

Dance as Activism: Exploring Gun Violence through Movement and Text
Proposal for Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program Summer 2018

[REDACTED]

Faculty Mentor [REDACTED]

School of Dance, College of Fine Arts

Example

Statement of Research Topic/Creative Work

The goal of this research project will be to better understand how to create activist art in the medium of modern dance. One conversation that comes up frequently in my major, either when speaking with peers or professors, is that it is difficult to create a dance piece that is both exciting to watch and a statement about current events. Dances with activist tones can feel heavy-handed or maudlin to audiences at times. The medium of the body makes some imagery feel too aggressive or tactless when handling a specific topic. However, I have seen performances that have greatly moved and inspired me on a more socio-political level. The purpose of this project is to navigate the creation of a dance work that aims to address a social issue.

I specifically would like to create a dance work that incorporates historical anti-war texts as an entry way to discuss the issues of gun violence that the United States is grappling with today. I am interested in incorporating historical texts along with modern day text as it gives the audience a different entry point other than “this is a dance about guns.” Text from a variety of different focal points also allows for different connections to be made. I am interested in this variation of locality—both in time, space, and speaker—as it unfolds in a dance work.

My research will involve movement research, discussions with my dancers in order to understand different perspectives, and researching other texts and movement work, along with collaborating with my faculty mentor. It is important to me that I spend time listening to my dancers and understanding their perspectives, as I am interested in collaboration. Having that dialogue will allow for a more rich examination of the subject matter, as I will get to see it through different eyes. I will accomplish this through journaling, asking my dancers to free write, and having candid discussions with them.

Relevant Background and Literature Review

I have been involved with certain dance research in the past few years that will inform my movement research for this project:

- Cast member in “Work Everlasting,” choreography by Alex Barbier in collaboration with dancers, to be performed April 22, 2018. This dance piece examines queer women’s narratives surrounding boundaries expectations. The process involves generating text, using multimedia and installation, and generating material inspired by real events without pantomiming, all of which will inform my process.
- Cast member in “Market,” choreography by [REDACTED] in collaboration with dancers, performed October 2017. “Market” used multiple narrative perspectives and storytelling devices to examine one fateful day at a Finnish market. “Market” exemplifies to me the ability to create dance pieces about a difficult topic without making the whole piece heavy or telling the audience how they should be feeling, something important to me going forward with this dance research.
- Cast member in *Gender/Power*, “a collaborative working methodology lead by Maya Ciarrocchi and Kris Grey,” performed on November 19, 2016 (“About”). This piece took hours of discussion amongst the cast on the subjects of gender and its intersection with power and translated it into a performance art piece performed in front of an audience. This piece took on a more political stance as it looked at micro-aggressions, violence, misogyny, and homophobia, among other subjects. Its willingness to heavily incorporate text into a movement setting and use personal narratives will influence how I examine incorporating text.

As far as a literature review goes, there are specific texts I would like to draw inspiration from when it comes to movement generation and text incorporation. Whether I will end up using the text as a multimedia device or just as a source of prompting my dancers remains to be determined, as I do not want to prescribe what my sound score will be yet.

A key one is the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. *Slaughterhouse-Five* looks at the atrocities of war and specifically the firebombing of Dresden. Its nonlinear timeline and examination of how individuals cope with mass death are of particular interest to me at the beginning of this process.

I would also like to look at Ambrose Bierce's collection of short stories. Bierce was a fierce critic of the American Civil War and was not afraid to look at its issues in graphic detail. His criticism of violence on American soil stands out to me as a good contrast to the issues of today. I will use discretion as to what content seems appropriate to deliver to an audience and what is too graphic.

Example

The Wasteland by T.S. Eliot is a poem that deals more abstractly with the horrors of war.

I am also interested in music by The Beatles, as much of their music contains anti-war themes. The idea of incorporating popular music that many are familiar with into a setting where certain lyrics or themes are highlighted differently is exciting to me. The Beatles also harkens to a period of time where a younger generation was pushing for change, something that I would like to juxtapose with today's youth.

I also plan on using text from current events; newspaper articles, audio reports, interviews, etc. I will use discretion to make sure I do not use insensitive material and will work with integrity to respect the victims of violent crime. This text incorporation expands to text that

I will later generate with my cast based on prompts drawn from my literature review and personal experience.

Specific Activities and Timeline

My long-term goal by the end of the summer will be to create a substantial dance work that can be performed by my cast of dancers. To achieve this I will follow the time table specified below to the best of my abilities.

Late March-early May: Preparation Phase

Begin independent movement study to start generating material. Meet with mentor to discuss choreographic strategies and text excerpts. Reach out to dancers and start to finalize a cast.

Mid May-early July: Choreographic Phase

Spend at least 3-6 hours a week in the studio with movement depending on their schedules in rehearsals. Each week I will work on generating material, editing already created material, cleaning material, and collaborating with my cast. I will also spend time before and after each rehearsal time to reflect on the process and create strategies for later rehearsals. I will research as needed additional media to bring into rehearsal times. At the end of each week, I will work with my mentor on material that I feel needs another eye. When my mentor is out of the city, I will converse with her via email and video so that she can still interact with my process and my work.

Early July-August: Wrap-up

Continue to rehearse, but with the intention of having a presentable, finished work. I will research outside of rehearsal to consider where to present the work once it is finished (I will be doing this throughout the process but will work on finalizing it during this time). One option to consider is the School of Dance's Student Concert, where student work is presented in front of

an audience. I will also consider if I would like to create a screen dance with the material so that the work can be shared with a wider audience. I will work with my faculty mentor to decide what is the best venue and medium to present the work. The performance may happen after the end of the summer semester.

Relationship of the Proposed Work to the Expertise of the Faculty Mentor

I have been interested in Professor [REDACTED]'s dance work ever since I started attending the University of Utah. She has created many dance works, something that already gives her an advantage to help me maneuver a choreographic process. On top of that, she is incredibly adept at incorporating text and movement, something I enjoy exploring in my own choreographic practices. Her expertise at working with dance and text will certainly assist in this project.

Professor [REDACTED] is also not afraid to bring in social commentary in her dance work, but when she looks at social issues, she finds a way of addressing them without overwhelming the audience. Her piece "Market," which I discussed earlier, was a prime example of this negotiation to me. In that process, we discussed how, in order for the piece to be impactful, it could not be down and heavy for the whole length of the work. Her process showed to me the importance of looking at the arc of a dance work and seeing how one idea connects to and propels forward the next.

Relationship of the Proposed Work to Future Goals

One concrete way that this research project will assist in my future goals is by informing my senior Honors Thesis. I may or may not end up using sections from this creative process for my thesis, but regardless, it will help by informing my aesthetic preferences and choreographic process.

Creating a substantial dance work that deals with current social issues lends itself tremendously to my future goals. As I near the end of my undergraduate career and prepare to enter the dance world, I look forward to the opportunities to choreograph more and more. With that, however, comes the knowledge that experience in creating dance work helps in making later dance work. Embarking on a journey to create a presentable dance work and finding a venue for it is an immensely helpful practice before graduation.

This project will allow me to understand what it means to create a larger dance work with the assistance of a university and a faculty mentor, something that I will not have as easy access to once I am graduated. Because of this, this project will facilitate confidence and ability when it comes to choreography. This directly affects my post-college career, as I wish to continue to create work. Not only that, I wish to create socially-conscious work, something that this project will allow me to do. This project enables me to envision and actualize the career goals I have set for myself. In doing this, it will both show me that creating dance work is possible while teaching me how to better hone my craft.

Works Cited

"About." *Gender/Power*. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.

Example