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The rite of movement: the creation of John

Sarah Allison McCann

Abstract

The Rite of Movement —The Creation of John uses the lens of choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater lineage and era to honor the values and practices of Christian sacred dance. This thesis investigates where these two seemingly unrelated topics intersect and how a non-religious view of composition can direct the dance-making process of a sacred dance. Using elements of postmodern dance such as pedestrian movement, gesture, and inquiries regarding weight offers a new pathway to participate in Christian sacred dance, making it accessible to all congregation members. *John* was composed, pulling inspiration from dance works, *Trio A (*Rainer*), Chicken Soup (*Cummings*), The Man Who Grew Common in Wisdom (*Hay*), Satisfyin Lover (*Paxton*)*, and the movement practice Contact Improvisation. Inspiration also came from the writing "No Manifesto" (Rainer). *The Rite of Movement —The Creation of John* investigates dance as worship, evangelism, and the accessibility of sacred dance, encouraging all types of bodies and skills to participate in dance worship and sharing Christian ideas with contemporary audiences. *The Rite of Movement — The Creation of John* incorporates community offerings that include a movement experience, sharing of food, and space to ask, "What need can we help meet"?

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The Rite of Movement —The Creation of John

by

Sarah Allison McCann

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THE RITE OF MOVEMENT — *THE CREATION OF JOHN*

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Montclair State University
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Introduction

This thesis project uses the lens of choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater lineage and era to honor the values and practices of Christian sacred dance work. I have investigated where these two seemingly unrelated topics intersect and how a non-religious view of composition can direct the dance-making process of a sacred dance. Bringing these two lineages together, I created a dance work titled *John*, and this written thesis explores the research that underpins the choreography as well as examining my process and where this may lead me in the future.

I have written about Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, Blondell Cummings, and Steve Paxton's artistic processes and compositional values. I have analyzed their artistic works and have drawn inspiration from their clear compositional values. Dance works I researched include *Trio A (*Rainer*), Chicken Soup (*Cummings*), The Man Who Grew Common in Wisdom (*Hay*), Satisfyin Lover (*Paxton*),* and the movement practice Contact Improvisation. I have also analyzed the piece "No Manifesto," written by Yvonne Rainer. My project relies heavily on understanding these dance composition values, which include pedestrian movement, gesture, and inquiry regarding weight. These components are elements in what we know as postmodern dance. It's important to note that this piece and my research look strictly at postmodern dance's composition values — not postmodernism as a worldview. Since the 1960s, these postmodern elements have offered a new pathway to participate in dance. Individuals who are not classically trained can participate in dance performance and dance composition. This makes movement expression accessible to everyone. Accessibility is at the core of my work: to create something for God or to share God's message via the non-traditional Western dance-trained body.

This thesis also describes how sacred dance is currently used in other Christian communities. I have contextually researched the Yoruba people, as their emphasis on community within their sacred dance practice inspired me to consider the community more deeply and consider further the needs of my direct community. The community is an innate concept in the church, in which many church bodies excel in supporting one another. I was part of a congregation for nearly four years, and I felt unseen and, in my time of need, not helped or supported. Due to that experience, I wanted the audience members of *John* to have an undeniable connection to the community.

In my performative work, I applied aspects of postmodern compositional values to create both set choreography and improvisational scores in a sacred dance inspired by the Gospel of John from The Bible. This 45-minute sacred dance experience, performed by Krisann Deauville, Erin Kracht, Marianna Lara, Ezra Deauville, Miah Deauville, Yaro Severn, and myself, reflects the compositional values of Rainer, Hay, Paxton, and Cummings, exploring pedestrian movement, gesture, and elements of contact improvisation. Simultaneously, *John* investigates dance worship, evangelism, and the accessibility of sacred dance, encouraging people of all types of bodies and skills to participate in dance worship and sharing Christian ideas with contemporary audiences. My primary role was director, choreographer, and performer as I worked with Christian and non-Christian faith-practicing artists. I evaluated performance as an act of worship and evangelism for the self-identifying Christian faith performers, regardless of venue. I also examined dance-making as an act of evangelism. The dance piece I have titled *John* has been viewed in a secular performance space and will later be influential in bringing dance to my small church congregation in my rural community. I received audience feedback through a post-show community offering in which audience members were invited to learn part of the

choreography, mingle with the performers, and express their needs. My drive to complete this project is to deepen the Church's understanding of how we see the role of dance in Christian communities,[1] not only for the trained dancer but also for the average congregation member. This dancing for the average congregation member can be an act of evangelism in both performing and in the process of making or worship —aspects that the cast of *John* experienced from different perspectives. Additionally, I desire to deepen my understanding of postmodern compositional values and practices.

As a believer and follower of Jesus Christ, I have a deep passion for using sacred dance to understand more deeply the God I follow and love. As a dance educator, my spiritual investment has already manifested in creating pieces categorized as sacred dance. I have taught pre-teens, teens, and adults at Blessed Feet Studio, a ministry of Summit Church in San Marcos, California, for almost four years. Here, I train women in Ballet, Jazz, Modern, Improvisation, and dancemaking through the lens of the Christian faith. While I have had the privilege of creating many pieces for students ranging in age and skill level, one of the most meaningful projects has been *Miriam's Lament: The Road Back to Life* with our oldest, most advanced youth. (See Figures 1 and 2). *Miriam's Lament: The Road Back to Life* was a collaboration between myself and Krisann Deauville, a significant collaborator of *John*. *Miriam's Lament: The Road Back to Life* investigated the *New International Version* Books of Exodus and Lamentations,[2] shared the narrative of Moses, Miriam, and their people crossing the Red Sea,

[1] In this research, "Christian community" refers to a church, ministry, or group of individuals who have fundamental Christian beliefs: There is one heavenly Father, Jesus is the Christ who was fully man and fully God, Christ died on the cross and was resurrected three days later, and we have Salvation from our sins, which separate us from God, through faith in Jesus. While secondary theology may divide churches in terms of denominations, Christians can all agree on fundamental points. Those who agree with the above points are considered the "Christian community" in this research.

[2]The book of Exodus shares the story of Passover, which precedes the Israelites' freedom from Egypt. The book of Lamentations explores themes of destruction and grief caused by sin.

and explored the theme of repentance. This chapter of sacred dance in my life comes after years of investment in San Diego's modern and postmodern dance communities. Being a freelance artist in San Diego and dancing with a small postmodern dance company, "*IN" Collective* (directed by Nhu Nguyen and Zack King in San Diego, CA), has influenced my choreographic work deeply. This thesis project reflects the convergence of these two aspects of my dance career.

Figure 1: Photo of *Miriam's Lament: The Road Back to Life*

Figure 2: Photo of *Miriam's Lament: The Road Back to Life*

Background and Research

Sacred Dance

My first research task was to define sacred dance itself. The term sacred dance speaks to dance as worship *and* evangelism. As defined by the Sacred Dance Guild, "Sacred dance is any type of dance that is done to connect with or communicate something about the sacred, however that may be understood by the dancer or the choreographer." As for the setting, almost any arguably edifying space is acceptable. The Sacred Dance Guild describes settings for sacred dance: "A performance in a theater, studio, or park, for the benefit of an audience; [p]art of a religious service in a church, synagogue, or temple, to enhance worship; [a] communal event with many participants, to raise awareness and strengthen ties within a community; [a] personal practice, done alone or in a group, to facilitate spiritual and personal growth."

Secondly, I considered other approaches to sacred dance to broaden my understanding of worship, evangelism, and, most pertinent, service to the community. According to the *World History Encyclopedia,* the Yoruba people, prominent in Southwest Nigeria and Benin, participate in sacred movement practices of "possession and summoning" of spirits, or "orishas (Mark)." The Yoruba people call upon Orishas (gods and goddesses) to find guidance, to honor, or to appease the spirit (Mark).

One prominent example of a traditional sacred movement is the Bata dance. In a 2021 performance by the young girls of the Dream Catchers Academy in Nigeria, the dancers perform Bata, which is significantly defined by a sharp and clear drumbeat that marks the dance as the dancers respond with abrupt and angular movements and with spurts of chanting from both dancers and drummers. Bata dance is identified as an improvisation in which the dancer keeps their whole foot on the ground, twists their waist, and keeps their hips loose and their knees bent

(Dream Catchers Academy). According to *The Dialectics of Bata Dance and Its Socio-Economic Significance in Nigeria*, by Oluwafemi A. Jacob, Bata dance was conceived as communication between the dancer and the Yoruba deity, Sango, the god of thunder and lighting, and some dancers believe the improvisation emulates Sango (295). Bata dance traditionally occurs during weddings, funerals, festivals, and community events, thus serving as an opportunity to meet the community's spiritual and cultural needs (Gladokun). This concentration on meeting the community's spiritual needs convinced me to attempt to do the same with the community and church members who would see *John* — teaching a movement phrase that could be interpreted as worship or learning about Christ, thus meeting the spiritual needs of others.

Sacred Dance in Ancient Jewish Text

Ancient Israelites used dance to give thanks and worship God the Father, the same God Christians believe in today. The first example occurs in the Book of Exodus. It involves Miriam, Moses's sister. This celebration occurs directly after God parts the Red Sea for the Jewish people to escape the wrath of Pharaoh. God delivers them from slavery, and Scripture shares in Exodus that Moses sang, "Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam sang to them, Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea" (*New International Version*, Exodus 15: 20-21). Nowhere does Moses, the Israelite's leader, or God rebuke her or tell her not to rejoice in the Lord by dancing. Miriam must have shown significant conviction and pure joy in this moment of the story to have other women follow and join in. This Exodus passage supports the notion that the omnipotent God gave us bodies not only for life but for purposes of expression and to bring glory to Him.

David, the significant psalmist, also experienced dance as worship, “Wearing a linen ephod,[3] David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets" (*New International Version*, 2 Samuel 6:14-15). As one of Psalms’s authors, David encourages Christians to use dance as worship, “Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp” (*New International Version,* Psalm 149:3).

Saara Taina, author of *Encountering God Through Dance: The Dancing Bride,* shares that Taina’s motto comes from the *New International Version*, Jeremiah 31:13, stating, “Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness and give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.” In the true joy of the Lord, our bodies will have no choice but to scream and shout and to dance. Taina, who is an author and dance ministry leader at Bethel Church in Redding, California, articulates that some dances are used to show our hearts to God (worship), and others are used to show God’s heart to congregation members, believers, and non-believers alike (Taina, “Fire Catchers”). In a 2018 interview, Taina stated, “Jesus deserves creative worship from every nation, tribe, and culture” (Taina, *Fire Catchers*).

Rabbi Diane Elliot—a religious leader in the San Francisco Bay Area, an experienced Body Mind Centering Practitioner, and a professional dancer and choreographer— shared the following instances of dancing appearing in traditional Jewish observance that can be found in the Old Testament. According to Rabbi Elliot, eleven words in the Old Testament describe some version of dancing. See Figure 3 for these translations. Note that two translations have been taken out of the original list, as they pertain only to alternative Jewish texts.

[3]An apron-like garment worn by the Jewish high priest.

13 Words for Dance in Torah

מְכַרְכֵּר – ecstatic flying off the ground, unaware of anything around

מחול – חול (round dance (Psalm 30:11, Jeremiah 31:4 –

דלג (to lead or spring (Isaiah 35:6 –

מחולה (dance, company of dancers (Judges 11:34, Exodus 15:2 –

חגג – move in a circle, march in a sacred procession, celebration, festival
(Psalm 42:4, Zechariah 14:18)

כרכר (dance or whirl (II Samuel 6:14 –

רקד – stamp, spring about, dance, jump, lead, skip
(Chronicles 15:29, Ecclesiastes 3:4)

פזז (spring or leap (II Samuel 6:16 –

פסח (hope, skip, dance (I Kings 18:26 –

גלגול – to spin round, usually rejoicing, under the influence of emotion
(I Chronicles 16:31, Psalm 9:14)

עלף – to jump for joy, be joyful, rejoice, triumph
(Proverbs 28:12, Psalm 68:3)

Figure 3: *13 Words for Dance in the Torah* Image.

The examples and translations are straightforward—the idea of dance is everywhere in the Old Testament and is not only tolerated but edifying to the Lord God. These examples and the proceeding figure show that God intends for us to use the body for expression in times of joy and thanksgiving to worship him. This clearly validates that expression through movement should be used and honored in the Christian church.

Omega Dance Company and Sacred Dance

In the spirit of deep investigation into how sacred dance is currently used, I interviewed leadership members of Omega Dance Company, a professional sacred dance company in New York. Martha Chapman and Rebecca Reuter spoke with me on the morning of April 8th, 2024.

According to Reuter, Omega Dance Company offers dance in three settings: mainly in liturgical settings, workshops, and occasionally in concert settings. Leadership shared that they use a variety of forms to choreograph their sacred dance works, including modern, ballet, flamenco, praise dance, and pull inspiration from ASL. Choreography is built through structured improvisation or relearning repertory. Omega Dance Company is a multi-faith, multi-generational, multicultural professional sacred dance company. However, in the last decade, the focus has been on Christian communities because of the personal faith backgrounds of the current leadership (Reuter). Their process of using different forms and genres of dance affirmed that the traditional notion of sacred dance in the Church was being dismantled and evolving.

Founder of Omega Dance Company and Catholic Carla De Sola created Omega Dance Company in 1974 to "express the spiritual-social-healing dimensions of dance." She believed "...dance, and all the arts, are bridges between the visible and invisible world of the spirit." (qtd. in "Company History"), signifying the importance of movement in spiritual practices. Reuter

shared how Omega Dance Company has defined sacred dance: “We talk a lot about the dance becoming sacred dance by adding an intention to the movement. One can do the same movement with one intention, and you can do the same movement with a totally different intention. And that is what makes it prayer or sacred dance.” The notion of intention and bridging this world to the spiritual one deeply resonated in *John*'s creation as it investigated both worship and evangelism.

Omega Dance Company uses dance as worship, evangelistically, and as intersession to create what they describe as a “channel of energy” to enhance or connect worship for congregation members. Chapman believes, “Creativity and the human spirit are always striving towards the divine or to connect with the divine.” Chapman validated that viewing sacred dance, particularly Christian sacred dance, is for everyone, Christian and non-Christians alike, as we all seek connection. As Chapman expressed, dance can act as a “channel” to all, serving as a deeper understanding or revelation about the divine. This validated my decision to show *John* in a secular space filled with Christians and non-Christians in addition to connecting with Christian communities.

Reuter also expressed why sacred dance work is crucial to her: “Dance feels like my native language. Right off the bat, I feel closer to God.” This immediately resonated with the part of me that has always desired to worship God through movement but has not always been given the space to do so on a typical Sunday morning. Reuter echoes the importance of making dance accessible to those who best feel connected and worship God through movement.

Just as *John* encourages community participation, so does Omega Dance Company. They encourage the congregation to get moving and have a practical motto for the practice: “We try to get the congregations moving, and if congregations have not done that before, it can be

uncomfortable, so we do it, tenderly and carefully, showing kindness and giving them full permission just not to do it at all" (Chapman).

Judson Dance Theater: Origins and Accessibility

Just as sacred dance has a rich social and historical context, so does the Judson Dance Theater. Judson Dance Theater started in 1960 when the socio-political climate in America was shifting. The '60s boomed with new world views, values, and ideas around individual rights, community, and opposition. The Civil Rights movement was dominating the American public's attention, and the March on Washington could not be ignored (Onion, "March in Washington"); at the time, President Kennedy enacted the Equal Pay Act (Onion, "Equal Pay Act"), and Betty Friedan released her book *The Feminine Mystique* (Munoz). There was a definite shift in American society, and Judson Dance Theater created art in the context of America's shifting values. In *Milestones in Dance in the USA,* Emmanuele Phuon says, "There was an emphasis on the power of communities rising together to bring 'power to the people.' This spirit of resistance, desire for justice and equality, and interest in communal endeavors was seen across the arts disciplines" (191).

Meanwhile, in New York, John Cage was an experimental musician who collaborated with other notable artists, such as dancer Merce Cunningham and visual artist Robert Rauschenberg (Fitzpatrick). Cage approached Robert Dunn and asked him to conduct a class for dancers that applied Cage's newfound compositional ideas to dancemaking. Dunn was a dancer and musician accompanying Merce Cunningham's performance in 1958 in Boston, then moved to New York City to accompany modern dance choreographers and work with John Cage (Dunning). Phuon relays that as a Cage student, Dunn knew he was more than qualified to teach Cage's ideas, so it began. Five dancers started taking Dunn's class, including Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, and

Yvonne Rainer. Over the next year, more students, including notable artists Trisha Brown and Deborah Hay, would join the class (192). Phuon explains, “The first assignment was to make a dance that used the structure of a selected piece of music instead of being inspired by its melody…Dunn focused on concept, experimentation, and structure. In his class, only questions were allowed: How did you make it? What do we get from watching what you did?” (192). Steve Paxton would later reflect on the class, “The premise of the Bob Dunn class was to provoke untried forms or forms that were new to us” (qtd. in Perron). The experience of the process deeply mattered, and artists were liberated from the norm of codified forms. Access to dancing and what being a “dancer” meant changed overnight. Phuon notes, “Since the group consisted of both traditionally trained dancers and artists who were ‘non-dancers,’ dance makers focused on pedestrian movement, which by extension had the potential to appeal to anyone” (195).

Phuon conveys that eventually, the class got so big that it could no longer stay in the Merce Cunningham Studio (193). In 1962, Rainer suggested that the group considered performing at the Judson Memorial Church (193). Phuon also notes that the church had long been known for its “remarkably progressive outreach initiatives: an interracial dormitory, a recovery program for drug addicts…and later an organizing center for anti-Vietnam War draftees”" (193). Carolee Schneeman described Judson Memorial Church as “exquisite.” She shared, “.. it’s beautiful… it has such enriched memories…When you inhabit and physicalize a space and bring something to life in it, it stays with you…No matter how long I’ve been away, it’s a home base” (qdt. in “Carolee Schneemann Talks About Judson Dance Theater”). Thus, on July 6th, 1962, *A Concert of Dance #1* premiered at Judson Memorial Church. This premiere marked a new era for this investigative, experimental, postmodern group. Jill Johnston would

review the first concert, calling it “an important program in bringing together a number of young talents who stand apart from the past” (Johnston).

Steve Paxton’s Satisfyin Lover

According to Wendy Perron’s *Steve Paxton (1939–2024): A Lifetime of Burning Questions*, after a childhood in which he was a gifted gymnast, Steve Paxton first encountered José Limón and Merce Cunningham’s work as a young man at the American Dance Festival, and he continued training with them in New York City. Paxton recalled, “I regarded myself as a barbarian entering the hallowed halls of culture when I came to New York” (qtd. in Perron). Perron summarizes that in Dunn’s class, Paxton would find himself interested in pedestrian movement and improvisation as a solo artist and in groups. Within the Judson Dance Theater group and like-minded artists, he felt permission to play and felt “at home” (qtd. in Perron) with Judson Dance Theater collaborators and visual artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns (Perron). According to Yvonne Rainer’s memoir, *Feelings are Facts,* “he embraced extended duration and so-called pedestrian movement while maintaining a seemingly obdurate disregard for audience expectation” (241). Out of this interest came *Satisfyin Lover* (Paxton), an improvisational piece where performers chose to stand, sit, or walk. Critic Jill Johnston described its brilliance:

> And here they all were […] thirty-two old wonderful people in *Satisfyin Lover* walking one after the other across the gymnasium in their any old clothes. The fat, the skinny, the medium, the slouched and slumped, the straight and tall, the bow-legged and knock-kneed, the awkward, the elegant, the coarse, the delicate, the pregnant, the virginal, the you name it, by implication every postural possibility in the postural spectrum, that’s you and me in all our ordinary everyday who cares postural splendor. […] Let us now praise famous ordinary people. (qtd. in Perron)

Paxton's compositional values further validated the permission and the importance of the ordinary among a range of movers and that walking is a rich movement pattern. As seen in *Satisfyin Lover,* Paxton was particularly interested in the pattern of walking. "How we walk is one of our primary movement patterns, and a lot of dance relates to this pattern" (qtd. in Perron). The ordinary is sacred according to this methodology. *Satisfyin Lover* validated *John's* biblical "stations," aspects of the solo work, playing with water, and the piece's transitions. Many of our transitions involve walking, placing items or chairs, and cutting yarn and rope. My piece includes a range of ages and physiques; just as Johnston experienced, the ordinary is relatable and allows the individual to be highlighted as is. This emphasis on the individual is apropos, reminding me of a passage from Psalms.: "You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.… For You created my innermost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (*New International Version*, Psalm 139: 3-14). He watches us walk and sit, and participating in the ordinary allows others to recognize those engaging differences.

Contact Improvisation

Influenced by his time with Judson Dance Theater and the Grand Union Dance Theater collective ("Contact Quarterly"), Paxton developed Contact Improvisation, which he defines as "the communication between two moving bodies in physical contact and their combined relationship to the physical laws that govern their motion—gravity, momentum, inertia. The body, in order to open to these sensations, learns to release excess muscular tension and abandon a certain quality of willfulness to experience the natural flow of movement" (qtd. in "Contact

Quarterly"). Another significant aspect of Paxton's improvisational work is the "small dance." According to San Francisco based artist Keith Hennessy, the "small dance" was first experimented with in 1972 in the piece *Magnesium*, in which male dancers jumped, collided, and recovered into the physical practice. Hennessy defines "small dance" as "the micro-movement of the body's balancing, adjusting, sensing and responding to gravity."

Yvonne Rainer's Trio A & "No Manifesto"

Rainer was one of the founding members of Judson Dance Theater and, in fact, the artist who suggested the group use Judson Memorial Church to premiere their work (Phuon 193). Rainer's interest, as seen in *Trio A*, revolves around prioritizing the mechanics of the body over narrative or emotion (**"**Yvonne Rainer"). While it is impossible to avoid emotion or some form of narrative in our work with sacred dance, *Trio A* is still inspiring. According to the Museum of Modern Art, *Trio A* is a model of intention with non-codified movement and tempo ("Yvonne Rainer"). In *Trio A,* Rainer's most iconic piece, she focuses on bending her arms, knees, legs, and wrists. She rolls her head, balances, investigates the moving of her joints, rolls on the ground, swings her arms, and shakes her head, "No." No single movement is repeated in this piece except for walking. Rainer once described the tempo of the dance as "[It] would be about a kind of pacing where a pose is never struck…" (qtd. in"Yvonne Rainer").

Rainer's "No Manifesto" is a written work based on her movement and dance-making experience. While it is important to note that Rainer reconsidered and revised her "No Manifesto" in 2008, the original, written in 1965, reflects a moment's compositional interest. The "No Manifesto" has been inspirational to postmodern artists for decades. However, "[t]he manifesto was, in Rainer's words, a momentary whim, a kind of provocation and a way of

thinking about the themes of the work even further" (Laakso). Below is the "No Manifesto" (Figure 4).

1965	**2008**
No to spectacle	Avoid if at all possible.
No to virtuosity.	Acceptable in limited quantity.
No to transformations and magic and make-believe.	Magic is out; the other two are sometimes tolerable.
No to the glamour and transcendency of the star image.	Acceptable only as quotations.
No to the heroic.	Dancers are, in fact heroic.
No to the anti-heroic.	Don't agree with that one.
No to trash imagery.	Don't understand that one.
No to involvement of performer or spectator.	Stay in your seats.
No to style.	Style is unavoidable.
No to camp.	A little goes a long way.
No to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer.	Unavoidable.

No to eccentricity.	If you mean "unpredictable," that's the name of the game
No to moving or being moved.	Unavoidable

Figure 4: *No Manifesto* by Yvonne Rainer

With an understanding that these sentences were, in fact, impossible to execute and hold in the mind wholly and without fault, I found that when my company of dancers attempted to follow the "rules" of Rainer's "No Manifesto," they discovered movement that was minimalistic, gesture-like, pedestrian-like, stripped of theatrics, and often void of codified forms.

Deborah Hay's The Man Who Grew Common in Wisdom

Deborah Hay's influence differs from that of the rest. Hay's influence and ideologies live in my body, as I consider her work part of my dance lineage. During my time at San Diego State University, my two mentors, with whom I was close, Jess Humphrey and Leslie Seiters, were in the choreographic process with Hay working on *pause,* which also featured dancer Eric Geiger. I remember seeing *pause* and not grasping the significance of Hay and being utterly unaware of how her work, combined with other elements of postmodern dance, had already influenced me as an artist.

Humphrey and Seiters taught most of my technique and dance-making courses, and I often danced in their pieces in the department's dance company and performance class. As a more mature dancer and scholar looking back in retrospect, I can't help but see Hay's influence in their teaching. This influence resulted in shaping my movement interests and aesthetics. While they always credited Hay for the ideas they shared, the importance and integration of the work didn't "click" until I graduated from the program. It was through rehearsals and classroom

experiences with Humphrey and Seiters that I became aware and investigated phrases such as Hay's "what if?" mentality, the cellular body, "turn your fucking head," and most impactful in the process of *John*, the invitation to be seen.

In an interview with Josh Ronsen in September of 2015, Hay comments, "...part of the performance practice is inviting to be seen by the audience. That's all I can do. I invite you to see me in the practice...They're going to see me or not going to see me…But that's active; it isn't an idea; it is an activity I'm engaging in." I see this invitation to be seen present in one of her most well-known and earlier works, *The Man Who Grew Common in Wisdom.* Undoubtedly influenced by the inquiries of Judson Dance Theater, *The Man Who Grew Common in Wisdom* is a 20-minute piece in which the dancer (Hay) creates shapes, starting on the floor and eventually making her way to standing, where she continues exploring different orientations of her body. Hay is willing to be seen in shapes that linger in duration, taking pauses, moving so slowly it would take a moment to realize a new shape was being born, quick little toe taps on the floor, and resembling a child mimicking a frog; all examples of unapologetically dancing, asking the audience to fully witness her.

Blondell Cummings's Chicken Soup

Judson Dance Theater was mainly made up of Euro-American artists. Analyzing Blondell Cummings's perspective expanded my understanding of postmodern elements, pedestrian movement, and gesture. Entering into rehearsal, I was first inspired by Blondell Cummings's *Chicken Soup* of 1981. Cummings was a contemporary of Judson Dance Theater and a revolutionary Black artist. Her contributions to postmodern dance inspired what I call "the stations" in *John*. Cumming's work involves gesture and pedestrian movement, all essential to postmodern dance. However, it is important to note that Cummings saw her work through a more

functional lens. In a 1984 performance at Jacob's Pillow, Cummings commented on her work as an artist: "I forgot to mention that sometimes I'm considered postmodern. Whatever that means. But what postmodern really means to me — I don't think any artist really puts a label on themselves. I think you use whatever you need to use in order to say what you want to say. And that's what that's all about" (qtd. in Brito). This statement is permission to move outside a particular aesthetic, relating to Cummings's use of gesture and pedestrian movement.

According to the article "Blondell Cummings" by Karen Brame, Cummings moved to Queens from Harlem as a teenager and later earned a degree in Dance from New York University and a Masters in Fine Arts from City University of New York's Lehman College. She also trained at the Ailey, Graham, and Limón schools. Her interdisciplinary interests in film and dance created innovative ways to consider the choreographic process.

In Cummings's *Chicken Soup*, amidst tight and short gestural movements that initiate her body to rock back and forth, the audience observes pedestrian movement and images of rocking a baby, serving scoops of food, and perhaps sipping tea. Standing then moving to the ground, Cummings begins to scrub the floor with a sponge. In Joan Acocella's "A History Lesson," she describes Cummings's movement, stating, "[W]hile scrubbing a floor on her hands and knees—*an act of exemplary realism*—she would repeatedly break off, rear up, and shake, in jagged, convulsive movements, as if she were in a strobe light. Then, with no acknowledgment of this interruption, she would go back, serenely, to scrubbing the floor." Acocella is commenting on the ordinary, non-theatrical action of cleaning. Cummings's use of realistic, daily actions in the unorthodox but straightforward act of scrubbing a floor challenged the traditional notions of dance. It showed that everyday, accessible movement could be used in powerful, dynamic performances. This concept was necessary for the beginning of *John* and the world I created. In

Cummings's *Chicken Soup*, the authentic action of scrubbing the floor is interrupted by vigorous shaking, and "[t]his strange back and forth made the piece very interesting psychologically" (Acocella). In *John*, the stations also have a psychological purpose; they serve as a calming space before witnessing the chaos of my personal worship solo.

At the height of her career, Cummings commented, "It's the beauty in things that we sometimes lose track of…. When I'm at my worst, I don't see it. When I'm at my best, I see it all around me" (qtd. in Campbell). This expansive view of beauty led me to think about the everyday, seemingly ordinary beauty in the Gospel of John, among other Biblical stories.

Methodology

As I planned for *John*, I started speaking to Krisann Deauville, another Christian dancer and invited her into the process. As I moved forward, I was connected with a work-study group for San Diego Dance Theater, which consisted of students and freelance artists in San Diego. They sent a notice to their dancers expressing the research and values of *John*. I had quite a few dancers reach out to me. After conducting a series of interviews, I invited three other women to participate in the process. Along with Krisann Deauville, Erin Kracht and Marianna Lara were primary dancers, and Yaro Severn was the understudy dancer who was later incorporated since no understudy was needed for the performance. Deauville's daughters were incorporated near the end of the rehearsal process as supportive performers. Nearly every Saturday from December 2023 to the end of March 2024, we rehearsed in small groups or with the full company, collaboratively working to create *John*.

Pre-Show and Section 1

As patrons entered the lobby, they were confronted with the typical notion of dance, with a worship phrase I had choreographed last Fall in response to the concept of Salvation that is present in the Gospel of John. Marianna Lara and I repeated the phrase over a span of ten minutes as individuals entered and waited in the lobby, weaving in and out around us, viewing our dance closely and from afar as they bought tickets and mingled. After the first iteration, we were allowed to step in and out of the phrase and repeat sections. In the lobby, where one would expect pedestrian movement, they found a more classic notion of dance instead. Then, as the audience entered the dance space, where one would expect to see the traditional idea of dance, they witnessed pedestrian actions in the women's "stations." The pre-show served the desire I had to contrast and dismantle expectations.

Figure 5: Photo of pre-show movement phrase for *John*

Figure 6: Photo of pre-show movement phrase for *John*

Figure 7: Photo of pre-show "stations."

During the pre-show, audience members were invited to enter the performance space and walk around the "stations" before taking their seats. In section one of *John*, the audience continued to witness four women sitting in these "stations" engaged in seemingly ordinary tasks, concentrating on the activity in front of them. As mentioned in my research, the expansive view

of beauty Cummings saw in art led me to think about the everyday, seemingly ordinary beauty in the Gospel of John and Biblical stories. While the stories of Jesus's miraculous healings and raising the dead are magnificent, there are many examples of everyday people doing everyday things in Scripture. I began to look closely at the text and found examples of the ordinary. These examples of the ordinary are things people did in obedience to Christ (an act of worship) or how Christ found them in their daily life, and actions that they did while Jesus ministered to them (his action being one of witnessing or evangelism). For the sake of logistics, some of the dancers rotated from one station to another as the pre-show ended, and we prepared for the first section of the dance. One dancer sits in a chair, taking food and putting it into brown paper bags. This "station" is inspired by *New International Version*, John 6:12. After the miracle of feeding the 5,000, Jesus says to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." In our day, "leftovers" often reappear in the next day's lunch. The next station is a woman gathering water. The story of the woman at the well from *New International Version*, John 4:1-26 inspired this. Jesus alone comes to a well, kept by a Samaritan woman. History and Scripture tell us that Jews and Samaritans did not associate with one another, so a Jew receiving water from the Samaritan woman was radical. Jesus asks for a drink of water and shares that he is the Messiah. In this station, the dancer plays with the water, scooping it out of a deep pot, occasionally drinking it, and pouring it back in.

The third station is a woman sitting in a chair, reading and writing. Jesus repeats ten times throughout the Gospels, "Have you not read?" (*New International Version*, Matthew 12: 3-5), insisting on the importance of Scripture and commanding us to commit it to memory. One last "station" occurs in the upstage left corner, where a teenage girl rests. Psalms, with which the disciples would have certainly been familiar with, reads, "In peace, I will lie down and sleep, for

you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety" (*New International Version*, Psalm 4:8). The dancer participates in this comfortable rest. Later in *John*, another woman takes a similar rest. As Christians, we are commanded to do the ordinary as an act of obedience and thus worship. In addition, the stations create images that hark back to well-known Biblical stories, sharing the stories of Jesus, which is evangelism.

As noted in the research about *Chicken Soup*, Cummings's work is described as "This strange back and forth made the piece very interesting psychologically" (Acocella). This concept inspired me. In *John*, the stations also have a psychological purpose; they serve as a calming space before witnessing the chaos of my personal worship solo. Tapping into the spiritual can be overwhelming, joyful, grief-filled, and a boiling point for many emotions. Not only are the stations an example of accessible movement for the average congregation member, acts of worship, and evangelism, but the "resting" station serves as a visual rest and anchor for the audience as the piece proceeds. It is then interrupted by movement more associated with gesture and quickly paced movement that includes more of the body.

The stations: a woman drawing water, reading, making lunches, and resting — make a circle, and in the center of the circle lives a spider web of sorts. In front of the spider web, dancing in dim lighting, two women are connected through physical touch, giving, pouring, and receiving weight from one another. Both Severn and I have been part of the contact improvisation community in San Diego in different capacities. While contact improvisation, as noted in my research, is a practiced skill and a specific technique, just as modern or ballet, resting and adjusting one's weight is a natural and human pedestrian movement in which the non-dancer often engages. The movement in front and within the spider web is simply that.

In my experience and practice with contact improvisation, I have always been fascinated with the notion of another person "pouring" their weight into me. Relieving a person of a heaviness—whether physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual—is rest. In the physical practice of contact improv, we do this for one another, pouring weight into one another, our experience of heaviness constantly shifting. Even before this thesis piece, I have always been fascinated with the parallels between this particular physical practice and the promises Christ preaches in Scripture.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (*New International Version*, Matthew 11:28). Jesus tells us we can rest when we "pour" the world's weight and trouble onto him. The experience of pouring weight into one another, and then, at times, the spider web, is the physical manifestation of the spiritual practice of giving the heaviness we feel to Christ. I shared this fascination with Yaro Severn, discussed it, and found a tenderness between us when that particular thought came to me within the score.

Figure 8: Photo of dancers "pouring" weight into one another.

The score moves from in front of the spider web to inside of the spider web. The more I engaged in the practice of the "spider web," the more I realized that not only did I find myself in the score of letting certain body parts be supported by the spider web (both alone and when my partner, Yaro Severn held it taut), I too was interested in pulling the rope taut. I noticed that I would also slip into pushing against the web, occasionally getting caught, the rope wrapped around my hand, my foot or arm being bound, held back, and restricted. In this practice, I realized the spiritual connotations of being bound, pulling, pushing, and resting body parts on/in the web. The Christian walk is full of resisting temptation from the behavior that previously enslaved, pushing, pulling, and resting in Christ.

The apostle Paul writes in the New Testament, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (*New International Version*, Romans 7:15). Just because I believe in Christ as my Lord and Savior does not mean I don't sin and have flawless behavior. As everyone does, I mess up. I do things I know go against my faith, rejecting the spirit and giving into the flesh. Paul refers to this notion as being "slaves to sin" (*New International Version*, Romans 6:20). While Christ spiritually breaks this grasp, there are moments when I'm tempted to be controlled by sinful behavior. The literal bondage and grasp on the rope physically demonstrated this. Resting in the spider web and allowing body parts to be supported by the rope was a reminder that even when I fail in my behavior, I can rest in the gentleness of Jesus, knowing I'm forgiven. Creating tautness for Severn also had a deep spiritual connection to me regarding evangelism. The pushing and pulling to create a tight rope was a physical manifestation that when we evangelize to someone, and they want to know more about having a personal relationship with Christ, we are called to create space and provide a structure of support for them to explore that relationship. The spider web score and the movement present within was

a very sincere realization of these spiritual concepts and the physical manifestation of the Christian walk.

Figure 9: Photo of "pulling" the spider web.

Figure 10: Photo of resting on some of the lines of the spider web and dancer Yaro Severn.

Within the spider web and the preceding worship solo, I became very aware of a sensation I know as Steve Paxton's "small dance," as discussed in my research. My awareness of it started in the spider web score, and by the end of my solo, in which I moved quickly, dipped my feet in the water, and then stood in the two buckets, I felt my awareness of it increase intensely. In my experience, Paxton's "small dance" is a deep listening, vibrating, and

occasionally a release. It is a constant state of being, a dance that happens within the body at every movement, when moving slowly, erratically, or when we feel still in our environment.

During the rehearsal process, I shared this concept with the dancers, and we had moments of verbal notation when we perceived Paxton's "small dance." This internal feeling and experience is a design of God that he set during the creation of humanity. During the spider web investigation and my worship solo, I returned to this small dance to anchor myself, collect my balance, and, most importantly, be. Christ sees me "being" as is, with no social or performative mask, opposing the notion of performing for others. I am genuinely dancing for the God I worship.

Also present in this section was the influence of Deborah Hay's idea of inviting the audience to see the performer for an extended duration of time. As a performer, I find it nerve-racking to have the perception that you're "in something for too long." Our comfortable duration was pushed past our personal thresholds in the spider web and "stations." Can we be seen in this lingering duration, as I would describe it, creating new shapes, pulling, supporting, and pausing? Through assurance in the rigor of my work, investment in my personal inquiries, and a willingness to be vulnerable, we were offering an invitation to be seen by the audience.

Downstage from the stations, Erin Kratch performs her solo work. She finds herself downstage left, working through two specific phrases in which the influence of Yvonne Rainer is particularly relevant. Kratch is present in the embodiment of raising her arm, moving her leg with her hands, and occasionally moving quickly as though on fire.

Kracht, who was particularly interested in this work due to a recent interest in her mother's Jewish lineage, excitedly engaged in *New International Version*, Genesis 1, the story of Creation. Together, we read and spent that afternoon moving and journaling in response to the

reading. We picked the movement vocabulary that felt most significant in our responses and wove them together. In the preceding rehearsals, we applied and committed to the "no pose" work inspired by Rainer's *Trio A,* as discussed in my research. We interpreted Rainer's "no pose" work as always being ready to move (even in a slow duration) and investigated Rainer's notion of "no repetition" in the *how* of the movement. "No repeating" was implemented by executing the reappearing movement differently in each iteration.

Other movement vocabulary for the solo came from Kracht and I, filtering the previously seen (during the pre-show) worship phrase through Rainer's "No Manifesto," mainly emphasizing "No to spectacle," "No to moving or being moved," and "No to style." We would take turns moving through the "big" worship phrase while the other person read the manifesto. Layering these three "rules," Kracht found an objection to traditional performance within herself, a new sense of being on stage. Kracht reflects, "I get to go out there and just be human, which I started craving after getting injured in college." Congregation members need to feel they can come to a dance worship movement practice as is, without a specific type of training or skill. Applying Rainer's "No Manifesto" affected Kracht's solo. She felt permission to show up as is and not necessarily worry about shape or form.

Figure 11: Photo of Erin Kracht in “Genesis” solo.

Figure 12: Photo of Erin Kracht in downstage solo.

Section 2

John continues as most dancers move downstage, entering the audience’s space to watch Krisann Deauville set two buckets in the middle of the stage. I walk to the side of the stage, and Miah Deauville starts deconstructing the spider web by undoing knots and cutting its connections to the chair. As analyzed in my research, this transition is validated by Steve Paxton’s *Satisfyin*

Lover, in which ordinary movement makes up the composition. I diagonally walk to the middle of the stage to perform my worship solo. I move quickly through several gestures, occasionally slow down, dip my toes in the water, and attempt to stand in the buckets. Around me, the other dancers gather, performing the same gestures but at a much slower pace.

Greatly influenced by Hay's "inviting to be seen," as defined in my research, I reflected and journaled on the real-life application of the invitation to my life as a Christian. The invitation to be seen and to actually be seen is a highly vulnerable concept. While creating my worship solo, I drew inspiration from my baptism, a public religious rite of immersion into water, symbolizing purification and a proclamation that I believe and trust Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. When I worship God in thanksgiving, I often thank him for my salvation and the opportunity to proclaim it to the world through baptism. At the time of my baptism, I attended a church with a congregation of about three hundred people. Being seen proclaiming a profoundly personal and spiritual decision and then proceeding to be dunked and come out dripping wet was no doubt a vulnerable experience. I felt grateful, shy, emotional, messy, and, if I'm honest with myself, I did not honestly want to "be seen" in such a vulnerable space.

With that being said, I loosely set choreography for this particular solo. I chose gestures and actions that reminded me of my baptism, the emotions involved, and the decisions leading up to it. I felt grateful in my worship but recognized a messy, emotional vulnerability to consider and remember in the solo. Within this solo of remembering and thanking Jesus, I used Hay's wisdom in inviting to be seen, recognizing the irony that I did not invite "being seen" within my actual baptism. Again, I was inviting to be fully seen using assurance in the rigor of my work, investment in my memories, love for Jesus, and a willingness to be vulnerable.

Figure 13: Photo of worship solo

Figure 14: Photo of worship solo

Section 3

After my worship solo, Miah and I set chairs and buckets of water for what we affectionately called the "Chair Quartet." Starting on the chairs and making their way to the ground, the other women moved through several gestures in unison and cannons.

I guided my dancers through the emotionally charged stories of Mary anointing Jesus with perfumed oil and cleaning his feet with her hair (*New International Version*, John 12: 1-8) and Jesus washing his disciples' feet (*New International Version*, John 13: 2-17). Then, I witnessed a profound response. The dancers, Christians, and non-Christians resonated with the stories, expressed their thoughts and emotions through writings, drawings, and conversations, and then translated these concepts into movement. As a viewer and participant, I selected the movement that evoked the most substantial connection to the themes of receiving cleansing, anointing, and giving.

Figure 15: Photo of "Chair Quartet."

As a company, we constructed it into a phrase and rehearsed it as it was. Next, we played with tempo, analyzing when it was visually interesting to move urgently or take a pause. Rainer's

inspiration can also be found in the “Chair Quartet,” as the “No Manifesto” was layered on top of it. Again, as the dancers moved, I read the manifesto to them. Through this, tension left the movement, and pedestrian movement filled the quartet. Krisann Deauville reflected on this process, “In the chair quartet, the “No Manifesto” applied over the work gave a sort of ‘directive spine.’ The pedestrian movement and gesture was the anchor and the framing.”

Figure 16: Photo of “Chair Quartet.”

Figure 17: Photo of “Chair Quartet.”

As the four dancers make it to the floor, Deauville pops up and performs her own gestures based on the stories and her personal relationship with Christ before dipping her fingertips into the bucket of water beside her. The other dancers take this as a cue to start playing with the water themselves. Again, greatly influenced by the pedestrian actions in *Chicken Soup*, as referenced in my research, a seven-minute score begins, allowing the dancers to play and discover water. Water is a significant theme in Scripture, reminiscent of not only the story of the Samaritan woman but also the story in which "...Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John" (*New International Version*, Matthew 3:13). In this water score, the dancers pour, drink, dip, splash, cover themselves, and flick the water.

Figure 18: Photo of dancers in the "Water Score."

Figure 19: Photo of dancer in the "Water Score."

Then, with help from a lighting cue, the dancers gather in a clump to demonstrate the story in which a woman, having great faith, reaches out to touch Jesus's cloak to heal her bleeding (*New International Version*, Matthew 9:20-22). Clumped together, dancers maintain one point of contact with the potential of "rolling" (a concept of contact improvisation by Steve Paxton). Inspired by contact improvisation's diversity in touch, each dancer touches the cloak differently. I have always imagined many different versions of how the woman of great faith did this. Each touch and point of contact differs among individuals, just as in contact improvisation. I created the differences in speed and texture by giving each dancer a poetic pace, which included "the speed of a ray of sun," "the speed of a cat hunting," etc. As the dancers engage in the score, the lights and the music dim, completing the piece.

Figure 20: Photo of dancers clumped in ending moments of the *John*.

Financial and Logistic Research

A considerable part of this thesis was logistical - in terms of time, performance space, location, and resources. The inherent coordinating tasks included finding a showing location, interviewing artists to complete my artistic team, casting dancers, finalizing a rehearsal schedule, and allocating financial resources.

My strategy was comprehensive, involving applying for grants, seeking out potential donors for space or resources, exploring trade opportunities, and planning for ticket sales. Despite my efforts to apply for several grants, I did not receive any. For the first iteration of *John*, I selected San Diego Dance Theater's Light Box as the venue. This decision led to valuable connections with their staff, offering to promote *John* through their monthly newsletter. My team and I also actively invited audience members. *John* was also featured on San Diego's KPBS artistic event calendar, a popular resource for the local community. Our goal was to attract 25 paying audience members, with tickets priced at $12 each. This would have amounted to $300, covering the venue cost, the fee for a lighting designer, and the cost of operating the lights. However, our actual ticket sales were $132 (11 paying patrons and 11 complimentary tickets),

which only covered the lighting designer's fee. Additionally, there were individuals who lent their rehearsal space as an in-kind donation or as a trade, such as mentioning their organization in the program.

Note on Multi-Generational Dancing

Something that came up in this process was the diversity of age that occurred in our cast. Our cast consisted of women between the ages of 13 and 40. The larger story of Jesus (Old Testament to the end of the New Testament) is multi-generational, like our cast. When I think about the women who played crucial roles in Scripture, while some small and others quite large, there's undoubtedly diversity in age among these women. Scripture shares that Sarah, the mother of Issac, was 90 years old when she gave birth to him (*New International Version*, Genesis 17:17). Mary who discovered Jesus's empty tomb (*New International Version*, John 20: 1-18), was probably around the age of Jesus, thirties, and the girl Jesus brought back to life was twelve years old (*New International Version*, Mark 5:21-43). Evidence of multi-generational relationships were seen in my personal relationships within the cast. Krisann Deauville has been my mentor in dance education and is a mature Christian woman whom I admire. She provided a very nurturing feeling throughout *John*'s process. Her children, Miah and Ezra, have been my students for years, and I've had the opportunity to mentor and watch them grow as dancers and young Christian women. I felt a certain protectiveness with them in the process. Peer to peer relationships occurred with the other dancers, and we discovered that three (out of four) adult women were mothers, an identity we bonded over.

Costumes, Music, and Sound

As part of my methodology, I include some sound and costuming notes. The shades of green are inspired by the first chapter of Genesis, which is the story of Creation and the shaping of the Garden of Eden: "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (*King James Version,* Genesis 2: 8-9). Costuming shades of green are drawn from these verses, inspiring the image of a complete, green, beautiful garden and the concept of grounding oneself into the earth, God's creation, while we move. To complete the costume, I asked the dancers to utilize their everyday, pedestrian hair and makeup for *John*.

A sound score can be the use of noise that is not constructed or composed. The incidental sound of water, the crinkling of bags, and the sound of chairs moving were considered when making choices regarding accompaniment. The music accompanying the pre-show phrase in the lobby is a musical version of Psalm 104 (in Hebrew) by *Yamma Ensemble*. This music is used again during my worship solo. After the preshow and in the first moments of John, the soloist is accompanied by the song "Why" by Michael Card. The song briefly asks *why* Jesus was crucified and provides context for investigating Christian narrative and symbols, such as water, cleansing, struggle, rest, and anointing within the piece. *John* continues with the sounds of pages turning and mourning doves, inspired by Scripture: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went out of the water. At that moment, heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him" (*New International Version*, Matthew 3:16). Incidental sounds of water also occurred an essential part in the soundscape, evoking images of baptism, "living" water, and cleansing. Finally, the first two verses of "Amazing Grace" finish the piece. I chose

to use such a traditional hymn in the last moments of the piece to further direct attention to the Christian symbols throughout *John*.

Community Offering

During this process, I quickly realized I couldn't explore sacred dance, accessibility, or evangelism without profoundly thinking about the community and what we were offering them. In the process of *John*, I thought of community in two ways. I thought about the community of Christians, which is the "Church." Secondly, I primarily thought about the larger community in San Diego since we were presenting the first iteration of *John* in a secular space.

One of my main curiosities with this work was how to make dance accessible to the average, non-trained dancer congregation member and meet a spiritual need. It only made sense to put the choreography to the test. At the end of the piece, we invited the audience members to join us on stage. We also had an invitation to witness the class. Individuals were welcomed to participate in their seats or on the floor. Those who wanted to learn the movement on the stage started in small groups of two or three, and then as a group (including anyone sitting in the audience and learning the material), performed the choreography together. I experienced, as others did, an immediate connection among the community members that ranged in age, dance experience, and identity.

Dancer Yaro Severn reflected, "It felt satisfying to do it all together. It really felt like a community bonding moment." Throughout our reflection on the community offering, we noticed the audience's willingness to not only learn the movement but also to mingle with other dancers they didn't know. This result is credited to the dancers' vulnerability. They opposed the traditional notion of performance and did not present any performance "front" or "mask." Audience

members felt they could also be vulnerable in the space because they had just seen a demonstration of it. Combined with creating a space in which it was safe to be vulnerable, audience members knew they would be learning gestures, not pirouettes and big jumps, thus making the class accessible to join and creating a willingness to mingle.

In the process of *John*, I realized that teaching the movement met one specific need, and I was committed to meeting other needs if they were present. This was after being inspired by St. Francis Assisi. St. Francis Assisi was an Italian Saint known for believing in the consecration of charity (Brady). He is popularly attributed for the ideology, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words" (qtd. in Cotter). The motto insinuates that if we are walking the Christian path, our actions are the witness to Christ. Instead of *just* telling people about Christ, our actions and lives reflect the life and love of Jesus. If I wanted to point people to Jesus with my dancing, meeting the need to open a new channel of worship and share the Gospel,[4] then I also wanted to meet the physiological needs of individuals. Tucked within our program, we placed a card that asked if we could help meet a need. (See Appendix B). We offered the option of folks dropping them off in a basket by the door or texting. To date, no one has reached out to ask for help with a need, but I am pleased that if someone does have a need that is yet to be met, they can reach out to me, and I can act as the hands and feet of Jesus.[5] Secondly, the lunches being made were available for audience members to take for themselves or to grab to stick in their cars and give to individuals who might need them, as the lunches were filled with nonperishable, wrapped food. Audience members were open and eager to take the lunches.

[4] The teachings that reveals Christ as the Messiah.
[5] A culturally Christian saying that insinuates that to be like Christ, a Christian should participate in acts of servitude.

Reflections and Moving Forward

The day after the performance, we had a virtual "coffee meetup" to digest, integrate, and reflect upon *John*'s performance and process. As mentioned, I was curious about three distinctive outcomes: dance-making as evangelism, performance as evangelism, and performance as worship. Aspects of all three outcomes came up in our virtual "coffee meetup" and journal reflections. Below are examples and results of each of these interest points.

Dance Making as Evangelism

The process of *John* was an opportunity for evangelism by sharing biblical stories that all point back to Christ and digging into them with our common connection, dance. I was delighted that we were all open to talking about it. Even though we had practiced considering spiritual concepts throughout this process, I find it difficult for most people, including myself, to articulate spiritual shifts and growth. This willingness and, at times, enthusiasm is evidence that a safe space was created to express oneself fully. Marianna Lara shared how the process encouraged her to read Scripture:

> It [the water section] was beautiful; it made me want to reach and learn more. I've even started looking up random bible verses. I don't even know the first way to go about it passage wise, but I've been [diving] deep into that.

Erin Kracht, who had very little exposure to the Christian message, also shared her experience of learning Scripture:

> It was interesting for me to hear some of the passages that you picked out, and I got to experience them in a digestible way. I feel you made it really accessible for anyone coming from any space…. It was interesting to be exposed to that and connect it to a language I know: my body and my movement.

As a Christian, my faith brings me peace and hope. I was encouraged to hear that Marianna felt called to read further and that Erin was willing to embody the stories, leading to a better understanding of Scripture and the Christian faith. Ultimately, I always desire to bring hope and peace to the individuals around me, and I was encouraged by the results of evangelism through dance-making.

Performance as Evangelism

One of the intentions of this work was to use *John* to evangelize to audience members. As you have read, I worked with multiple narratives and Bible verses, so I knew this piece would not reflect one linear narrative. A non-linear narrative is a common aspect found in postmodern dance. With this said, I still desired for the audience to grasp the stories from the Bible, even if we were demonstrating them abstractly and nonlinearly. As you can see in Appendix A, Bible verses were written in the program, and we encouraged audience members to look them up and read them. I chatted with several audience members after the show and in the proceeding days. One audience member shared with me that she went home and read all the verses. When she did, the dance resonated more deeply with her after reading the text, *and* the text came alive as she recalled the dance. To me, this is evangelism. Evangelism is to witness to others the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is through Scripture that a person learns about the stories of Jesus and, inevitably, the Messiah's crucifixion, death, and resurrection. *John*'s result was that people were guided toward Scripture and given visuals to experience the stories with which, in turn, they could uniquely experience the good news of Jesus Christ.

For future showings of this piece in secular spaces, I would more publicly display the Scripture as part of the experience. I have already considered projecting the verses onto the

theater walls and lobby for people to read as part of the pre-show experience. Another thought I had was to print the verses and staple them together in a book format for people to read as they sit in their seats, similar to having a Bible or hymnal in your lap at church.

Evangelism, or witnessing, is also done through interactions with one another. As written in the "Community Offering" section, the acts of servitude was another way that Deauville, her daughters, and I felt we could be ambassadors for Christ.

Performance as Worship

Krisann and I agreed that dancing as an act of worship is always rewarding regardless of the movement's quality or form. However, we found that the simplicity of participating in activities that we do in private, such as reading, resting with another person, or using water, felt particularly sacred and thus vulnerable, perhaps because we are taking the private, public. The obedience (worship) of following simple actions, such as resting, cleansing, and reading Scripture, is physically so simple yet emotionally and spiritually complex. We cannot truly rest if we are anxious, yet Scripture tells us not to be and trust in the Lord. We can not get closer to God if we do not read His Word. We can not be spiritually clean without the Messiah. These small acts of obedience expose the complexity of our relationship with Jesus publicly.

Deauville also reflected upon how the earthly body becomes less prominent in attention as we worship; our spirit becomes primary. She wrote, "When the four of us were lined up during the slow motion version of the glancing at the hands, I felt most connected to worship. I did find myself a few times not with the timing [of the group] because I was so connected to the expression of spirituality and genuine worship" (Deauville). I felt similar in my personal worship

solo of reflection and thanksgiving. The body is no longer primary but secondary as the spirit comes to the forefront.

Audience Reaction to Postmodern Movement

I enjoyed hearing the audience reflect on the pedestrian aspect of the work. In our reflection, Kracht shared that her mother commented, "You looked just like you making those lunches in the preshow; it was exactly how you normally move!" This was rewarding to hear, as Erin and I worked specifically on stripping the "technique" or the need to demonstrate Western technique throughout this process. Erin was enacting precisely how she makes lunch, which made the audience curious. Erin's mother found the piece calming and meditative, and I wonder if it was, in part, that there was permission for her child to be exactly as she is. A second comment came from Deauvill's son, who whispered during the performance, "I do not think Miah is pretending to sleep. I think she really fell asleep!"

After the showing, a woman approached me and shared how she thought the simplicity of the movement was beautiful and effective. She's a Christian and a teacher for the primary modern dance company in San Diego. Her reflection felt welcoming, and I wondered about a future iteration in which a traditional codified form, pedestrian movement, gesture, and contact improvisation could live together by also equipping Christians with contemporary dance classes to participate in.

My Reflection on Cohesiveness

Within this process, I had time to consider if *John* felt cohesive with my other work. I knew that biblical themes and aspects of postmodern work had been my primary interests since

the senior year of my BFA program. I desired for *John* to explore something new, which it did, but I also recognized cohesiveness between *John* and two other pieces presented in San Diego, *19 M's*[6] and *March to May.*[7] There was a cohesive stamp on *John.* The creative process of *John* solidified who and what I do as an artist in a way that I have been yearning for. This yearning is what drove me to apply and attend Graduate school. Having such clarity after presenting *John* and articulating my research and methodology is incredibly satisfying.

Moving the Work Forward

On the day of the performance, I was encouraged to see so many people willing to witness and support the work, to have made money back to cover the expense of a lighting technician, and to chat with audience members and hear what touched them and what confused them. With all that said, I plan to move the work forward into church settings, Christian communities, and secular spaces.

Through this process, my husband and I recently decided that our family should move to another church in our small community. This particular congregation is about 30 people, multi-generational, ranging in socioeconomic status, and with some diversity in terms of race and ethnicity. I often meet with the other women in the church, and in May, a few of us will be getting together to move and dance, bringing this work to a small group of Christian women looking to connect with one another and God. I have also offered to work with the congregation to present something for Christmas using my methodology for *John*.

I will also present a piece in a three-day dance recital presented by Blessed Feet Studio, a ministry of Summit Church, in June. This semester, I'm working with adults, all women over 40.

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[6] Senior Capstone presented at San Diego State University (2017), and solo work presented at the San Diego Art Walk (2019)

[7] Presented at *Make It Concert!* in San Diego, California (2018)

Additionally, one of the women in my class has Down Syndrome. I see an extremely relevant need in this group of women to choreograph accessible sacred dance work. While some of the work will reflect more traditional codified material, as it is something that they have been training, I will be including phrases from *John* that rely on gesture, contact improvisation inspired scores, and sharing the stories of Jesus's baptism, the Samaritan women, and the women who reached to touch Jesus's cloak.

I will continue applying for grants to represent this piece in a secular space as a form of evangelism and a way to serve the community. As I review the footage of *John*'s performance, I'm sure there are things I might adjust or evolve for future showings, but for the most part, I would like to present this piece as is again.

Appendix

A; *John* Dance Script

Pre-Show:

Ezra (Sleeping) Krisann (Reading and Writing)

Miah (Adding to the web)

Erin (Making lunch) Empty with water set

- Sarah and Marianna dance the preshow phrase in the lobby.
- Marianna, Yaro, and Sarah take their places in the station before the "start."

Section 1:

Ezra (Sleeping) Krisann (Reading and Writing)

Sarah and Yaro (Contact & Spider Web)

Miah (Making lunch) Marianna (Water)

Erin (solo)

- Erin's solo – 2–minute section (lighting cue). *Erin continues to dance throughout the sections.*
- Spider web section – Contact score and spider web 4–minute section. *Continue score throughout Erin's solo.* (lighting cue)
- Erin's solo – 1 minute (lighting cue). *Ezra and Yaro switch during this solo.*
- Ezra solo – 40–ish seconds (lighting cue). All stations stop to watch Ezra.

Section 2:

Miah (Spider Web)

Sarah (Solo)

- Krisann places water for Sarah, and other dancers walk off stage, including Sarah.
- Miah deconstructs the spider web during Sarah's solo.
- Miah and Sarah set chairs and water for Section 3.

Section 3:

Ezra (sleeping) Miah (sleeping)

Chair Quartet and Water Score arrangement

- Chair quartet
- Krisann's solo
- Water score, and *Ezra joins*. Krisann solos again. The lighting cue indicates the transition to cloak score, and *Miah joins*.

Section 4:

Community Movement & Servitude offer (learn, witness, how can we serve you today).

Community offering key points:

- Invitation to learn movement
- Invitation to witness
- Invitation to mingle
- Invitation to share need

B: Program and Questionnaire

Erin Kracht

Erin Kracht is a dancer, choreographer, and teaching artist in San Diego. She graduated summa cum laude from San José State University with a BFA in Dance, where she was awarded the Virginia Ann Excellence in Dance Scholarship. While studying in the Bay Area, Erin performed in Mark Foreinger's Nutcracker Sweets and SAFEhouse Arts RAW Residency in San Francisco. She also taught at multiple dance studios during this time. Since returning to San Diego, Erin has performed professionally for San Diego Dance Theater's Trolley Dances and was featured in the San Diego Union-Tribune for her choreography, *Molded*.

Mariana Lara

Mariana Lara is a movement designer who believes that the healing of the mind and body can happen through the connection of dance and psychology. With her bachelor's degree in psychology and her training in hip hop, she intends to create a safe space for others to create freely so that the mind, body, and soul can be nurtured. Mariana Lara's first experience with dance was in the 2nd grade, where she trained and performed Laotian dances named Lam Vong. Growing up, she bounced between hip-hop, modern, and contemporary but decided to dive deep into hip-hop. From dance battles to competitive teams and exhibitions, Mariana is in love with dance no matter what form it comes in.

Krisann Deauville

Krisann Deauville began self-training in dance from a young age by watching classic musicals her grandmother had recorded onto VHS tapes. She pursued further training at her local high school, then community college, to grow in her passion for all manner of physical performative story sharing. She has taught multiple dance disciplines in various educational and non-profit environments over the past nineteen years, 15 of which have been situated all across San Diego's north county region. Mainly, she is endlessly proud to raise her children as "stage babies" in the performing arts environment.

Miah Deauville

Miah Deauville studies dance at her home studio in San Marcos, CA., and has continuously since age four. She trains in multiple styles and volunteers there as an assistant teacher. She also exhibits regularly in visual art forms such as sculpting, painting, and illustration. She has won awards in every fine and performance art category she has tried her hand at. Her kindergarten teacher still remembers her for her famous margin art - a tradition she carries forward to this day.

Ezra Deauville

Ezra Deauville's first dance class at the tender age of just two years set in motion a lifelong passion. Her dance training recently granted her a solo in her school's musical, in which she

effortlessly performed, portraying Linus' well-loved blanket in *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*. She plans to pursue a career in education in the future.

Yaro Severn

Yaro Severn is a work-study San Diego Dance Theater member and teaches with Malashock School's outreach program. She enjoys spending time with her kids, practicing contact improvisation, and being out in nature.

Sarah Allison McCann

Sarah Allison McCann is a dance maker, mother, arts educator, advocate, and scholar whose work is guided by curiosity, sacred dance, individual and collective experiences, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Sarah Allison will be completing her graduate work in May of 2024. She has had the recent opportunity to share her research at the California Dance Education Association State Conference and the National Dance Education Conference. As a freelance artist, she has been involved in several projects, including involvement in the San Diego Fringe Festival, assisting with choreography with the Old Globe Summer Shakespeare Studio program, presenting her work *March to May* in San Diego, working with the San Diego Gulls, and even dancing in the circus. Sarah Allison also teaches at a dance studio in San Marcos, CA, and is an Adjunct Faculty member at Montclair State University.

John investigates faith and dives into stories and themes of the Gospel of John using pedestrian and gestural movement, realism, and pulling inspiration from contact improvisation. *John* also focuses on community and servitude, asking how dance can benefit a community and exploring the breadth and definition of dance.

For a deeper understanding of the performance, we invite you to read the following passages:

Genesis 1
Genesis 2
Psalm 4
Psalm 127
Matthew 3:11 -17
Matthew 19:4
Mark 5:25 -34
John 1:29
John 4
John 6
John 12:1-8

Direction and Choreography: Sarah Allison McCann

Dancers: Erin Kracht, Krisann Deauville, Mariana Lara, Yaro Severn, Miah Deauville, Ezra Deauville and Sarah Allison McCann

Music: *Why* by Michael Card, *Psalm 104* by Yamma Ensemble, *Amazing Grace* by CA House Music

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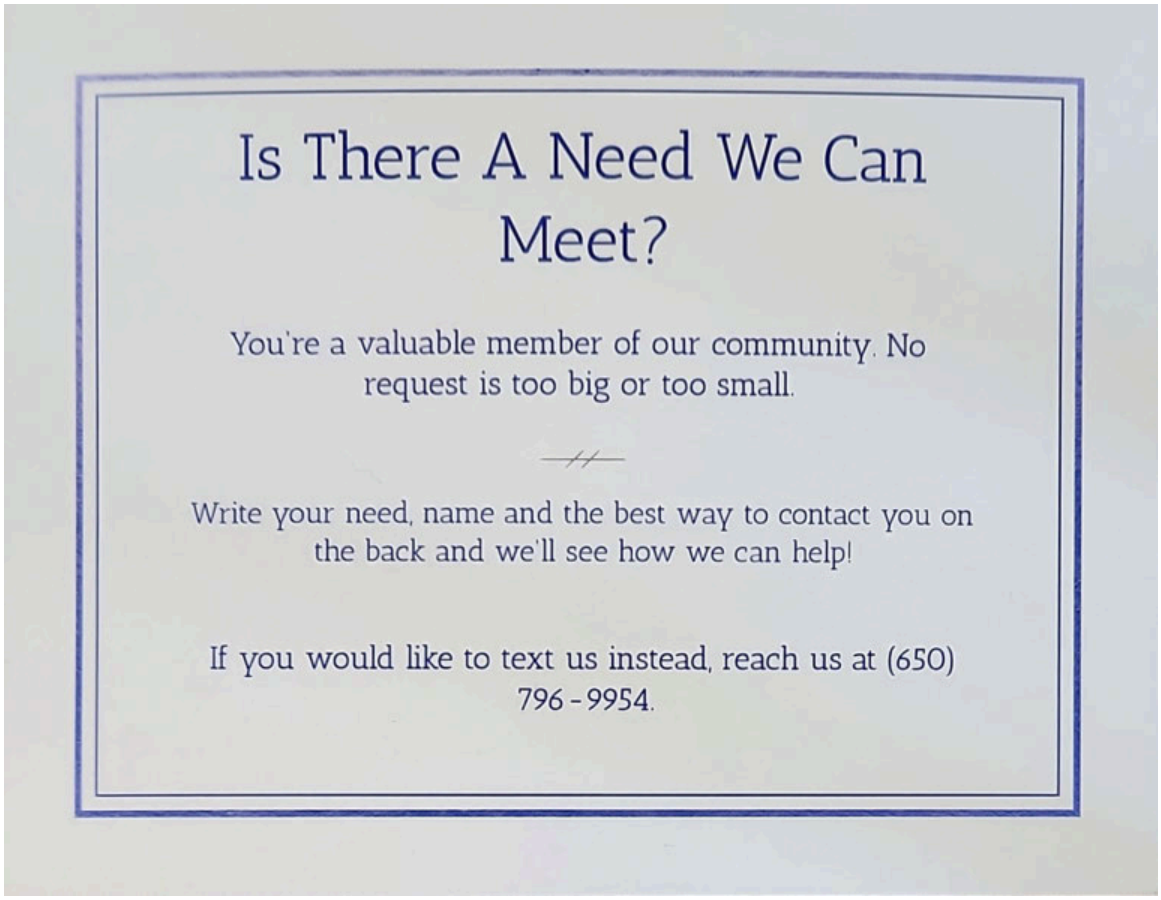
Is There A Need We Can Meet?
You're a valuable member of our community. No request is too big or too small.
Write your need, name and the best way to contact you on the back and we'll see how we can help!
If you would like to text us instead, reach us at (650) 796 - 9954.

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