

Abstract

Members of the LGBTQ+ community go through an internal process by which they come to terms with their sexual identity. Ruth Fassinger presents a model comprised of four stages by which queer individuals experience this revelation. My thesis aims to document this journey through jazz dance and based on my own personal experiences as a queer person. In creating this project, I employed my knowledge of jazz dance, its history and evolution, music and color theories, and I took inspiration from the mythos of H.P. Lovecraft. In this written thesis, I document the steps of the creative process that includes not only the methodology and research behind the project, but my personal perspective and how those ties contributed to the overall outcome of the presentation.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Coming Out:

An Exploration of Fassinger's Model of Sexual Identity Through Jazz Dance

By

Michael McCarthy

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

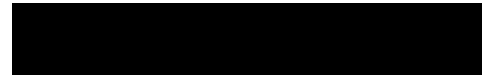
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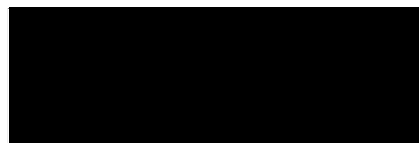
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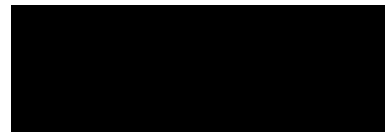
Thesis Committee:



Dr. Elizabeth McPherson
Thesis Advisor



Dr. Allen Maniker
Committee Member



Claire Porter
Committee Member

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Montclair State University

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....1

Acknowledgements5

Introduction.....7

Rationale7

Research.....8

Sexual Identity and Psychology9

Jazz Dance History and Evolution.....12

H.P. Lovecraft Inspiration.....14

Color Theory.....16

Music17

Methodology18

Presentation.....20

Results26

Works Cited.....28

Appendix.....30

Introduction

This thesis is an exploration through jazz dance of Ruth Fassinger's model of sexual identity presented by Fassinger and her colleague Susan McCarnin in a 1996 study. The inspiration for examining Fassinger's model came from my teenage students at one of the dance studios where I am a weekly instructor. A few of these students have openly discussed in class their own sexual identities and the process with which they have either come out to their families and friends or the manner in which they discovered this part of their identity. This created an opportunity for self-reflection on my own experience, and I began to look for studies and articles on the psychology of queer people that scientifically quantify the experience. Fassinger's model is one of many sexual identity models and my decision to focus on this model was my own personal connection to my coming out as a homosexual cis-man.

I decided to use jazz dance as the modality for storytelling and movement exploration because of my growing and constantly renewing interest in the style, technique, and history of the genre. Historically connected to the vernacular dance of 1920s Harlem, jazz dance is intrinsically linked to vaudeville and the general rise of musical theatre dance. During my graduate studies, I simultaneously began my certification with the Nan Giordano Certification Program with three goals in mind: to further examine the technique, solidify my knowledge of the genre as a whole, and follow its evolution in the modern world.

Rationale

My rationale behind the creation of this project is multi-layered. First, the stories and experiences of the LGBTQ+ community must continue to be told. In 2022, multiple states in the United States have put forth legislation that adversely affect this community.

The most prominent of these is HB 1557, perhaps more infamously known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill. HB 1557 has passed the Florida House and Senate and was just signed into law by Governor Ron DeSantis. Critics of the bill effectively decry it as “hateful and dangerous,” but it is not the only bill that is currently circulating (Migdon and Simon). Tennessee, Oklahoma, Indiana, and Kansas are among the other states bringing forth legislation that effectively erases the contributions of queer people to history and culture, as well as isolates students who identify as queer because a key component of these laws prevents educators from even bringing the subject up in the classroom. By telling stories of the LGBTQ+ community and documenting our experiences, we continue to nurture empathy and stop the dehumanization of nonheteronormative individuals.

Second, I wanted to work with jazz dance as a modality for storytelling. Ballet has been one of the greatest storytelling genres across centuries of Romantic, Classical, and contemporary ballets. Modern dance, through the works of Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey, and Paul Taylor among others, has solidified itself as a storytelling medium. Coming from a background in dance studios and currently working with competitively trained dancers in New England, jazz dance is seen as a means of training and showing the athleticism that dancers can produce. It is, however, not often used as a storytelling conduit. I believe jazz dance needs to be further examined as a way to bring narrative dance to audiences while remaining true to the genre’s history and technical foundation.

Research

My research for this project evolved throughout my entire graduate school experience. I have always been focused choreographically on creating story driven experiences that inspire conversations and evoke empathy in both participants and observers. Using jazz dance as a means to communicate became my focus and thus, I

dedicated time to supplement my education and become certified in the Giordano Technique with Nan Giordano, the daughter of famed jazz master Gus Giordano and current artistic director of Giordano Dance Chicago. What the Giordano program emphasizes is back to basics technique and a steady progression of center and floorwork. The need for this type of program has become increasingly more apparent as I notice jazz programs in dance studios no longer applying essential jazz components in training such as isolations, consistent use of plié, and musicality. Jazz has slowly turned into more of a drill team dance with a lack of substance and style. While Giordano's technique doesn't differ greatly from other jazz styles such as Luigi, its accessibility and malleability as a program offers greater benefit to a dancer's training.

Sexual Identity and Psychology

Members of the LGBTQ+ community continue to fight and stand up for their individual rights and equality around the world and in the United States today. Issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality explored in Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, as well as the events of the Stonewall Riots of 1969, remain relevant in the modern struggle for visibility and acceptance (Livingston). And, while these issues are important in discussions today, I wanted my project to focus on personal experience and the internal struggle of understanding oneself.

It is important to note that in 1952, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) listed homosexuality as a mental disorder. After much scrutiny and scientific study, homosexuality was declassified as a mental disorder in 1973. Since 1975, the APA has urged mental healthcare providers to refrain from the label of mental illness that homosexuality once carried ("Answers to Your Questions For a Better Understanding of

Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality”). The World Health Organization removed their classification of homosexuality as a disease in 1990.

One of the first models of sexual identity developed in scientific literature was the Cass Model in 1979. Developed by Vivienne Cass, it describes the process in six stages, some of which may be revisited in different points in an individual’s life. These are aptly named Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Synthesis. These stages chronicle a queer person’s beginnings by asking the question, “Am I queer?” to making their sexual identity merely a portion of their overall self (Cass 147-153). In their 1996 study, Fassinger and McCarn wrote, “Cass’ pioneering attempt to quantify and validate a model of lesbian/gay identity formation is important because few such studies exist even at present” (510).

Based off of Cass’s model, Eli Coleman created a similar model in 1982, outlined by five stages instead of six: Pre-coming out, Coming Out, Exploration, First Relationships, and Integration. The Troiden model, established in 1989, reduces the process even further to four stages: Sensitization, Identity Confusion, Identity Assumption, and Identity Commitment. There are more models in the literature that focus on different aspects of the experience such as the importance of surrounding oneself with a supportive environment in order to better create self-acceptance, examining racial and political disparities among the LGBTQ+ community, whether the linearity of earlier models is valid in documenting an individual’s journey, or whether an individual felt they were queer before their first questioning or first-hand experience.

I settled on using Ruth Fassinger’s model because of its simplification of the Cass model, as well as the more diverse collective of participants Fassinger studied. The study

included individuals who exhibited a wide range in age, race, and education. While Fassinger's original study focused exclusively on women and their sexuality, this study was recreated a year later with gay men, finding the results to be the same. Fassinger's model condenses Cass's model into four stages rather than six. The stages are Awareness, Exploration, Deepening/Commitment, and Internalization/Synthesis.

Awareness is "likely to begin with awareness of a difference, a general feeling of being different or awareness of feelings or desires that are different from the heterosexual norm and therefore from the predicted self" (McCarn/Fassinger 522). The feeling of "outsideness" from heteronormative society was something I began to feel after the age of twelve. While some individuals feel they know their identity their entire lives, I found myself questioning on the precipice of entering high school. I mark this as the time I started to retreat into myself and became less outgoing for fear of being bullied.

McCarn and Fassinger explain that the Exploration stage "involves active examination of questions arising in the first phase" (522). This stage is when an individual acts upon sexual feelings or strong relationships with members of the same sex. Personally, it took me a long time to arrive at this stage and move on from Awareness. Growing up in a Catholic household and attending Catholic high school, where I was constantly told everything I felt was a choice and should not be acted upon, delayed my progression. I never properly began to explore these feelings towards men until college when I was finally removed from the constant indoctrination coming from my religion.

McCarn and Fassinger explain that the Deepening/Commitment stage is as "the crystallization of some choices about sexuality" (522). More succinctly, this stage is

sexual clarity. Interestingly, in this stage there is no one singular path. One person might begin to conclude that they are attracted to the same sex but more closely identify with bisexuality. Alternatively, I came to the conclusion that I could have a fulfilling relationship with a man and that was exactly what I wanted. I equate this development to maturing past sexual desire and onto the idea of having a supportive relationship with a same-sex partner.

Internalization/Synthesis is the final stage. Here, the individual would experience self-acceptance after most likely many years of “emotional and sexual self-exploration and to have resolved difficult decisions about their desires and practices” as McCarn and Fassinger describe (523). This resolution manifests in different ways depending on an individual’s circumstances. McCarn and Fassinger give the example: “A woman may choose to be professionally ‘closeted’ for important contextual reasons; as long as the choice has been addressed, this woman may be as developmentally integrated as the woman who is professionally open” (523). While the literature intrinsically describes this stage as a resolution of sorts, I personally have found this stage to be a project to be constantly rebuilt and validated as I progress through my life.

Jazz Dance History and Evolution

Historically connected to the vernacular movement of Harlem in the 1920s, jazz has a rich history that dates even further back to the lives of enslaved people on plantations. Much of these plantation dances, either directly or indirectly, influenced the movements that evolved into what we would call jazz technique and style. In the spring of 2021, I spent my semester researching the cakewalk, arguably one of the more famous plantation dances that eventually turned into a vaudeville staple of entertainment.

The cakewalk was originally called the “prize walk” as the winner of the dance received a prize, usually a cake. Plantation owners held contests, requiring enslaved people to participate and dance for a prize, usually a cake, presented by the plantation owner themselves. However, the enslaved people forced into performing did so via subterfuge by making their dance a mockery of the white plantation owners.

The cakewalk was among many dances that originated on plantations such as the jig, the juba, and the buzzard lope. The cakewalk blended a Eurocentric sensibility of the upper body presentation in its mockery of white ballroom dances like the waltz with complex rhythms and extravagant feats in the lower body. Based off the Grand March, a European couple dance, the cakewalk was performed in a circle, similar to the ring shout, and involved repeated strutting with high kicks and turns. Brooke Baldwin points out in her article “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality” that much of this information was passed down through oral tradition among formerly enslaved people and their descendants (Baldwin).

In my research into jazz’s history, I utilized three main written sources. The first, Marshall and Jean Stearns’ *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*, provided insight into jazz dance’s West African origins, its parallel rise with tap dance, and how the style was named after jazz music. The book chronicles jazz’s eventual progression into the mainstream of American society via minstrelsy, vaudeville, and Broadway (Stearns).

The second main source was *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches* edited by Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver. This book discusses different facets of jazz dance from style, perspectives on teaching, to the contradictory opinions between

professionals that led to the multiple paths that jazz dance has taken (Guarino and Oliver).

My third main source was Brenda Dixon Gottschild's book *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. Gottschild's work provides context and revalidation of African roots in dance, specifically American dance, information relevant to jazz dance and dance education (Gotschild).

I found wonderful resources in articles by Brooke Baldwin and Constance Valis Hill. Baldwin's article "The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality" inspired the creation of stage three of the project. Constance Valis Hill's article "From Bharata Natyam to Bop: Jack Cole's 'Modern' Jazz" addressed how Jack Cole, who many consider to be the father of jazz dance, took elements from vernacular dance, rhythms associated with Latin America and the Caribbean, and Bharata Natyam to create his style or what Matt Maddox would call "real jazz" (Hill). Hill's article brought up thoughts of fusion and how jazz, and subsequently tap, began as a fusion of different styles from other cultures that were gathered together like a tossed salad. Without the fusion of multiple styles and cultures, our American dance styles would not exist in their past or current forms.

H.P. Lovecraft Inspiration

H.P. Lovecraft is arguably the most influential author in the horror genre, and his writing continues to serve as inspiration for books, television, movies, and video games. Although he did not achieve much recognition in his lifetime, fellow writers and contemporaries sought to preserve his works.

My first direct introduction to Lovecraft was through *Bloodborne*, a 2015 video game developed by the game studio From Software under the direction of Hidetaka Miyazaki. The game used many of Lovecraft's themes in both its storytelling and worldbuilding which include a mythology of Elder Gods, cosmic indifference, and going mad at the possibility of understanding the workings of the universe (*Bloodborne*). Much of Miyazaki's inspiration came specifically from Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, a mythopoeia and connected universe that began with his short story "Dagon" published in 1919. The mythos was further built upon by August Derleth and other writers.

Lovecraft's library of work is vast and for this project, I focused on the monsters of his works as inspiration for each stage of Fassinger's model. For Stage One: Awareness, I was inspired by the monster known as a Shoggoth taken from Lovecraft's novella *At the Mountains of Madness* published in 1931. The Shoggoth's appearance and haunting demeanor served as a metaphor for the heteronormative world and its watchful eye:

It was a terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train—a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and un-forming as pustules of greenish light all over the tunnel-filling front that bore down upon us, crushing the frantic penguins and slithering over the glistening floor that it and its kind had swept so evilly free of all litter. (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 127).

Stage Two: Exploration was inspired by Gloon, a slug-like monster taken from Molly Tanzer's *The Infernal History of the Ivybridge Twins* originally published in *Historical Lovecraft* in 2011. Gloon is known as a corrupter of the flesh and hides its slug-like appearance as a Dionysian statue (Tanzer). While I didn't want to take this slug-like form literally, this monster felt perfect as an embodiment of a homoerotic fascination that the second stage of the model presents.

Stage Three: Deepening/Commitment was inspired by Azathoth, known as the “Blind Idiot God.” Making its first appearance in its self-titled short story in 1938, Azathoth appears in many other stories in Lovecraft’s mythopoeia and is known to hold court “at the center of infinity.” Lore-wise, Azathoth has no identifiable form, he was described as an “amorphous blight of nethermost confusion” (Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*). I interpreted him to be the judge of a grand cosmic game and in the case of the journey to one’s sexual identity, the judge of one’s commitment to a path. For the fourth and final stage, Internalization/Synthesis, I chose to not involve any of the horrors of Lovecraft because symbolically, this stage signifies an internal peace within oneself.

Color Theory

Color Theory was a fascinating exploration that provided additional tools for storytelling and improved methods for creating atmosphere. In my first spring semester, I began to work on a color theory project that enriched my Special Topics, Creative Practices, and Digital Technology courses.

I wanted to look at ways that directors, stage lighting designers, and filmmakers shape the emotions of their intended audience by using color. The horror film genre expertly uses color to enhance its themes. The 1977 supernatural horror film *Suspiria*, directed by famed Italian director Dario Argento, is renowned for its use of vibrant colors in its storytelling (Argento). Argento is well-known for his films in the subgenre of horror known as giallo. Giallo in Italian literally translates to “yellow” and is often designated for mystery and crime thrillers. The term originated from pulp fiction

paperbacks, known for their prominent yellow covers, distributed in Italy in the early twentieth century.

Certain aspects of color theory and psychology are rooted in one's culture and its traditions. It is important to note that my use of information on color theory is firmly based in a Western societal point of view, and the constructs that are quantified here might not ring true for non-Western cultures. For example, while Western cultures such as that in the United States and the United Kingdom traditionally wear black to a funeral to symbolize mourning, Eastern cultures such as China and Japan might wear white ("Color Psychology").

Red is the primary color I used a great deal in this film. Red's positive aspects are often attributed to positive attributes such as power, strength, and passion with negative connotations in pain and anger. An example is the popular sci-fi film series *Star Wars* where the antagonists of the series carry red lightsabers as a symbol of their immorality. A lack of color can also make a statement as well. Black and white both carry negative attributes of coldness, oppression, isolation, and heaviness.

Music

In creating my own music for this thesis project, I enlisted the help of local musician Keri McCarthy. I had previously worked with Keri in my spring semester as a collaborator for my Special Topics class with Professor Maxine Steinman. Knowing that during this spring semester I wanted to create the soundscape for my project, I worked closely with Keri to better understand how music manipulates our perception without the help of other factors.

Keys and time signatures were among the first lessons to be discussed. In general terms, major keys often evoke signs of good while minor keys often evoke signs of melancholy. I was involved in music when I was younger, playing the clarinet for eight years so this concept was not completely new to me. The first bit of new information I discovered was that of diminished chords. Their significance is that their presence brings a sense of foreboding. For time signatures, one time signature that stood out was a 5/4 time signature. A less commonly used time signature, it is featured prominently in John Carpenter's score for the 1978 slasher film *Halloween*. The well-known theme, performed with just a piano, uses 5/4 effectively to create a sense of anxiety (Carpenter).

We discussed tri-tones, which put subsequent notes together to create a brash and uncoordinated sound. The greatest example of this can be found at the beginning of "One-Winged Angel" composed by Nobuo Uematsu. These tri-tones immediately give the listener a sense of doom approaching (Uematsu). We also discussed how certain instruments are often tied to certain colors and can create positive, negative, or neutral sounds with their inclusion. I used all of these ideas in creating the sound for this project.

Methodology

From this base of research, I began work on my creative project. The structure of *Coming Out* is heavily inspired by Bob Fosse's 1979 film *All That Jazz*. While the character Joe Gideon, who draws heavy comparisons to Fosse himself, lies in a hospital bed after a massive coronary event, he dreams of elaborate dance numbers that involve the women in his life. These numbers reflect the stages of grief as he is slowly moving closer to death (Fosse). In *Coming Out*, I wanted to create a similar sequence. In this

case, the protagonist walks into the “theater of the mind” and relives each stage of Fassinger’s model as an audience member observing himself onstage.

Pondering the creation of Fassinger’s model, I wanted each stage to present jazz dance in a different way from the others. A point of entry for me with any new piece or work I am creating has always been the music. However, in the case with *Coming Out*, I wanted to create choreography that would not be bound by the music I had chosen. Instead, what I chose to do was focus on movement first and worry about music composition later. Allowing this blank slate of sorts allowed me to choreograph the movement I desired. This process was something completely different for me and really helped me flex my creative muscles in how I wanted to approach each stage.

I made the decision from the beginning not to dance in the film itself. Given that the film is semiautobiographical in nature, I wanted to be able to take a step back and examine and experience the work as a choreographer and creator and not from the point of view of a dancer. If I performed in the film, the movement would have been choreographed very selfishly and I did not want to do a disservice to the process and the final project.

The genesis of movement in my process was visual and collaborative. Once I began playing with movement, I pulled my husband, Jacob Sewell, in to see the choreography on another body. He offered feedback and adjustments for when movement did not flow organically, and we continued to play and adjust. I knew from the project’s inception that he would be the protagonist of the project as we had similar training and styles. A great deal of the baseline choreography was set in this way with some room for flexibility.

The three female dancers involved in the project came into the fold about eight weeks before filming. The dancers are all former students of mine and are studying dance at the university level. These former students are familiar with my style of jazz and style of setting choreography, and thus, the rehearsal process was smooth. The ongoing pandemic made rehearsals difficult as Massachusetts continued to have some of the strictest guidelines, and there were a few cases of positive testing that forced us to go remote for some rehearsals. The second male dancer came in much later as a previous male dancer had to drop out about three weeks before filming.

Rehearsals took place primarily at Center Stage Dance Studio in Hudson, MA. This location allowed a large amount of space so that we could social distance even while dancing and rehearsing. Rehearsals occurred every weekend for three hours. A few rehearsals were also conducted at Charlotte Klein Dance Centers in Worcester, MA when our primary rehearsal space was not available. Because of a busy community theatre season leading up to the holidays in 2021, we were not able to step into the Calliope Theater until the day of filming. This was an obstacle I foresaw when booking the venue, and I received the dimensions of the space so I could mark our rehearsal space with the dimensions of the theater to keep the square footage from becoming too much of a detriment. Rehearsals consisted of dancing with only a metronome playing in order to further facilitate a blank slate and compose the music in post-production.

Presentation

My dance film was filmed at Calliope Productions from January 8, 2022 through January 9, 2022. The space provided a small and intimate venue for filming which was

necessary in the translation of my personal story to dance. My thesis premiered digitally on April 3, 2022.

Awareness, the first stage, is simply about being different and beginning to feel heteronormative society's judgmental gaze. I created a Fosse-inspired vocabulary that continues to expand in energy and movement as the piece continues. Fosse's work is known for focus on isolations and small intricacies. As in works like *Sing, Sing, Sing*, Fosse's choreography often simmers like a kettle beginning to boil, only to have it burst forth with full bodied energy, the dancers releasing their inhibitions in chaotic purpose. To match my personal journey, this stage is the longest of the four.

In this section, the protagonist dances in unison with the other performers for a majority of time onstage as a statement about the conformity of heteronormative society. At the end of each sequence, he breaks out of the choreography in order to perform his own movements. The other dancers stop him, creating a sense of tension among the performers. The first time the protagonist does this, the other performers gently return him to his place, mirroring how society often tells young boys not to show their emotions or that they cannot play with "girl toys." This element of breaking away and embracing change was inspired by Charles Weidman's *Traditions* which involves a dancer breaking away from the choreography and inciting a reaction by the other performers.

Lovecraft's Shoggoth was used as inspiration for both staging and visual effects for the film. As a hulking mass of eyes, the Shoggoth is a metaphor for society's unwavering gaze and judgment, and the ensemble dancers themselves are the manifestation of Lovecraft's creature. I kept them clumped together for much of the staging to continue building upon the theme of conformity and all the isolations and

“Fosse-isms” contributed to the shapelessness of the creature. I conveyed the gaze with the visual effects, using staring eyes of one of the ensemble dancers throughout the stage, growing with intensity and frequency.

The color aesthetic is washed out as the scene was filtered through a black and white lens. This provided further opportunity to visualize the lack of life in the protagonist, similar to the start of *The Wizard of Oz* before melancholy Dorothy is carried to the colorful “Land of Oz” (Fleming). As the tension grows in this stage, I used pops of red to serve as pricks of pain in the protagonist as he comes closer to the breaking point. In the final sequence of the stage, these flashes of red combine with flashes of black to further reveal his emptiness, desperation, and pain.

The tempo of the music increases as the dance continues. The movement becomes less subtle, and each time the protagonist steps out of bounds, he is reeled back, more aggressively each time. I used different percussion instruments such as bass and heavy drums to create heaviness but also used my own voice manipulated through the equalizer to give the music breath and a darker atmosphere. This idea stemmed from the 1980 film *Friday the 13th*. In *Crystal Lake Memories: The Complete History of Friday the 13th*, composer Harry Manfredini explains that he used the first syllables of “kill” and “mommy” to create the effective “ki ki ki” and “ma ma ma” found in the score (Farrands).

Exploration, the second stage, involves partner work and the fusion of jazz with paso doble and tango forms. This section was inspired by Lovecraft’s Gloom and the concept of examining attractions and feelings. While there is no physical manifestation of Gloom specifically, the idea of something beautiful masking something sinister

underneath is how homosexuality was characterized for me growing up. Gloom created more of an emotional inspiration that then sparked movement. I keep the dancers in silhouette, surrounded by complete darkness except for a singular red spotlight. Where the previous stage contains pops of red color, Exploration finds the red aesthetic at its strongest. Red encompasses the excitement and fear behind one's decision to explore something that many parts of society still consider taboo or unclean and can also symbolize danger and defiance. The red spotlight provided a glimpse of the movement, something beautiful, without showing what hid in the darkness waiting to appear.

Musically, this second stage retains a consistent bassline from the previous stage but incorporates more synthesizers to create an ethereal soundscape. I also incorporated an acoustic guitar to ground the piece more and provide more syncopation and flair to the score. For a viewer who watched the film with headphones, this particular track favors one ear over the other in an attempt to keep the viewer off-balance and provide further stimulation to make the viewer feel slightly uncomfortable.

The protagonist begins on the floor as he ended in the previous stage. Throughout this stage, the female dancers move in and out of the red spotlight that constantly follows the protagonist. Although the protagonist is partnering these female dancers, the female dancers are in a position of power throughout this section. They are nameless, merely steppingstones on the path of exploration. This red spotlight is a vibrant red and is constant, highlighting the continued pain of the protagonist and the sensuality of the sequence. Showcasing the dancers in silhouette was a choice reflecting the impersonality of sexual exploration, especially in modern "hookup culture."

The entrance of the male dancer marks a shift. The camera work here changes as well, following them around in a circular fashion. I wanted the shot in this manner to work as a metaphor for the whirlwind of experiencing this intimacy for the first time. I also made the choice to pick a male dancer with less dance experience. I wanted the duet to read as awkward because I felt it worked as a metaphor for someone's "first time" with a partner of the same sex. The red spotlight has transformed into a red haze, creating a sense of a fever dream. Red is at its most prominent in this stage before it starts retreating in the next.

The section is marked by quick flashes of fire and torment. Before being at peace with my identity, I would continually have thoughts of whether I would be punished and tormented for my "choices." These moments of levity are reflections of my fears as I was trying to find myself.

Deepening/Commitment, the third stage, is characterized by the one piece of music I did not create. Lifted from my Special Topics course in Fall 2021 taught by Christian von Howard, this section is my take on a cakewalk performed to Scott Joplin's ragtime composition "Maple Leaf Rag." Now in the public domain, the sheet music is available for this musical piece. I converted it into a MIDI file to serve as the piano track for the piece.

My take on the cakewalk also doubles as a carnival game of sorts, as that is how the cakewalk is known to many today. While the carnival game is played like musical chairs, the dancers prance around the stage more in the fashion of a maypole found in European folk traditions. I found inspiration from Ari Aster's 2019 folk horror film *Midsommar* as a device for this piece (Aster). The choreography consists of turns, kicks,

and jumps. As the piece continues and the dancers are cut, the music speeds up in an attempt to knock more people out of the running to win the game. I wanted to create a moment where we see the protagonist struggle for something he wants and then find solace in achieving it. While it is not necessarily about “winning” a specific man, it is about winning over oneself in understanding that this is who one is.

The man in silhouette, inspired by Lovecraft’s Azathoth, acts as judge for the entire section. Azathoth is an Outer God in Lovecraft’s mythopoeia, and it is written that other Outer Gods dance around him in a circle. His role in Lovecraft’s universe is vague as he is often used as a symbol for cosmic chaos and indifference. His court dancing around him serves as further inspiration for staging of this stage. Given the game the protagonist plays, he embraces the perceived chaos at the end of this stage.

Homosexuality is still seen as a sin and this “embracing of the chaos” is symbolic of fighting against the status quo and the voices that continue to spread hate.

The choice to give the stage a sepia tone was multi-layered. I wanted the section to aesthetically have the appearance of a silent era film with the film scratches and the washed-out tone that held a miniscule amount of color. This sepia tone is a mixture of red and brown. In this stage, the red is not nearly as vibrant as the pain presented in the other stages and is more subdued, highlighting that the protagonist is slowly finding balance. The brown aspect brings more warm tones to the piece and provides a sense of being more grounded and less driven by emotion. This natural progression in color leads into the final stage.

The final stage, Internalization/Synthesis was the most organic choreographically to create. Reflecting on where jazz dance has come from and where it seems to be

heading, the piece has more of a contemporary feel compared to the other stages. After the heaviness and frantic confusion of the previous stages, I wanted to present a piece that showed more lightness in spirit. Musically, there are multiple layers of strings playing over light piano to create a more peaceful and ethereal response. In terms of color, the red, previously so prominent, has become internalized and less flaunted.

The final stage sees the protagonist dancing in unison with the other dancers. But unlike the first stage, there is now a sense of community and support. As the final number comes to a close, the stage lights fade and the house lights come back on to reveal the protagonist looking back at the process. He stands and leaves the theater, looking back one final time before closing the door. I wanted to end the film in this way to show the self-reflection involved in the entire process of coming out but also having the strength to leave it behind. This stage marks the moment when an individual has absorbed their sexual identity into their whole self and is complete. It is about maturation and evolution. Instead of presenting one's sexual identity as their entire self, it becomes a piece of the puzzle.

Results

The feedback I have received has been insightful on how the different elements in the video influenced the viewers. In an anonymous survey, multiple viewers expressed that the use of color or exclusion of color influenced their response to the film. One viewer wrote, "I felt the exclusion of color was used to great effect to show how the main character was not thriving, not truly living, until he found his true self. As a viewer, it made me feel cut off from him, in a way like he was only two dimensional and unreal until he was able to be who he truly was."

Others commented on the cohesiveness of the story and the emotional reaction it spurred. “I didn’t view this intending to feel so much. It was funny, touching, poignant, sad, and happy. I loved the way the last section brought everything back to the principal dancer, beautifully done!” Since this project’s main focus was storytelling and providing an empathetic experience, even just one person experiencing the film this way has made its creation worth it. The music was also given credit for providing further atmosphere to each section.

Throughout this project and my graduate studies, I have become a more thoughtful artist, educator, and choreographer. The perspective of diving into jazz dance’s rich and storied history has motivated me to continue to honor the legacy of the past as jazz dance continues to evolve. Working with Nan Giordano in her technique program and learning more about Gus Giordano’s approach has made me more appreciative of the technical training. It has solidified my classroom content in giving dancers a strong foundation of jazz training that they need, and it is also a great way to discuss the history of the technique with them.

My hope is that this project will help to inspire more LGBTQ+ artists to tell their stories and experiences with the world through their own art form. This kind of work aims to validate queer individuals in ways that some of the world is trying to invalidate either through legislation or social ostracism. I also hope that this work shows that jazz dance can be a storytelling modality and not just a mode of training while leaving other genres to tell stories.

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Appendix

Film Program

Michael McCarthy

Presents

Coming Out

An MFA Thesis Film

Monday, April 4, 2022

A Youtube Live Streaming Event

Production Credits

Producer/Director/
Choreographer/Composer.....Michael
McCarthy
Music Advisor.....Keri
McCarthy
Additional Sounds.....Hadwin
Channel
Dancers.....Jordan
Cullen, Ava D’eon, Daniel Reidy, Jacob Sewell, Sydney Olsen

Director’s Notes

This film, along with a related written thesis document, serves as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance from Montclair State University. This MFA thesis project is a sixteen minute long dance film that examines Ruth Fassinger’s model of sexual identity through jazz dance.

The film progresses through the four stages laid out in Fassinger’s model: Awareness, Exploration, Deepening/Commitment, and Internalization/Synthesis. Each stage addresses a different aspect or style of jazz dance. Stage One, Two, and Four have original compositions created by myself while Stage Three samples Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag.” My hope is to inspire more LGBTQ+ artists to share their stories and continue conversations around identity.

***WARNING: This film uses flashing lights and flashes of subliminal images. A very small percentage of people may experience a seizure when exposed to certain visual images, including flashing lights or patterns.

Coming Out

Stage One: Awareness

“Feelings or desires outside the general heterosexual norm”

Movement inspired by the style of Bob Fosse

Stage Two: Exploration

“Active examination of questions arising”

Movement inspired by ballroom styles of tango and paso doble fused with jazz dance

Stage Three: Deepening/Commitment

“Crystallization of some choices of sexuality”

Movement inspired by the cakewalk

“Maple Leaf Rag” composed by Scott Joplin

Stage Four: Internalization/Synthesis

“Self-acceptance”

Movement inspired by contemporary dance fused with jazz dance