Phase 7: Revealed

by

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Finding the way with no map/Are we there yet? No. Good.

“You will recognize your own path when you come upon it, because you will suddenly have all the energy and imagination you will ever need” –Jerry Gillies

Learning how to speak with my own voice as a choreographer has been a source of great frustration. At a very young age dancers learn to mimic their teachers’ movement-- first position, shuffle step, contract-- and become so reliant on outside guidance that their own voices are muted. Negotiating the influences of those teachers who have left movement imprints upon my body and pushing myself to discover who I am as an independent mover and artist has proven difficult. Tuning into my own movement impulses was a re-education process facilitated by studies in improvisation. Through improvisation my once inaudible voice became a whisper, and that whisper has gradually strengthened. By revealing my body’s inner dialogue I have been able to use the tools given to me by my dance educators to depart from their influences. The phenomenal “thing” about art is that there are no two creations identical in content and form. Artists bring their own life experiences, their own beings to the creative process, which makes any product innately unique. While imitation threatens originality, each creation, like a fingerprint, has its distinct features. My work is unique because its source is me, is within me. I challenged myself throughout the creative process of Phase 7: Revealed to truly expose my own movement voice instead of falling into the cycle of imitation.

Finding my own path has been an emotional journey filled with fear, surprises, self-doubt, and satisfaction. Very often it is only in retrospect that I realize I am even on a
path at all. There was a drive that pushed me throughout the creation of *Phase 7: Revealed*; the necessity and urgency to create with my own distinctive, independent voice compelled me onward. Like a child eager to communicate once verbal expression has been acquired, I had within me movement visions that needed to be realized. I would be lying if I claimed the genesis of this concert was unproblematic, for I can still feel the labor pains of its creative birth. However, the rewards have proven to be worth it because I have truly begun to develop my creative voice as a dance artist.

*Phase 7: Revealed*, as the first senior dance thesis concert, set a precedent for future dance majors interested in creating their own production. Due to the fact that I had no such example to use as a source of reference I often felt directionless. In reflection I realize that it is when you have made yourself vulnerable by traveling the path without a map that you truly are able to find your way and no one else’s. *Phase 7: Revealed* was a process of discovery: stumbling upon paths to travel, deciding to depart from the beaten path, and making new paths. This journey left me wondering if there comes a point of arrival in every artist’s life when the path of self-exploration ends? I think not. I hope not. May the surprises continue to reveal themselves around unexpected corners.

**Finding inspiration beneath a coconut tree with arms resting on my favorite pillow as it rains** (or *Mommy where do dances come from*?).

“*And there is the famous example of Michelangelo’s theory of sculpture: The statue is already in the stone, has been in the stone since the beginning of time, and the sculptor’s job is to see it and release it by carefully scraping away the excess material...What we have to express is already with us, is us, so the work of creativity is not a matter of making the material come, but of unblocking the obstacles to its natural flow*” – Stephen Nachmanovitch
Where does inspiration come from? What compelled me to write that sentence? Or this one for that matter? Creative work can be stimulated by an idea, an emotion, a theme, an experience, a cloud, a river, the sources are endless. It is the responsibility of the artist to nurture these motivating forces through the creative process until their truth has taken form. The creative process for every piece of choreography has its own life, which is as unpredictable as a teenager. It has been my experience that meaning and movement often reveal themselves together.

My desire to work with a live musician was the fuel that drove me to create *Waiting* and *Reminiscence of me/Essence of We*. Exploring the specific theme of “pre-curtain don’ts”, *Waiting* was about taking familiar movement language and presenting an untraditional theme through its codified system. Throughout the entirety of the concert I wanted to play with disrupting conventional theatrical expectations, and *Waiting* allowed me to do just that. Since the piece was more about delivering a literal message (No cell phones, no flash photography, etc.) I knew I wanted to keep the movement simple. The repetitive structure of Teleman’s composition allowed me to return to one basic movement phrase over three musical cycles. Subtle alterations of the movement allowed it to remain fresh while the dancers introduced the shirts as another visual element. The theme, as presented through the choreography, was meant to be direct and simple in its delivery.

*Reminiscence of me/Essence of we* was an entirely different experience. Stravinsky’s composition had more freedom and breath within it. *Reminiscence of me/Essence of we* was by far the most challenging piece I choreographed for *Phase 7: Revealed*. The form and structure of Stravinsky’s composition was rather foreign to me,
as I have never studied classical music. It was taxing to remain true to myself as a mover while trying to honor the integrity of the musical composition. I tend to choreograph listening to the natural pulse of the movement’s flow, so I often felt constrained by the specificity of the music’s structure. Nonetheless, the experience and knowledge I gained by working with Stravinsky’s composition and with a live musician, Chris Brooks, was invaluable. Reminiscence of me/Essence of we forced me to be incredibly clear with the movement’s timing and rhythm in relation to the music. I made more conscious choices--like when to be on the music, when to be off the music, when to accent a movement to accentuate the music’s spirit-- than in any other piece I created. The true success of this piece can be attributed to the specific creative contribution and guidance of Chris Brooks. Chris was patient and thorough in his explanation of the compositional elements of Stravinsky’s Elegy.

The creative inspiration for Reminiscence of me/Essence of we unfolded simultaneously with the movement. I created the movement alone and then worked with Chris to cultivate the relationship between the movement and music. Without knowing it, I had constructed three distinct movement personalities within the boundaries of the music’s composition. The task then became how to relate these separate entities to each other and to the musician. Once I had the dancers’ bodies in space it and set the material on the dancers it became easier to see that the mental construction of the three personalities as being separate entities was not as true as I had originally thought. Each personality, including the musician, was in truth a dimension of the greater whole. The piece was incomplete without each individual ingredient. In hindsight I have great respect
for the fact that the movement created its own meaning; it just seems more truthful that way.

*Phase 7: Revealed* certainly had an eclectic diversity of musical choices. Incorporating classical musical compositions, performed live, for *Waiting* and *Reminiscence of me/Essence of we* only enhanced the breadth of those choices. Working with live music and working with recorded music each present their own challenges. I found there was more freedom to insert pauses, tinker with the music’s speed, and create a deeper connection between the movement, the dancers, and the musician with live music. There is an extra layer of physical energy onstage that textures a piece of choreography when using live music that isn’t present with recorded music. As a result of this, great attention has to be paid to the relationship between the musician and the dancers, for the slightest discrepancy on either end can disturb the balance of the piece. Working with a live musician is like creating the right conditions for a chemical reaction to occur. I was very fortunate to have had the right conditions. I think—though of course I am biased—that my musical selections worked well with the individual intentions of each choreographic work. Whether the music or the creative vision came first, I truly enjoyed working with such vastly different choices because each musical selection assisted in extracted new movement vocabulary from within.

*Without Replacement* investigated the tender confrontation that unfolds between two beings as they grapple with the reality of parting ways. I began to work on *Without Replacement* in the academic arena while enrolled in Writing Dance and the piece continued to evolve during my studies in Choreography and the Creative Process. I was at a point in my life where a lot of the relationships that I had considered to be stable
began to crumble at their foundations. This piece was an attempt to work out these experiences through movement. I use free writing to cultivate material for a lot of the pieces I work on and found myself relying on it heavily throughout the conception of *Without Replacement*. Free writing is a tactic I use as a way for me and my dancers to keep in touch with what is going on from the inside. I have found that writing is the best way for my dancers to connect the movement material to their own life experiences. The free writing Cristin and I engaged in kept us focused on the purpose and meaning of the material. In addition to free writing I found a poem I had written to be particularly relevant to the emotional investigation of *Without Replacement*. I often brought this original poem into the studio with me to reference while generating movement material.

Having a close relationship with Cristin made it easier to draw out the mood of the piece and to delve into the theme of support through partner work. The partner work was the only material that was not set when I began working with Cristin, though her creative input on the preexisting material was helpful in pinpointing moments that did or did not work from the inside. Together we talked about and experimented physically with how to create a sense of tension and release through partner work that would emphasize the mutual dependency of the exchange occurring between the two of us.

Onstage I wanted to create a sense of the dancers confiding with the audience, as if they were sharing a secret together. My hope was that the dance’s movement vocabulary would speak clearly enough that the audience would almost forget they were watching a dance unfold, so that sole concentration could be paid to the evolution of the relationship. I chose to strip the stage of the curtains and use work lights to create a specific environment that was the dancers’, not the theater’s, “usual” environment. There
was a certain rawness these theatrical elements fostered that complemented the dance and the honesty of the relationship.

Since this piece had the longest time to germinate it was difficult to keep it from becoming stale. Cristin and I took vacations from *Without Replacement* in the hopes that the performance of it would not fall into a lull. Stepping away from the piece also allowed us to look at it with fresh eyes. I made subtle adjustments to the partner work, to directional facing of some movements, and to the solo I took at the end of the piece. These changes kept the piece alive for us in a way that allowed us to continue finding new texture within the old sections.

*Numb Reciprocity* was also conceived in academia from a movement nugget assignment given during my studies in Choreography and the Creative Process. The instruction of the assignment was to explore the usage of body parts that you neglect as a choreographer. This study revealed the movement niches I found myself falling into and with the recognition of this I was able to extend beyond the familiar. In doing so I acquired an entirely new movement vocabulary for *Numb Reciprocity* that was more intricate and detail oriented than any of my previous work. I incorporated eye, hand, and foot gestures while I investigated using the pelvis and ribs as points of initiation rather than places of response to the demands of the dominating limbs. I became interested in exploring floor work during *Numb Reciprocity* because I realized the movement potential that was possible when you take the dancer off his/her feet.

The creative process for *Numb Reciprocity* was very much about facilitating a dialogue between body parts. Although the choreography was initially oriented towards purely moving bodies through space it quickly grew beyond that. The curtain played two
functions: 1) to draw attention to the subtler movements that might get lost otherwise, and 2) to further the evolving theme of being faced with a situation/relationship in which, for one reason or another, you are selectively seeing the reality of what’s before you. The dance’s purpose, like Reminiscence of me/Essence of we, was recognized with time. The relationship that was to unfold between the dancers was one that was void of stimulating emotional investment. The difficulty in this scenario became finding a way to perform a non-emotional piece without being perceived as disengaged with the movement. Usage of repetition in Numb Reciprocity also played a function in creating a sense of being complacently stuck in an endless cycle of mutual dependency.

Like Without Replacement, free writing played a vital role in the creative process of In this skin. My interest in gender studies, which was the true source of inspiration for the creation of this piece, began through my involvement with the National Conference of Community and Justice. The “theme”, exploring pertinent gender relations and the inner/outer struggle of negotiating social pressures, for In this Skin was my point of creative departure as I conceptualized its content long before any movement was generated. This piece differed slightly from my other creative departure points in that its beginnings were purely intellectual. In a quest to find out if this “theme” was similarly perceived among the dancers in the piece, I took them through a series of exercises that sparked a conversation about the current state of gender relations (see Appendix A). I then had the dancers write about their reactions to the exercises and their own experiences with feelings of inferiority, from which I drew the majority of the text for the piece. I wanted to challenge myself to incorporate text and movement, this piece seemed to be the right time to do so as the dancers and I had much to express about our own
experiences with gender relations. As a group we talked about how we wished we had never experienced the fear of a man’s physical anger, how we wished it was possible to take back the memories of placing ourselves in compromising situations, how we wished we had had the courage to say no when we felt pressured in sexual experiences, how we wished we didn’t need a man’s affirmation to know that we are beautiful, intelligent, strong (ironic isn’t it) women, how we wished for a sense of satisfaction when looking in a mirror, how we wished we hadn’t sought unhealthy measures in the attempts to reach that point of satisfaction, and much more. Knowing that these “themes” were very real for the women dancing, I proceeded to cultivate movement material with them.

*In this skin* was the only piece for which I had the dancers generate their own movement phrases— a method I wish I had used throughout more of my processes because it was successful in allowing the dancers to express their own movement voices. I wanted the dancers’ verbal and nonverbal vehicles of communication to be realized within the piece. Aside from the opening gestural phrases, I created the remainder of the movement material through improvisation on my own; I then set the material on the dancers. It was extremely helpful to return to the dancers’ writings as sources of guidance when I felt like I had lost my intention. Although it was, and still is, a work-in-progress, *In this skin* had the richest and most interesting movement material for me to work on. Since there was a lot of repetition used within each piece of the concert, a goal of mine was to not use a movement phrase more than once in the creation of *In this skin*. Having this guideline made the piece more dimensional than some of the others for me. The feedback process for this piece has been particularly pivotal in establishing its direction. The feedback I received on this piece brought to my awareness the necessity to explore the paradox
between the physical appearance of the beings engaging in movement and the very real inner turmoil that is at play. The scars of thinking you are never enough is an intimate struggle that the audience can not see. My task, which I have not found to be simple, is to draw this paradox out. Without doubt I have a long way to go in making this paradox evident and intentional, but that is what the feedback process is about: finding what does and doesn’t work in order to make your intentions clear.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina I was left, as many were, with a sense of “what can I do”. Image after Image that contained the destruction and aftermath of this natural disaster shook me at my core. What’s left of us. was an attempt to find a way to process this event. The composition of Chris Lancaster’s, used in this choreographic work, was a musical selection I have been interested in working with for over a year. The emotional texture of the composition seemed to be the perfect marriage for this particular choreographic endeavor. There seemed to be an internal struggle between the sections of the composition that encapsulated the range of emotional reactions to the hurricane (anger, sorrow, hope).

I will admit that I underestimated the difficulties of working with a large group of dancers, working with dancers of varying levels of technical training, and working with such a lengthy piece of music. I feel fortunate to have had such a dedicated group of dancers who inspired me to work through these challenges in order to realize my artistic vision for this particular piece.

The dance was constructed upon the manipulation of six phrases, with a strong focus on the design of bodies in space. Sometimes movement came before the geometric pattern it created in space, other times I created movement material based on a specific
spatial pathway. My greatest difficulties, in terms of giving this piece structure, was finding a way to create smooth transitions between each section and making sure there was a clear development of the relationships between the dancers onstage. Feedback for this piece indicated that, on a whole, the dancers appeared to be emotionally disengaged from the movement material. Once again I returned to free writing in the hopes that the dancers could make personal connections to the material. I asked the dancers to write about a time they lost somebody or something that had great meaning to their lives. The dancers were willing to make themselves vulnerable to me, sharing memories and experiences that some hadn’t revealed to anyone else. There was an immediate transformation in the performers’ intention following this exercise, which revitalized the work with a new sense of purpose.

The completion of this choreographic work brought me the greatest sense of satisfaction because there was such an even exchange of energy and commitment between myself, as the choreographer, and the dancers. In the end it was so powerful for me, knowing the journey the dancers and I embarked upon together, to watch all of those bodies moving in space with such an evident emotional connection to each other and the movement material. From the inside as a fellow performer the sense of being supported by the other dancers was compelling.

*Knowing how it ends would you do it all again?* pleasantly diverged from the presentations of my other choreographic work. This piece was my little guilty pleasure that arose from the pure desire to play around with film. The hardest part about working on a site-specific piece was finding a way to navigate the usage of space. Location provided specific constraints on what type of movement was and wasn’t possible. By the
time I reached the production of this piece, it being the last project I worked on, I felt completely drained of creative juices. I truthfully thought I had tapped out all of my creative resources. Being able to work in a different environment allowed me to push through these feelings of exhaustion. Working with a bed, a wall, a table, a toilet, etc. allowed me to create movement that relied solely on the presence of these objects, material that would be difficult to realize onstage. While I generated the content of the dance-on-film, Jenn Werner, the filmmaker, was the one who modeled and structured the piece. Her artistic vision in the editing of the film was the true success of this project.

*It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand her* provided me with the opportunity to rest my choreographic engine. Not yet having stepped away from this piece, as it will be performed again in March, makes it difficult to articulate the totality of my experience with the material as I am still actively in the discovery process. The content of this piece couldn’t be more pertinent to my own experiences as an individual and a modern dancer. So often with modern dance the “I don’t get it” factor blocks a sense of openness to the form. It has been my experience that people would rather cut themselves off from the unfamiliar than face the challenge of truly investigating what is unfolding onstage and their response to it. As a performance piece the choreography and usage of text and props was a refreshing challenge that pushed me out of my comfort zone. Although it took time I now feel at home with the movement material. Stripping yourself of the security of fellow dancers onstage teaches you much about who you are as an individual performer. My hope is that I have taken the material and made it my own while still being true to Pam Vail’s, the choreographer’s, vision.
Throughout the creation of *Phase 7: Revealed* there was a constant negotiation between my vision as a choreographer and the shaping that each dancer brought to the process. While the dancers played an important role as constant sources of feedback, their direct impact as “shapers” could best be seen in *What’s left of us.* and *In this skin.* In both choreographic works the dancers generated their own movement material or created companion phrases to my choreography. By utilizing and incorporating these different ways of moving, the dancer, in my opinion, has a greater sense of investment in the movement material. As the choreographer it was then my task to frame, edit, and organize the movement in a manner that remained true to my artistic vision. In the end no artistic vision can be realized and communicated to the audience without the dancers’ commitment to the performance of the material.

The role of movement in choreography is in the eye of the beholder. As a subjective form the choreographer makes the choice to define the role of movement for himself/herself. Movement for movement’s sake and movement as dramatic expression are both valid ways to define movement’s role in choreography. For me movement’s role is both of these things and neither of these things. I have traveled between both approaches and have discovered that each commands respect in its own right. As a choreographer who doesn’t fit squarely into either camp, I do not see the role of movement in choreography as such a black and white picture. My choreography tends to fall into the gray area where there is a networking of roles at work. For instance, movement’s role as a carrier of social knowledge has become an important consideration in the creation of my choreography. Examining the social implications of movement in choreography is fascinating to me. As a choreographer who is still finding who I am as a
dance artist I am thrilled by keeping the role of movement in choreography as flexible as possible. Roles without borders foster exploration and experimentation. Movement’s role in choreography, for me, is multi-functional and multi-definitional.

**Distinguishing between trash and treasures**

“And your doubt may become a good quality if you train it. It must become knowing, it must become critical. Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you, why something is ugly, demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it perplexed and embarrassed perhaps, or perhaps rebellious. But don’t give in, insist on arguments and act this way, watchful and consistent, every single time, and the day will arrive when from a destroyer it will become one of your best workers—perhaps the cleverest of all that are building at your life” — Rainer Maria Rilke

Doubt is an important and necessary part of the choreographic process if recognized that it can be used in a constructive manner. Doubt forces you to reexamine your intentions in order to either defend your choreographic choices or recognize that alterations must be made in order to refocus your artistic vision. If molded in this way doubt can work to the choreographer’s advantage.

The feedback process was so vital in making sense of how to deal with the doubt that was constantly surfacing throughout the creation of this concert. As an emerging choreographer I was plagued with the thoughts of “Am I on the right path? Does this even make sense? What the heck am I doing?”. Gaining feedback from experienced viewers of dance, who were removed from the creative process, helped to provide a fresh lens to examine my work through. Feedback can either put your doubts at ease or confirm your suspicion that the current trajectory of the piece has led you off course from what you are truly trying to get at. Feedback can only be harmful to those who think there is no room for growth because perfection has already been attained. The guidance that the
feedback sessions gave me forced me to become clearer and explore the choreographic content of the movement deeper. Feedback is the part of the creative process that helps you fine-tune your craft.

Having had the time to let the experience of creating *Phase 7: Revealed* sink in there are certainly elements of my work that, if I could, I would return to and question further. As a dance artist who is just beginning to define my place in the dance world, my philosophy of dance is in a constant state of flux because I am continuously exploring new dimensions of myself as a creator. I would have loved to push the way in which I used the curtain in *Numb Reciprocity* further. Bringing the dancers in the air with lifts and weight sharing while behind the curtain would have been quite satisfying to my creative eye. In hindsight I question my decision to remove the curtain altogether. There is something I enjoy about having the audience know that there is more going on than what they can actually perceive. If I were to return to *What’s left of us*. I would reduce the amount of repetition used in the choreography. Perhaps I became too complacent towards the end of this piece’s creative process and didn’t push myself to continue seeking what other directions the piece could go in. I’ve drastically reworked the text for *In this skin* in the hopes of making the paradox that is at work clear. It is definitely to my advantage that I have the opportunity to revisit this piece with the knowledge I gained by putting it in front of an audience.

Recognizing that as a maturing artist I am constantly growing and changing it is inevitable and important that I look back upon my work critically, after all that is how you learn. *Phase 7: Revealed* was a launching point that let me begin to define my own creative voice. I am certain there is more to come as I continue to ripen my craft.
Selective hearing: listening to the voices in your head

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Creating *Phase 7: Revealed* made me understand the importance of persistence. You must be persistent with the demands you place on yourself while cultivating a piece, continually encouraging yourself to search for what lies just beyond your reach. You must be persistent with the demands you place on your dancer to truly push them to question their relationship to and investment in the movement. If you are not persistent your work runs the risk of becoming stagnant.

While I was excited to delve into each choreographic work as each piece had a nagging need to be realized, like an itch that must be scratched, I have learned that as an artist you must slow down and limit yourself in what you create in order to give each vision the respect and attention it deserves. Above all the most important lesson I have taken away from the process of creating *Phase 7: Revealed* is to always remain true to your own creative voice, even if you are just beginning to discover what that voice is.
Appendix A

Create a list of “Female Messages” then create a list of “Male Messages”. Once you have completed the list vote for what messages you would pass on to your sons or daughters. One vote allows the message to stay on the sheet; no votes means it gets a single line crossed through it.

Please think about your answers to the following questions in silence:

Have you ever been yelled at, commented upon, whistled at, touched or harassed by a male?
Have you ever altered your behavior because someone you were attracted to was in the room?
Have you ever worried that you did not meet traditional female roles?
Have you ever felt you had to diet or exercise to make yourself look better?
Have you ever been afraid of a man’s anger?
Have you ever felt limited in what hobbies, activities, or careers were open to you?
Have you ever felt pressured to have sex, whether or not you actually did?
Have you ever been lied to by a man so he could get something he wanted?
Have you ever been called a bitch, slut, whore, or dyke?
Have you ever limited your activity, or changed your plans to go somewhere, out of fear for your physical safety?