focus on product over process may seem to overshadow any other value, as the performance is the only piece being evaluated. The mere concept of a numeric evaluation is also reason enough to see the value in product over process. Through a wider lens, however, a concentration on process through the structure of performance may be present in commercial dance beyond initial perception.

Many studios, including the one I grew up in, attended multiple competitions a year, which meant that we received feedback and critiques from many judges over the course of a year. Serving as choreographers, performers, or educators in the field, the judges' personal expertise in the field based on their experiences and trainings informs the feedback we receive from them, a respected source for young dancers attending competitions. These evaluations informed our teachers and enabled them to change and develop our dances throughout the season. Yes, we were there to score high, but the process of considering what the judges saw allowed us to improve in ways that could benefit our performance most effectively.

From a personal experience, I recall receiving feedback from one of the first competitions of the season one year, and a judge was explaining to us that the sense of community that the dance was portraying wasn't reading well because of our interactions with each other appeared impersonal or authentic. With this performative feedback, my teachers set aside some rehearsal time for us to have mundane conversations with each other. It was clear to the judges that we were a group that didn't have the communal connection that would improve our stage presence even further. Because my teachers not only spent the time to listen to the judges' comments with the whole class, but also spent studio time embodying what these notes could do for our performativity for the next competition, this became an ongoing process of development within my competition studio. On a small scale, a singular competition by itself can absolutely be seen as a solely commercial experience, however I pose a wider lens that allows an entire season of competitions to be seen as a performative process. This integration of feedback and refinement of technical execution and performative quality places competition studios on the contemporary spectrum.

Shifting to the other side of the continuum, I draw from my experience within a modern-based collegiate department to posit that seemingly epitomizing examples of concert dance also exist somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. The College at Brockport, the state institution from which I will soon receive my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance, may be initially perceived as an exceptionally concert-based program because of the emphasis on postmodern and post-postmodern technique. These are practices that intentionally strayed from the strict codifications of ballet into a more expressive and pedestrian performance art. In Brockport's Department of Dance, students excel "not only in the studio [but also] on stage," a curriculum that emphasizes

studio time, or process, which seemingly exemplifies concert dance.<sup>10</sup> Utilizing the structure of the performances in the department however, Brockport has integrated commercial values of quantity over quality and product over process. This places this modern-based collegiate department, a substantial example of pure concert dance, on the contemporary continuum.

During the spring semester of 2017, there will be a total of four concerts showcasing student choreography and performance. For dances to be presented in any of them, the works must be selected through an adjudicated audition. Simply noticing that four performances being held over the course of fourteen weeks is a heavy load for a collegiate department, a value of quantity over quality is already at play. Considering the numerous hours of rehearsal and development that each piece entails in addition to outside coursework for full-time students, rehearsal time becomes spread quite thin, thus highlighting the number of dances rather than the investment within the dances. The number of performances versus the amount of time that students have to make them adopts the commercial value of quantity over quality.

From another angle, this performance structure is more concert-based. With so many opportunities for students to perform and choreograph, the intensity and pressure is lifted from these presentations. Instead of focusing all of your work and ideas on a singular show, familiarizing yourself with frequently presenting work to people can be viewed as an entirely process driven practice. Similar to how an entire season of competitions can be holistically seen as a performative process, Brockport draws from this structure as well, providing a multitude of avenues for students to approach showing work as an ongoing process rather than a one-time presentation.

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<sup>10</sup> “The Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Dance, “The College at Brockport, 1, accessed May 1, 2017, [https://www.brockport.edu/academics/catalogs/2016/programs/dance\\_bfa.html?pgm=dance\\_bfa\\_major.html](https://www.brockport.edu/academics/catalogs/2016/programs/dance_bfa.html?pgm=dance_bfa_major.html).

This alternate approach to a performative structure, one that includes less performances, but more emphasis on the one or two that do happen, is a curriculum I experienced in the Fall of 2016 when I spent the semester studying Dance Performance at The University of Stavanger in Norway. While abroad, there were two performances during the semester I attended, which is half the amount of performances at Brockport in one semester. Both of these performances were choreographed by faculty members or guest artists who were teaching us technique and repertory classes for weeks prior to the performances. Because each student was involved in these repertory classes, everyone performed in the work these professional artists set on us, which eliminated a sense of evaluation that auditions provide.

During the week leading up to each of the performances at UiS, we had what were called ‘project weeks’ – entire weeks where all other classes were set aside while we developed and created the piece to be performed. Our first performance, choreographed in collaboration with Yael Flexer and her London-based company Flexer & Sandiland, was performed once with an audience of about 25 people. Having the entire week, endless hours each day, to rehearse and sculpt this piece for a performance for just a handful of people is one of the strongest examples of prioritizing process over product within a performance structure that I’ve experienced. While creating in the studio, we were given tasks based on tactile action and reaction with our partners. This was how the company had made most of the movement for the show, however it was important to Yael and her colleagues for us to experience this process of creation for ourselves. The goal of this project was not to perfect the performance or satisfy all 25 audience members. Frankly, the fact that there was only one presentation and such a small audience supports the claim that studio time, rehearsals, and creation was weighted more than the show itself.

While the method of facilitating this first performance drew from concert-based values, the second performance at UiS incorporated a commercial-based value of product within their post-performance evaluation. The day after our one showing, we spent our class time having individual meetings with three of the faculty members discussing our performance. The questions I was asked were based on my performance on Thursday night, how I would evaluate my commitment on stage, and how repertory classes had informed the performance for me. By discussing my personal evaluation within the performance itself and focusing on how my experiences in rehearsal can inform my performativity, the product of the performance seemed to be greatly valued over any development or personal growths that I experienced along the way. In taking an entire day's worth of technique classes to individually speak with three faculty members about one performance illustrates a strong emphasis on product, a commercial-based value.

Understanding how process and product are valued becomes exceptionally complex as rehearsal and performance structures don't entirely reflect these terms. They are a singular, literal way to understand them. Performances themselves can be seen as processes of presentation, just as rehearsals can exist solely to support the performance. They can be valued within each other, just as I view concert and commercial dance being equally as intertwined. Structures of rehearsals and performances can be seen in multiple ways, and I don't think an absolute answer exists as to how any work precisely reflects the values of concert and commercial dance. The mere acknowledgement of this complex and consistent overlap is what bears the importance in this discussion.

The purpose of the spectrum is to have a clearer understanding of artistic choices that are made, and how it fits into the contemporary world, without value judgements. Exact placement

on this spectrum isn't necessary; these points may not even exist. It is simply a tool to comprehend that nothing we do is purely and solely one thing, rather an intertwining mix of decisions, aesthetics, and characteristics that blend into one another to allow concert and commercial dance to cohabitate in any context. With the following and concluding section, I approach dance training from a lens of application – one that acknowledges the eclecticism in each of our selves and urges the same to exist within training as well.

### Section 3: Eclecticism in Training

This concluding section will dive into the application of this spectrum as an artistic tool. Whether it is referenced to facilitate training along the spectrum, or simply a method of acknowledging creative decisions, the purpose of this continuum is to support the progression of contemporary dance training and the field at large. The application of such a tool begins with the concept of eclecticism. While the rarity of solely commercial or solely concert practices have been discussed due to their overlaps and intertextuality, a suggested idea is to embrace the eclecticism of dance training in ways that address the entire spectrum to evolve training and decision making as an artist. With this digression away from singularly exclusive practices, utilizing the entire continuum of contemporary dance to train along is encouraged.

Melanie Bales introduces the term eclecticism, which greatly resonates with this discussion pertaining to dancers' training in her book, *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*. Acquainting her readers with this phrase as it pertains to contemporary dance, she defines it as “the process of appropriating various movement practices [and] existing dance traditions” into your artistic toolbox.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, her discussion around this term will serve as the foundation of my claims regarding training along the continuum. Bales states that while a handful of dancers still may only train within the realm of “one ‘pure’ style,” it’s a regime that’s deteriorating in the contemporary field.<sup>12</sup>

The broader a dancer’s training, the more egalitarian their artistic choices become, due to the larger pool of exposures that’s widely accessed. Dancers today can more effectively tap into

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<sup>11</sup> Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettle-Fiol, *The body eclectic: evolving practices in dance training* (Urbana III.): University of Illinois Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>12</sup> Bales and Nettle-Fiol, *The body eclectic: evolving practices in dance training*, 15.

their artistic license to mold their creative directions because of this eclecticism. With classes and projects and departments dipping into varieties of practices, movement vocabularies are exponentially growing, which leads to new interests, passions, and the exposure to step in any direction because these choices are available to them. Essentially, eclecticism provides indefinite possibilities that create a platform for contemporary dancers to jump off in any direction.

Additionally, eclecticism offers a secondary bonus that enables dancers to better support themselves financially. It's almost impossible for dancers to sustain themselves by working with a singular choreographer today, or one project at a time. Therefore, to become as marketable as possible and stylistically appeal to multiple artists willing to hire, it's crucial to access the variability along the spectrum. Now more than ever, this "training package" is going to serve dancers in the professional world as the possibility of creatively cross-training along the continuum is increasingly accessible.<sup>13</sup>

Viewing the conglomerative identity of today's dancers as "one of the major descriptors of contemporary dance training," there are more steps to take as current artists to evolve the field with eclecticism as the vehicle.<sup>14</sup> With the spectrum of concert and commercial dance, it's possible to acknowledge practices and decidedly evolve them. To widen the scope of training along the spectrum, incorporating as many elements from both sides will be the key to accessing more range. With values of concert and commercial dance residing in each project or work, it's important that additional practices are considered to offset and complement whichever values aren't given as much thought. To illustrate this concept, I'll discuss the concert and commercial

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<sup>13</sup> Bales and Nettle-Fiol, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

values that resided within a project I was recently involved with, and offer several opportunities to balance these values, thus filling the spectrum.

A repertory class I participated in at The University of Stavanger in Norway was two weeks long. Guest artist Helder Seabra from Portugal came in and we spent on average 4-5 hours each day in the studio, either taking his class and ingraining his movement vocabulary into our body, or piecing together and rehearsing the work we were showing the following week. The performance structure of this process incorporated the concert value of process, as there was a singular showing. Additionally, multiple hours each day were not spent rehearsing the piece, but rather taking his technique classes and diving into the rigorously primal way of moving that was new and foreign to our class. Yes, ultimately these classes greatly informed the final work, however our time learning from him was emphasized more than the single performance. However, the piece we put together, *When the Birds Fly Low the Wind Will Blow*, was already made. The process of creation was not involved or revised during this process since Helder's company, Helka, had been performing it for several years. Learning his repertory with finished material made this project product driven. Yet, resetting the piece on a group of sixteen as opposed to the original cast of five was something Helder noted that entirely changed the experience when we began at the end of November 2016.

With an additional eleven bodies, Helder simply made three replicas of his original five, with one group having an extra dancer. There were three students for every original cast member. The way we learned and rehearsed the piece drew from the monologic value of commercial dance. Simply given a video of the performance, we watched the people we were mimicking to essentially become them. We learned their exact movements, studied their precise timing with the other dancers, and slithered our way into the most accurate version of them we

could access. Through this method of becoming the thing I needed to be on stage, my experience as a performer was less valued. I became someone else solely for the performance of the work, and because that is how we approached this process.

The experience within Helder's piece integrated elements from both concert and commercial dance; process was valued in having one performance and many classes that were unrelated to the presentation, and a monologic form of rehearsal through becoming the original cast members. While I would claim this experience as a highly intertextualized process because of its integrations of both concert and commercial values, if every method of training was similar to this one, I would be leaving large gaps in the spectrum wide open. To balance my training and complement Helder's process that focused heavily on refining the final product, there are numerous options that I could choose to relieve my mind and body of the values I had been focused on so intensely for those few weeks.

To counter this specific process, a project that doesn't spend as much time creating and perfecting, but rather shows it to others will counterbalance the weight upon curation and revision. For example, partaking in a work or creating one from a chance procedure method eliminates the emphasis on making and refining. The chance-dance method is a choreographic tool that relies on the spontaneity of the universe to make artistic decisions such as "dice rolling, coin flipping, and improvisation"<sup>15</sup> This technique was made popular, ironically enough, by American modern dance pillar Merce Cunningham. Cunningham was at the forefront of modern dance for half a century, however his choices to make choreographic decisions right before the performers went on stage beautifully counterbalances a process-driven experience that doesn't

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<sup>15</sup> "Chance Dance," Merce Cunningham, 1, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://mercecunninghamproject.weebly.com/chance-dance.html>

involve monotonous rehearsal of a singular product.<sup>16</sup> Both of these methods are process driven, however the emphasis on the product itself offers an alternative approach to develop an eclectic training.

Another example of holistically including various values along the spectrum for the sake of eclecticism is given through offsetting monologic and dialogic tones of training. If a monologic tone has been saturated in training or performance, in that the presentation is given to a passive audience, a practice that conversely involves presenting unfinished work may satisfy this balance. Eliminating a polished product from a presentation would shift the tone into a more conversational showing that involves experiences or choices in the work to develop as a result of the feedback received. Additionally, eliminating a presentation altogether could shift the experience as well. This could be an entire dance made that no one ever sees, an improvisational score with no end goal, even journaling without publishing – anything done for personal reasons, not an audience's. Balancing a monologic tone with a dialogic one allows training to draw from both concert and commercial based practices, which develops our eclecticism.

These are merely two examples of recognizing the values of a project and referencing the contemporary continuum to creatively balance the training along the spectrum through alternative processes. Deciding to broaden the scope of training along the spectrum, however, is a decision that is by no means necessary for artistic success or creative improvement. Using this continuum as a tool is simply how I've begun to understand the world of contemporary dance, and how to absorb as much from it as I possibly can. Through recognizing the eclecticism within myself as a mover, I can challenge my training to be as equally conglomerate. Because this is a

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<sup>16</sup> "Chance Dance," 1.

choice regarding the eclecticism of ourselves and the movement we have in our training package, this training approach becomes greatly personalized. In support of the analysis of specific examples and written literature references, I also refer to a creative process to further research the notion of eclecticism along a spectrum of contemporary dance.

The movement-based component of this project personified these values surrounding eclecticism as it intertextualizes concert and commercial dance within my practice. I chose to create a new solo work in a matter of weeks, intentionally giving myself a limited amount of time to avoid editing and adjusting my instinctual decisions.<sup>17</sup> With only a few weeks to make a dance to perform, I used this solo as a raw reflection of the eclecticism that exists within my artistic choices. Making this dance quickly was decided to exemplify the trust I have in my experiences. Because of the inherent eclecticism within my training, I came to view the piece as a byproduct of all my past experiences. They are deeply rooted in my practice – not necessarily habits, rather the effects of wide-ranging exposures. Even if a significant amount of time was spent making this solo, it would not have been possible without every experience leading up to the moment I made it. My choices are a direct result of the existing eclecticism within my history; a summation of experiences that continues to cumulate. This further solidifies the idea that this project, along with my artistic practice within the field of dance, is an ongoing endeavor that continues to evolve. A process that links a continuous stream of current products within our development.

Contemporary dancers “at the millennium [are] self-styled”; in other words, this eclecticism doesn’t just encompass contemporary dance for what it is, but also provides a

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<sup>17</sup> Solo presented one time as an informal work in-progress on a Friday afternoon. No decided costume or production cues other than the music that lasted the length of the dance. Audience participated in observation-based discussion afterward.

responsibility to dive deeper into it.<sup>18</sup> This decision to broaden the range of training along the spectrum is not a codified or prescribed experience of training. It is up to us as movers and creators of today to explore what this eclecticism means for us. To trust it. Because it will inherently be a different endeavor for each of us, but crucial for the progression of the art as a conglomerate itself.

Today, pure commercial dance and pure concert dance seldom exist. Whether it's a performance, class or rehearsal, elements from both ends of the spectrum are simultaneously involved in either the process or the product of the work. My understanding of concert and commercial as a continuum that defines contemporary dance provides a method to reference ourselves and our work as we move forward. Acknowledging the complementary differences of the opposite sides of this continuum will allow you to benefit from the intertexts that inevitably exist, but only if you actively extend the edges of this spectrum inside your practice.

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<sup>18</sup> Bales and Nettle-Fiol, 15.

## Endnotes

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