

Abstract

When human beings dance side by side in unison, participants often experience a sense of community, connection, and healing. Specifically, the circle dance form crosses cultures, extends beyond generations, and brings unity to a community by eliminating the need for social hierarchies. Circle dances occur to mark special occasions and are a valued element in most dance forms. Participants who are unfamiliar with dance can feel a part of the group because of the simple movement patterns and structures that make the circle dance accessible for all. This thesis utilizes the circle dance form as a tool to foster greater confidence in untrained dancers, to generate new movements reflective of shared humanity, and to explore the healing and connection that is offered through the physical act of joining in a circle.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Be Apart or Be A Part: An Exploration of the Circle Dance Form as a Means For Human

Connection And Healing

By

Stephanie R. White

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

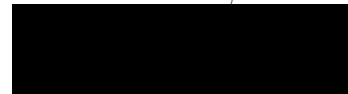
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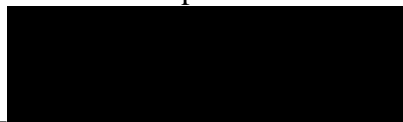
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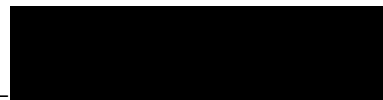
Thesis Committee:



Christian von Howard
Thesis Sponsor



Laurie Abramson
Committee Member



Lauren Grant
Committee Member

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AS A MEANS FOR HUMAN CONNECTION AND HEALING

A THESIS

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Stephanie R. White

Montclair State University

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I would be remiss if I didn't thank all who contributed to my work and progress for this MFA degree. Please know that this long, involved list comes in no order and of course, there is the huge fear that I have left someone out. If you can visualize a circle, you would understand that everyone worked side by side to support, lift, and assist me. Thank you.

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Introduction

“Be Apart or Be a Part” was inspired by an auto correction that occurred when writing a paper for Emmanuele Phuon’s Creative Practices II in the spring semester of 2021. The automated word revision created two very different phrases with vastly different meanings. The placement of one space in the same letters changed the meaning entirely: *apart* = separation, and *a part* = a fraction of the whole. Amidst the isolation, social distancing, and unrest of the COVID-19 pandemic, I became interested in how dance can create social connection and healing. The mandated necessity to remain *apart* for physical health directly affected our mental well-being and empathy which further strengthened my investigation on how dance and movement create social connection and make people feel *a part* of the greater community.

My thesis explores three key points that informed my performance: access to dance for untrained individuals, the connection effects of the circle in dance practices which foster healing, and the creation of movement based on commonality and everyday gestures. Working with musical theatre ensembles, vocalists, and educators established my interest in breaking the stigma that dancing is only for those who train. Dance should be accessible to everyone.

When instructing untrained dancers, I find that their most positive dance experiences happen when they dance in unison and in a circle: shoulder to shoulder, making eye contact, learning simple steps, and patterns fostering community, confidence, and connections. For my thesis, I utilized the *Hora Medura* and *Zemer Atik*, two Israeli folk dances that typify the vast number of circle dance forms that exist in the world. I acknowledge and respect the rich heritage of the Jewish tradition and people who have inspired me with their music, lyrics, and urgency to create dance as a unifier of a

religious society. The dances were my springboard for exploring the origins, meanings, patterns and structures of circular dances, and also influenced the music composed for the performance portion of my thesis. I am deeply grateful to incorporate these forms and hope that my offering honors the people of Israel.

I wanted to find methods for creating human connections within a diverse group of people brought together in a common space since my intent for the performance was to ask volunteers from the audience to come to the stage and dance. I explored the use of creating everyday gestures to generate commonalities in movement. Rather than relying on popular vernacular movements like “the floss” or “the locomotion” that might be unknown to some participants, I instructed the volunteer dancers to create their own gestures reflective of their day-to-day life.

In blending all of these interests and concepts together, it was important to also feature the opposite of being *a part* of the circle. The separation and isolation of being *apart* was represented by the auditioned dancers in the concert dance section of my thesis performance. I focused on the contrast of being *apart* or being *a part* - the push and pull of separating from the circle versus the connection found when returning to the circle.

Further study of the circle dance form enhanced my understanding of the healing capability of dancing together. I observed positive changes in group dynamics, less discomfort in making mistakes, laughter, and heightened camaraderie in participants. My collaboration with dancers, musicians, designers, and cinematographers represented the critical concept of being *a part* of the circle. In all, the process of bringing people together using the circle dance form offered numerous benefits for the participants and guided my inspiration for a unique and fulfilling thesis performance project.

Research

Accessibility and Benefits to Dance

My thesis performance project offered dance experiences that were accessible to untrained dancers with simple steps and attainable movement patterns, thus creating space for a greater population to join in the dance. There are so many negative opinions about dance that come from both trained and untrained movers. The most common excuses are: I'm not good enough; I don't have any turnout; I'm too awkward; I'm not coordinated; I have no rhythm; my body is the wrong type. With this thesis and my creative practices, I want to reduce these inaccuracies. Accessibility to dance comes when people understand the health benefits, eliminate self-judgment, disregard social judgment, and realize the human body's full capacity to move and dance.

For adults, the inhibition to dance seems to stem from past negative experiences, concern over social judgment, or lack of confidence or training. Why is it that a toddler will bounce to any beat at any time, but adults often hold off the urge unless they are alone, coerced, or inebriated? Humans are predisposed to move and express themselves using their bodies but, too often, I have faced a room full of students who shy away from participating in the simple pleasure of moving their bodies to a beat. I have found that my use of circle dances in my teaching practice offers comfort to the student and allows everyone to be in it together. Re-introducing the joy and pleasure that comes from dancing was a key component to my thesis performance.

Many studies provide evidence that dance is not only enjoyable, but there are health benefits associated with it. Here are a few examples. Julia F. Christensen and Dong-Seon Chang write that dance has the potential to promote physical well-being,

social interaction, and unification. Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan note about dance: “It renews our natural sense of optimism and opens us up to new possibilities.” This innate trait to dance is sometimes forgotten or overlooked. Sally Sevey Fitt, in *Dance Kinesiology*, argues that the body comprises more sensory neurons than motor neurons. Sensory overload without the benefit of motor activity can contribute to high levels of stress and anxiety, a huge issue in our society today. Finally, Girija Kaimal, Kendra Ray, and Juan Muniz have found that participating in the arts can lower cortisol (the stress hormone) levels.

Specifically with social dance, recent studies have shown that after six months of dancing, participants had a marked improvement in cognitive ability and attention. An older population of dancers ages 61-94 years, “showed better performance on cognitive tests as well as motor performance, posture and balance exercises, and reaction times compared to the nondance control group” (Christensen and Chang).

Many dance innovators have put methodologies in place that actualize the importance of dance for everyone. Among these inspirational artists, we find Ohad Naharin, an Israeli choreographer, who created the Gaga dance technique which allows people to find new channels of movement by allowing the individual to move and create independently of others present in the room (Gaga). Another artist, Liz Lerman, first began working with older people as a creative outlet away from her modern dance company, but realized the inherent value in allowing untrained dancers to create and express themselves through movement (Lerman). Both Naharin and Lerman have made extensive use of communal movement and have focused on the untrained dancer as *a part*

of their art. Their work affirmed the value of individual expression and spontaneity that can enhance any staged performance.

The German/Austrian dance theorist, Rudolf von Laban, was known for analyzing and cataloging human movement. He constructed movement choirs in which individuals moved in unison and in reaction to each other. Laban's work asserted that unified movement within choreography can act as a powerful tool to enhance or make a statement through movement (Thapa). I utilized this concept extensively within my choreography through use of the cultural folk dances and created gestures.

Circle Dance

When attending dance performances, I prefer to sit in the balcony to observe the movement blueprint being created on stage; the bird's eye view from above allows me to watch how the movement patterns evolve and transform the space. Circular movement, in particular, intrigues me. Many artists have explored circles and serpentine movement in their choreographic work. Jacquelyn Buglisi in her *Table of Silence* uses concentric circles traveling clockwise and counter clockwise following the circular floor pattern of the Josie Robertson Plaza at Lincoln Center. The multiple bodies that establish the circles melt to the floor in unison or separately move in slow motion to solemnize the "prayer for peace" (Buglisi). Mark Morris' *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* perfectly exemplifies the ability to transform traditional circle dance into intriguing choreography. By establishing the traditional pattern and then, uniquely changing it to blend with the music, the movement for the group becomes heightened. Laura Dean's *Inner Circles - Sacred Dance* incorporates the circle more to the individual isolated body movement. There is some group movement in the round, but her work primarily generates circular movement

in isolation of the group (Dean). In classical ballets like *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*, we see circles in the choreography created to culminate a joyous occasion or rally around a key character.

The circle dance form is used for ritual, healing, celebration, and unification – bodies dancing side by side, moving together, focusing toward the center. Circle dance crosses cultures, extends beyond decades, and is a means of bringing unity between people while disbanding social hierarchies (Georgios).

I was first introduced to the *Zemer Atik* Israeli circle dance in a secondary school educational setting. Karen Teuscher, a high school music teacher trained in the Orff Schulwerk method, used this dance to unite and focus her students at the end of the day. Through multiple experiences, I found this dance had the same effect on all students no matter their age or ability. They followed a simple pattern while moving in unison and strengthened their connection with each other.

Zemer Atik, also known as *Nigun Atik* (meaning ‘Old Melody’), is a second generation Israeli folk dance that first appeared around 1955 and was choreographed by Rivka Shturman who included Eastern European movement within the choreography (Folk Dance Footnotes). The music and movement follow an A-B-A-B pattern which includes steps that move in a sequence of four fast, two slow and then, two slow, four fast. These simple steps travel counter-clockwise until part B where dancers face into the center of the circle. Traditionally, dancers held hands unless they used body percussion such as snapping and clapping. This dance can also be done without any physical contact which made it very accessible as a dance form during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hora Medura (meaning ‘Campfire Dance’) was an Israeli song written in the 1930’s (Folk Dance Footnotes). Hora in Hebrew means ‘dance’ and in Greek means ‘goddesses of the season’(Theoi). I used the Greek meaning as inspiration for my choreography and had four goddesses evoke the circle dance in my piece. The original *Hora Medura* choreography was created in 1963 by Yo’av Ashriel using steps so that “...everyone could join in its simplicity” (Folk Dance Footnotes). The pattern varies from Zemer Atik in that it repeats A-B twice counter-clockwise and then introduces a new pattern C and D, which cycles twice clockwise. The full stepping sequence is A-B-A-B-C-D-C-D.

These two dances provide the means for commonality with simple movement structures and accessible technique. They reflect the use of the circle and spiral patterns found in nature. Understanding the history and purpose for a people to dance in circle form is key to offering dance across cultural boundaries (McCarthy-Brown). Unified movement can “...enhance the cultural identity and substantially affect the “cultural development” of the society” (Georgios). It can also “...boost a sense of community morale; brightening moods, forming bonds and increasing the quality of life in an area” (Thapa).

Everyday Gestures

Dance is often a reflection of the time and place in which it was created. It is influenced by so many factors including “perception... circumstance... insight, interests, and past experiences” (Nelson). Movement is created to describe occupations, symbolize beliefs, build defense strategies, and generate commonality among each other (Christensen and Chang). Social dance, specifically, can develop as an expression of a

shared experience or common livelihood. For example, Soran Bushi is a Japanese dance created by the fishermen of Hokkaido that mimics the movement of their pulling in nets and transferring cargo (Casey-Nelson). We see examples of this in popular American vernacular social dances such as the 'sprinkler' or the 'shopping cart' where the movement mirrors the action of an object or actions we might do in a grocery store. Twyla Tharp, a modern dancer and choreographer, explains that in the creative process, "Everything is raw material. Everything is relevant. Everything is usable" (Tharp). I wanted to emphasize in my thesis project that anyone can generate dance movement by starting with common, everyday gestures. It is easy to forget that we are all creators and everyone's offering is acceptable in the dance circle.

In addition, I wanted to create a neutral space where people of all backgrounds may dance together. Dance is a form of language that can communicate commonalities and shared experiences through moving the body (McCarthy-Brown). By finding common ground, untrained dancers can create their own movement; movement that reflects their daily activity and shared memory. Starting with everyday gestures, responding to prompts to get the ball rolling and working together to dissolve any worry or self-consciousness, a diverse group of people can create movements that reflect their lifestyle and interests.

Starting in the spring of 2020, I began introducing the practice of creating dance with everyday gestures in my courses at Utah State University (USU), Logan, Utah. Initially, the movement generated from the students created a basic dance sequence. Taking it one step further, we began to offer meaning to the movement by sharing ways that students have coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. Suggestions included planting

vegetables, eating ice cream, jogging, hiking, playing video games, driving through the canyon, playing Dungeons and Dragons, and writing in a journal. The class created a meaningful sequence that symbolized methods for coping through isolation and social distancing. As we danced together in unison, students relayed to me that they felt a greater bond with their peers (Students). Movement had meaning and simple gestures strung together bonded the students by dancing “an outward expression of an inner state” (Christensen and Chang). Their dance sequence was their own creation and helped define the commonalities between a diverse group of people. These sessions added relevance to my thesis plans of having a group of strangers create an everyday gesture sequence together on the stage.

Healing and Connection through Dance

Dance has the capacity to go beyond social unification and physical connection. It changes moods and emotions. It becomes a place of healing, a means for releasing tension and stress, an ‘elixir’ to the brain and body (Christensen and Chang). It offers commonality to people of different backgrounds and acts as a bridge for understanding. In my opinion, it is the drug that everyone is looking for to cure what ails, and I intend to create a more accessible dancing experience in my community.

One modern dance movement artist in the San Francisco Bay Area, Anna Halprin, created movement and ritual dance to assist in the healing of social tension, cancer, and AIDS. Her work investigated open emotion and expression. She worked with Gestalt therapists and philosophers to create works that incorporated audience member participation “as a heightened experience of life rather than something to be isolated on a

stage” (“Biography”). This helped to inform my work in opening up the dance experience to volunteers and closing the gap between observer and participant.

Irmgard Bartinieff is another pioneer in using dance as a means for healing. After studying with Rudolf von Laban, Ms. Bartinieff created the Bartinieff Fundamentals which were established to recreate the stages of development in humans. Beginning with breath, these fundamentals can alleviate unwanted tension and create more healthy movement patterns (Bartinieff). Her work with the breath connected well to my interest in circles and the use of unified breathing.

As I introduced the simple circle dance forms to my students at USU, their feedback paralleled that of Halprin and Bartinieff’s ideology of dance and movement as a healing art form. They noticed a significant energy shift in the room. More eyes locked, more laughter was shared. The exercise to dance and breathe in unison gave them confidence. They didn’t feel judged or left behind: rather, they felt a sense of support and “mental connection” with one another (Students). One student mentioned that “there is beauty in every single piece of the whole doing something simple to create something bigger than themselves” (Students). After the classes would dance together in a circle, students were more focused, more positive, and more awake, ready to tackle the stressors of the day. This informal feedback acquired during the research portion of my thesis made it clear that it would be important for me to create a survey for the actual thesis performance in order to collect more data on how dance can influence health and human connection (Appendix E). The survey results, covered in more detail under the Results section, clearly maintain that dance can positively affect a community and much of this thesis stems from this concept.

Methodology

Fractions of the Whole: My Collaborators

So many facets are involved in producing a new work for the stage. In the fall, I reserved the Morgan Theatre at USU for Saturday, 29 January, 2022. Using other art forms to inspire the dance, I commissioned Taryn Sommers, a visual artist, to create my poster art: a painting that could inform my idea of being *a part* of the circle. My thesis sponsor, Christian von Howard, mentioned the idea of focusing on concentric circles and I offered that to her as a catalyst for her work. In all of her sketches, we were drawn to the images that focused on the hands holding in the foreground which allowed the observer to feel like they were joining hands in the next circle outside of the painting. We wanted the work to have vibrant colors and include a culturally diverse representation of people inspiring the idea that anyone is welcome to be *a part* of the circle. We liked the idea of cobblestones which takes us to an earlier era of time where social dance was more prevalent in the streets and town squares. She completed the work by adding generic, but colorful buildings in the background: as if the dancers were together celebrating in the middle of town. Her completed work became my event poster as well as the card I printed to use as a thank you note for the dancers, collaborators, and supporters (Appendix A).

The musical composition became a critical component of my process as it inspired the creation of the movement vocabulary. I met with the Director of Piano Studies at USU, Kevin Olsen, and he referred me to a freshman composer in the Music Department, Rebecca Baker. I explained to her that I was interested in having threads of two Israeli melodies within the composition. I wanted to have a call to the people with

four bell chimes which also connected the use of four dancers representing the Greek Hora, goddesses of the seasons. My classical ballet background instills in me a need to create a story within my movement design. I wanted places in the music that connected to circular movement and found that the struggle between connection and isolation was clear within the soundscape Ms. Baker was composing. It was critical to have a distinct beat and keep the structure of the two songs when the untrained dancers joined the performance portion of the dance so as to keep it familiar with what they learned twenty minutes earlier. I also wanted a vocalist to sing in Hebrew in deference to the rich Jewish tradition and meaning of the songs, so I selected a female voice that matched the style of music. All musical elements were created electronically and prerecorded for the performance.

Nathan Davis, a senior undergraduate in Lighting Design, contributed so much to the final look of the performance. We had several meetings to brainstorm ideas and concepts and I developed a storyboard for each section with timestamps in order for him to understand the action on the stage. Rehearsal sessions were also filmed. Yet, one element of the dance rehearsal process was never filmed until the actual performance - we never simulated the volunteer dancer section. Despite this missing piece, Nathan developed a visual landscape with lighting that advanced the piece in so many ways. His use of warm light for human connection and cool light for isolation read well. The light focus also assisted the eye in watching the action, and we made certain that house lights were up when the volunteer dancers came to the stage for safety purposes.

I also met with Amanda Aiken, an MFA student in Costume Design, who was very eager to assist with concept and costume. We met and instantly, she had a

powerpoint ready and created with color palettes, artwork portraying the Greek Hora (and interestingly, all of the art showed the four goddesses dancing in a circle). We were fortunate to find ready-made dresses that were the right color and style. We thought to manipulate the look, but it was nearly perfect so we left them as they were, and Amanda took care to prep them for the performance. She also directed hair and makeup styles which added the finishing touch to the look.

Because this was a live performance in which distant Montclair State University faculty and students could not attend, I wanted to make certain to capture the evening on film. I asked cinematographer Andy Lorimer and his students from Fast Forward High School to document my performance project. They filmed from three different angles and their payment for shooting the event is going towards future scholarships for their film club. It was a great collaborative effort which offered many fruitful and professional opportunities to these talented students.

Administratively, I received financial support from the Dean, Arts Access Director, Department Head, and the Budget Officer of USU. This funding allowed me to pay everyone involved, purchase costumes, and pay for flyers and postcards within the allotted budget. I submitted my budget proposal to all parties and they returned with a dollar amount that covered the full production. The USU's event services department waived the fee to use the theatre, which would have exceeded the budget.

A month before the performance, I asked Raymond Veon, Director for Arts Access, and Matt Omasta, Associate Dean, both in the Caine College of the Arts at USU, to help me create a survey that would function as a non-biased means for collecting information on the efficacy of dance as a means for human connection and healing

(Appendix E). Both have extensive experience in collecting data from surveys and their feedback was invaluable. They suggested using Likert scales in order to quickly assess and measure things like dance experience and levels of connection. Limiting the questions was also advised; no one wants to take a long survey. We created neutral questions in order to avoid partiality. Initially, I had planned to have a QR code available in the lobby for people to use their phones, however Deam Omasta suggested having hard copies of the survey available. In the end, the hard copies were more successful than having a QR code, and I had to print off more surveys for the evening performance.

Choreography

I envisioned that my thesis performance would feature the circle dance form and involve volunteer dancers from the audience. Gathering spontaneous movement from the volunteers to intersect with more choreographed movement was a goal for this project. After much deliberation, I created the following format: 1) introduce the event, teach volunteers two Israeli circle dances, and have them generate four everyday gestures; 2) excuse volunteer dancers to their seats while the auditioned dancers perform; 3) include the generated everyday gestures into the auditioned dancers' portion; and 4) invite volunteer dancers to join the trained dancers onto the stage to end the performance. A unique dance structure, but intriguing to emphasize the concept of being *apart* or being *a part*.

In December 2021, I taught a master class for the dance club at USU. The university does not have an official dance program, but some of the dancers that participate in the club are exceptional dancers with extensive training. I then held auditions for anyone interested in the project who could commit to the rehearsal schedule.

For the audition, I asked the students to improvise using circular movement as well as the contrasting concepts of isolation vs. human connection. With these simple prompts, I was impressed by the movement the dancers created. I chose four dancers from the audition with a fifth alternate. Electing to use an alternate dancer became the wisest decision during this era of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the fifth dancer became even more valuable because she acted as a rehearsal assistant and the leader for the volunteer audience members – someone for the volunteer dancers to watch for cues of what comes next in the sequences of choreographed movement.

Our first session included learning the *Hora Medura* and *Zemer Atik* circle dances. This task turned out to be interesting as the more simple stepped dances were actually harder for the advanced dancers to learn and remember. We explored the movement found in the folk dances and improvised sections by changing time, energy, and range, e.g., a step clap became a lunge with arms ending in a clap above the head. We filmed all improvisational work, talked about the general outline of the dance and experimented with serpentine, circular, isolated, and connected movements.

As rehearsals progressed, I would hold separate sessions alone where I would dissect the music score's structure, familiarize myself with accents and key points in the music, and prepare choreography for the next rehearsal. I created movement using the floor, connecting the simple circle dance patterns of the Israeli dances, finding places to mimic the audience's generated movement, and exhibiting the emotions involved in the pull between being *apart* and *a part*. As a challenge for myself, I shied away from my ballet/musical theatre movement and included the freedom of modern dance, connections to the circle dance, and everyday human gestures.

Midway through the rehearsal process, one of the dancers tested positive for COVID-19. The fifth dancer took her place during rehearsals and the quarantined dancer was able to join us via the FaceTime App. We were able to continue solving problems and solidify timing.

In order to create greater connections between the audience members and the dancers, I started thinking of ways to incorporate generated audience movement into the auditioned dancers' movement. At the performance/community event, I placed the volunteers into four groups and then, as a group, they created a four-count phrase that had one of the following characteristics: brought them joy, portrayed an activity with friends, described a COVID coping strategy, or referenced a favorite movie. Each auditioned dancer represented one gesture and then, they all learned the sequence of the four audience generated gestures. Because the volunteer gestures were generated during the performance, we had to prepare the auditioned dancers to think on their feet. Each rehearsal, we would change out the four gestures so that they could prepare for the actual performance. The auditioned dancers still had no idea what the gesture would look like during the event as this part would be created spontaneously; this was the most open-ended portion of the performance.

Over the course of several semesters, I was able to teach various circle dances and everyday gestures to several groups. This was helpful to gather best methods on how to teach the circle dances and how much movement material could be given to untrained dancers before there was a feeling of anxiousness from learning too much. For example, I learned from colleague Jacob Madsen that when teaching the *Hora Medura*, it is easier to change direction if you are holding hands (we did not hold hands during the performance

because of COVID-19) and with circle dance forms, it was better to have a guide on opposite sides to assist with instruction in order to clarify direction during the learning process.

The musical composition ended with a faded drumbeat after a whirling build, and I wanted to offer the greatest impact for the final section. Knowing that my volunteer dancers would be on stage until the end, I created a spiral where they would follow each other to create a tight cluster up stage. As this train of bodies grew smaller, my auditioned dancers completed a circular sequence to end with a beckoning motion to the audience.

Into the Performance Space

Two things were vital to complete the program; my spoken portion of the presentation and recruiting volunteer audience dancers.

I drew an outline of what I wanted to say and later realized it was important to run through my presentation on stage with the microphone and lights. I practiced my speech to my family, and they gave me key points about what the volunteer audience members needed to know, as well as what key overarching concepts of my thesis were important.

Advertising and Recruitment

I began the advertising blitz after the New Year by emailing my college the Utah State University community, clubs, affiliations, and Montclair State faculty, staff, and cohort. I was surprised by who immediately responded to my announcement – the most busy people of all: USU’s President, Noelle Cockett, USU’s General Counsel, Mica McKinney, and the Mayor of Logan, Utah, Holly Daines. It was a full-time job responding to well wishes, answering questions, and advertising in classes. I realized that notifying people any earlier than one month prior would not have been as effective. I may

have missed a larger audience by not using social media, but I have been on a social media hiatus for four years (as a personal choice) and was grateful to those who sent out notifications for me.

The final hurdle was recruiting audience volunteers for the matinee and evening performance. Initially, I had no idea how intimidating it would be to ask people to volunteer to dance in a performance; for some, it created fear of the unknown. Here I was trying to show positive human connections through dancing together and in fact, this was creating social anxiety for the volunteer dancers. I created a waiver of liability google form (Appendix D) asking permission to photograph and confirming vaccination status. This form further explained what tasks they would be doing in the performance. The night before the performance, I only had eight volunteer participants, but through using others' social media to send out more information, family members and friends were able to help invite an adequate number of participants. It was an excellent example of how dance continues to be anxiety riddled to most if it is not familiar or offered in a significantly different context.

Results

My thesis performance had 22 volunteers for the matinee and 14 for the evening. The ages of participants varied from middle school to retirement age, and one volunteer danced with a global brain injury which impinged new learning and short-term memory. Despite the a few stumbling blocks, the event happened successfully.

I was astounded by the survey results and audience feedback I received. The 68 survey submissions reflected similar outcomes of finding human connection within the experience with 83% feeling more or extremely connected to others. 48% of the

surveyors had participated in the dance and 52% had observed. 85% of those who observed the dance said that if given a chance, they would have joined the circle. One participant thanked me for such an incredible experience; it took them beyond what a usual dance production does. They were surprised that moving with strangers could create such a bond because of dance.

When asked on the survey what stood out to the volunteers and observers, the response was highly favorable in experiencing human connection throughout the performance. People were touched to see the audience-generated-movement performed by the auditioned dancers. Many felt ownership over the movements and became more engaged in the performance. There was a sense of support and empathy from the observers when watching people learning new steps. Many were amazed at how easily common movement can be created in an environment where strangers could come together in a fun, inclusive, interactive, and welcoming place which gave space for people to struggle, learn, fail, and succeed together. The unified action and acceptance of any performance level created a response I had not thought would occur – the idea that making errors or imperfectly learning and performing a dance is just fine. Yes, being asked to step out of your comfort zone can one feel vulnerable, but struggling together creates a safe space for people to keep going. Some noticed differences in abilities, but in the end, they all looked like they were enjoying themselves and that was the greater point.

Implications for the Future

Inspiration for this thesis has come from my graduate studies coursework, my written work, my observation of the natural world, music, visual art, and dance. I value

my understanding of the circle dance form and how it reflects the society in which it was created. I have come to embrace and rely on old dance forms to create the new – it does not always have to be about breaking molds, but can be about establishing connections. My work shows that when groups of unrelated people join together and move in concert with simple steps that are executed in unison, dance becomes a healing agent which creates positive connections between strangers.

I intend to debunk the idea that dance is an exclusive art form by continuing to implement my thesis approaches in my pedagogical practice. Dance is for everyone, and I plan to create more dance opportunities where mistakes as well as differences are valued. Dance can change the dynamics of a room, it can inspire deep conversations about social issues, it unifies, and it provides room for individualism. As one survey respondent explained, “I’ve always self-proclaimed myself as someone who ‘cannot dance,’ but this made me realize how we can make dancing our own ” (Survey).

Through this thesis process, I have gained a greater understanding of what connects us as humans and the key part that dance plays in society. The realization that creativity comes quickly and easily if we make connections to each other confirms our need to be *a part* of the group rather than *apart*. Finding commonality in experience, emotion, situation, and context can easily lead to created movement for a new generation of dancers and an often unspoken means for societal healing. There should be space for everyone to dance with no pressure to be perfect. I aim to continue to create opportunities where bodies can move, engage with the music, and take in the joy of dancing.

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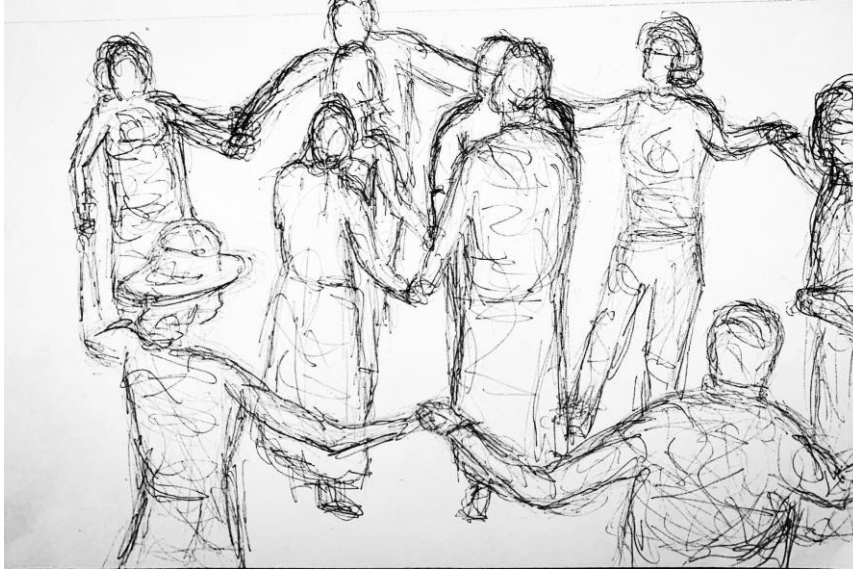
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Appendix

Appendix A. Commissioned Artwork

Artwork commissioned to reflect community and the circle dance form.



Sketch of concept, Taryn Sommers, 2021.



Oil painting titled *concentric circles*, Taryn Sommers, 2021.

Appendix B. Poster/Flyer

Please join us for Stephanie R. White's
MFA Thesis Performance

Be Apart or Be A Part



Taryn Summers, 2021

Saturday, 29 January 2022, 2:00 and 7:00 p.m.
Morgan Theatre, Utah State University
Free Admission

Inviting audience members to join in the dance. Please sign up here:



 **Department of Theatre Arts**
Caine College of the Arts

 artsaccess

designed by Ella White, 2021.

Appendix C. Thesis Performance Program

Performance Program:

<https://cca.usu.edu/theatre/files/show-program-information/be-apart-or-be-a-part-stephanie-white-thesis>

Be Apart or Be a Part:

An Exploration of the Circle Dance Form
as a Means for Human Connection and Healing

Directed and Choreographed by: Stephanie R. White

Music composed by Rebecca Baker, Vocalist Patrice Densley

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Montclair State University, New Jersey

Projected Run Time: 50 minutes

Intermission:

N/A

Director's Note:

To think that a thesis could be inspired by a computer autocorrect... Last spring, while writing an essay for class, I typed in 'a part' and my computer corrected it to read 'apart.' One space manipulates an entire meaning - connection, unification versus separation, isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened our awareness of space where we have been forced to separate and isolate in order to protect each other. For me, this inspired further exploration into dance forms that create human connection. The circle dance form can be found in almost every civilization in almost every era of time - humans gathering around fire, in the courtyard, to celebrate, to support, to unite. Circle dance movement is simply patterned and most accessible. It offers the chance to move to a rhythm as one body having all participants on equal ground. Most people forget the joy found in dancing and leave the art form to trained professionals. But, dance is for everyone and there is incredible power and beauty in participating and observing humans dancing. Sometimes, it takes dreary and unprecedented times to stimulate ideas for finding ways to celebrate humanity and pushing through our periods of social isolation.

Thank you for taking part in this performance. I would love your further support by having you complete a survey after the show (QR Code/URL Link listed below). Hard copies are available in the lobby after the performance. Please enjoy and keep dancing!

Sponsored by: Caine College of the Arts, Arts Access, Department of Theatre Arts

Post-Performance SURVEY:

https://usu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4VmFb4EUTP0ozVs

Dancers:

Eve Barlow Hannah Davison Lizzie Hales Sienna Hunt Karli Ludwig Volunteer Audience Dancers

Production Team:

Position:	Name:
Director/Choreographer	Stephanie R. White
Costume Designer	Amanda Cardwell-Aiken
Lighting Designer	Nathan Davis
Stage Manager	Taylor Karns
Film Crew	David Ahlmann Bradley Shields

Special Thanks and Acknowledgments:

I would be remiss if I didn't thank all who contributed to my work and progress for this MFA degree. Please know that this long, involved list comes in no order and of course, there is the huge fear that I have left someone off the list. If you can visualize a circle, you would understand that everyone worked shoulder to shoulder to support, lift, and assist me. Thank you.

Raymond Veon, Rachel Nardo, Craig Jessop, Nick Morrison, Adrienne Moore, Paul Mitri, Matt Omasta, Bruce Duerden, Michael Shipley, Leslie Timmons, Cory Evans, Dallas Heaton, Kevin Olson, Leslie Brott, Richie Call, Jason Spelbring, Elaine Olson, Keri Shoemaker, Cindy Shields, Karina Moser, Emily Nelson, LuAnn Baker, Emily Heap, Sara Grove

Christian von Howard, Lauren Grant, Laurie Abramson, Elizabeth McPherson, Stefanie Batten Bland, Claire Porter, Apollinaire Scherr, Emmanuelle Phuon, Kathleen Kelley, Maxine Steinman, Trebien Pollard, Allen Maniker, Randy Muggleston

My MFA 2022 Cohort, the 'Cofam'

My dancers and crew (listed above) and the brave volunteer dancers

My BFA Actors, Vocal Performance Majors, and THEA 3320 students

Andy Lorimer, David Ahlmann, and Bradley Shields, Fast Forward High School

Rebecca Baker, composer. Patrice Densley, vocalist. Taryn Sommers, painter.

Sandra Emile and the Cache Valley Civic Ballet, Maggi Moar, Marsha Knight, Wendi Hassan, Matt Koenig, Vanessa Ballam, Debbie Ditton

My parents, Gary and Fran Richardson, siblings, and the Richardson and White families

My children, Kelly and Trent Bateman, Curtis White, Ella White

My editor, critic, therapist, and strongest support system, Brent C. White

Thank you, thank you!

Appendix D. Volunteer Audience Form

Stephanie R White MFA Performance Audience Participation Form

Thank you for your interest in participating in Stephanie White's Thesis Performance.

I couldn't do this without you!

Your participation will include:

- learning two Israeli folk dances
- creating movement for a new circle dance
- performing the above within the Thesis Performance

Total time ~45 minutes. Volunteers must be able to negotiate steps onto stage and engage in mild physical activity. In order to maintain health of all participants, we ask that participants be fully vaccinated or have received a negative Covid test in the last 48 hours as the dance will include hand holding and close social interaction.

First Name

Last Name

Email Address

Select the Performance you will attend: 2:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m.

The performances will be filmed. By checking this box, I grant permission for Stephanie R. White and the Caine College of the Arts to photograph/video record and utilize photos/videos for educational and promotional purposes.

Assumption of Risk and Waiver of Liability. By volunteering for this dance experience, I am aware of the risk of injury while participating and do hereby waive any liability to Stephanie R. White or the Caine College of the Arts/Utah State University for any injury that I may sustain as a direct result of my participation in the aforementioned. I am participating in this activity entirely at my own risk.

Are there any accessibility requirements or prior injuries that should be disclosed in order to accommodate your participation? If yes, please describe.

Thank you so much for volunteering! Please plan to arrive 15 minutes early and let the ushers know that you are a volunteer audience member. If you have any questions, please contact me - Stephanie.white@usu.edu or 435-881-4658

Appendix E. Thesis Performance Survey

SRW MFA Thesis Performance Survey 2022

1 How often do you experience dance in your life, either as someone who dances or enjoys watching dance?

- little to no experience
- some experience, but infrequent
- frequent experience
- dance is a regular, ongoing part of my life

2 Were you a volunteer dancer in the performance?

- Yes No

3 What stood out to you from this performance?

4 To what extent did this dance experience make you feel connected to others:

- Less connected to others than I usually feel
- About the same
- more connected to others than I usually feel
- extremely connected to others

5 List up to 3 things that made you feel connected or not to others during the performance.

6 Were there any other things you noticed while dancing in/watching the performance?

7 If you had a chance to come again, would you have participated in the dance?

- Yes Maybe No

Thank you! Stephanie