

Abstract

Digital technology is continuously influencing modern day cultures and the dance industry at a steady pace. It is an area I investigated and explored in my thesis performance piece. Much of the research for my thesis project involved discovering new, current types of live productions and trends in dance and the general entertainment industry to learn new methods of utilizing digital technology to heighten audiences' experiences. My aim was to discover and then employ visual and emotional stimulation to deliver the narrative or thematic message of my choreographic work. I also conducted research to expand my knowledge and understanding of the history of the use of technology in dance, the development of contemporary dance, the current framework for what is considered contemporary dance, as well as to expand my choreographic tool box. Using bullying as my theme of exploration, I applied methods discovered from my research to create my thesis performance piece *Bullied*. In this written thesis, I detail the steps in the creation process as well as unpack the experience from my perspective and through audience feedback. Lastly, I explore where this research may take me next on my creative research journey.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

A Choreographic Exploration of Bullying Through Contemporary Dance

by

Mark A. Harootian

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

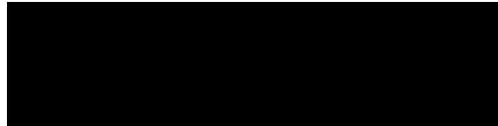
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

August 2020

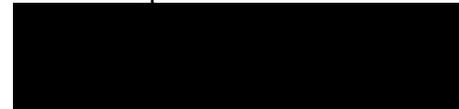
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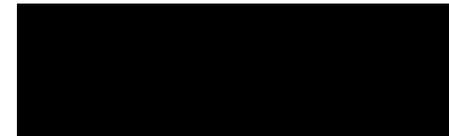
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A THESIS

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Montclair, NJ

2020

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Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful to the following people for supporting the development and creation of this thesis project:

Most importantly, my wife, Sarah Elizabeth DeRosa, father, Simon George Harootian Jr. and mother, Roberta Jeanne Harootian, whose never-ending love and support was crucial for me to complete my graduate studies.

Alison Hennessey, Director of California School of the Arts- San Gabriel Valley's Dance Conservatory (CSArts-SGV), and CSArts-SGV faculty for their generous support, counsel, and the donation of CSArts-SGV's resources, rehearsal space and theater for the performance of *Bullied*.

CSArts-SGV students whose hard-work and enthusiasm inspired much of the conception and creation of *Bullied* and made its entire creative process and performance a pivotal, special, and fulfilling moment in my career.

Professor Elizabeth McPherson, Professor Neil Baldwin, Laurie Abramson, and Julia Burrer as well as the faculty of the MFA Dance program at Montclair State University, for their support, guidance and education that has broadened my understanding of dance and of myself as a dance artist.

Lastly, my future son, Trevor George Harootian, who was the reason and motivation to enroll in graduate school and get through its most challenging aspects.

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Introduction

As a choreographer who has been focusing on expanding my contemporary choreographic works depicting various, widely relatable themes, particularly on cultural and social issues and events, I was deeply impacted in 2015 by a modern art exhibition on bullying that I saw in Valencia, Spain. Originally made in 2010 by the artist Gillian Wearing, the piece *Bully* was a large-formatted “video installation of a method acting class that re-enact[ed] one man’s experience of being bullied” (“Gillian Wearing”). Wearing’s use of video projection and sound was so effective in augmenting a viewer’s experience and stirring an emotional reaction, that her piece *Bully* motivated me to try and adapt the theme of bullying in a contemporary ballet concert piece and possibly use technology to enhance audiences’ experiences. This became my inspiration for my thesis project.

I began my thesis project by researching bullying – its history and current displays of bullying through social media. Observing the digital technology influence on modern culture and dance, I researched what types of technology are being employed in contemporary productions to heighten audiences’ visual and emotional experiences. Exploring what types of technology have been used through the history of dance, particularly in the 20th century, also helped shape the project’s development. I researched the history of ballet and contemporary dance to further expand my knowledge and understanding of the development of contemporary dance as well as the framework for what is considered contemporary dance.

In *Bullied*, my thesis performance piece, I applied methods discovered from this research data. *Bullied* was created and set in a contemporary dance workshop on teenage

students from California School of the Arts-San Gabriel Valley's Dance Conservatory (CSArts-SGV). It was scheduled to be performed as the third act of the school's annual Student Choreography Concert on March 12-13, 2020 at the Duarte Performing Arts Center (DPAC).

Background

Having experienced diverse training in ballet, American modern dance, jazz dance, and musical theater, much of my focus as a choreographer has been on developing a unique, hybrid style of contemporary ballet vocabulary which I can mold to create works reflecting the current era. My original interests were expanding the limits of classical ballet vocabulary to captivate viewers visually, particularly with pointe work and partnering. However, after years of observing and collecting feedback on my works as a choreographer for Rhode Island's premiere ballet company, Festival Ballet Providence, in addition to other organizations during the 2010s, I noted that audiences particularly favored my thematic or narrative works. Since then, my interest has been to further develop my thematic or narrative work in conjunction with expanding my contemporary ballet movement vocabulary. My thesis extends these curiosities, enhanced by the research I conducted.

Research

Over the last decade, my interest has been in making thematic and narrative contemporary ballet choreographic works that are innovative and relatable. I am always searching for new inspirations to apply in these types of works. After seeing Wearing's piece *Bully*, in Valencia, Spain, I wanted to try and understand how to reproduce the level of emotional effect *Bully* had on me in a new work based on the same theme. At the

exhibit, viewers walked into a room to watch video recorded actors reenact scenes of bullying that were projected onto an entire wall of a confined, completely darkened room. This immersed viewers into the experience. The immersive quality captivated me immensely by taking me to unfamiliar places, surfacing a sincere empathy towards bullying victims, and inspiring me to be proactive in anti-bullying campaigns. I was moved by how the artist of this exhibit clearly conveyed an enlightening artistic message, and I was inspired to create a similar effect in a concert dance performance.

Bullying

Bullying has been a longstanding, social issue in the United States for years. My reason for choosing it as the theme of my thesis was to inspire more awareness of bullying and proactivity in anti-bullying campaigns. In addition, I thought it would be a relatable theme to all audiences. Bullying is a pervasive issue: “Between 1 in 4 and 1 and 3 U.S. students say they have been bullied at school” (“Facts About Bullying”). “70% of school staff have seen bullying. 62% witnessed bullying two or more times in the last month, and 41% witness bullying once a week or more” (“11 Facts About Bullying”). The three major forms of bullying are verbal, physical, and social. Today, social bullying occurs often through digital devices and online in the form known as cyberbullying (“What Is Cyberbullying”). I researched the body language bullying victims and bullies have in informational videos, anti-bullying campaign commercials, and bullying photos. I used these to gather poses and gestures I could translate into movement motifs. For victims, these include: 1) arms crossed around one’s stomach, 2) shoulders inwardly concave, 3) downward eye gazes when walking, and 4) sitting on the floor with knees

bent up to one's chest with arms wrapped around and head down. For bullies, the body language I observed involved more open chests and shoulders with an assertive gaze.

I had a long-term desire to enlighten and reduce the stigma in the United States that dance is a feminine, non-substantial, unsophisticated profession and unrespectable practice for boys and men. This motivation stems from my personal experience of being bullied when I was younger for both being a male dance student and, more specifically, a male dance student in ballet. I am not alone; this has been an issue for male dancers in the United States for decades. In his presentation "When Boys Dance: Moving Masculinities and Cultural Resistance in Dance Training and Education," Doug Risner explains, "While dance in many cultures has and continues to be viewed as an appropriate male activity, the Western European cultural paradigm situates dance as primarily a female art form, and has done so since the 18th century" (1). This cultural issue was exemplified in August 2019 when ABC's *Good Morning America* co-host Lara Spencer, live and on-air, made fun of six-year-old Prince George of Cambridge when publicists announced he would be taking ballet lessons. The global dance community was outraged, and *Dance Magazine* reported it being the biggest story in dance in 2019. Lauren Wingenroth reported "Not only was it our most popular of the year, but our most popular of all time. Even our follow-up post covering Lara Spencer's apology and interview with Robert Fairchild, Travis Wall, and Fabrice Calmels ended up as one of our most-read of the year" ("The 10 Biggest Dance Stories of 2019"). This news story and my personal experiences inspired me to include bullying of males in ballet as themes in my piece.

I also researched anti-bullying commercials to get an idea of how to make a short film depicting bullying scenarios, which I planned to use as part of my choreography.

The typical format I discovered is starting with a practical reenacted scene followed by verbal or written information, all of which is accompanied with music. Particularly influential commercials I watched were, Be The Change's *Words Have Consequences* anti-bullying video, the Ohio Commission DRCM's *Words Hurt* anti-bullying commercial, and family.ca's anti-bullying video made in partnership with www.bullying.org. I also collected current stories on local and national news channels on bullying, which I adapted into narratives for the piece. I began to envision how I might include digital technology into my piece to further enhance the audience's understanding and emotional response to the theme of bullying.

Virtual Reality Entertainment & Digital Technology

Through the use of video projected in a darkened space, Wearing's modern art piece *Bully* made me feel like I was in the middle of an instance of actual bullying. Therefore, in addition to researching bullying, I also began to research uses of digital technology. When the arts' communicative nature is mixed with technology, the communication is amplified in a sensorial way, which, as explained by Michael Gorman, causes the effect of what Dr. Ruben R. Puentedura' has termed SAMR: Substitution, Augmentation, Modification and Redefinition (1). To simplify, Dr. Puentedura divides these four categories into two functional categories of Enhancement (Substitution, Augmentation) and Transformation (Modification and Redefinition) (1). In relation to the arts, Substitutions are the mediums themselves or the enhancements made to them that Augment the effect of the artistic integrity through Modifying one's craft and process towards Redefining itself or making anew. This then reproduces more breakthroughs of sensory response.

When I moved to Southern California in July 2017, I frequented shows and art exhibits that involved virtual reality and other forms of interactive experiences that pushed me towards enhanced sensory response. Due to the abundance and variety, I could see that digital technology was a new trend rising in popularity. One production I attended that heightened the viewers' experience through use of digital technology was Taylor Swift's *Reputation* tour. Audience members were given Wi-Fi controlled bracelets that lit up throughout the concert, immersing fans in light patterns or images. In addition, audience members were holding up their lit smartphone screens during certain songs. In a sense, the concert and audience were communicating in a contemporary way through digital technology.

I also attended several performances at the Hollywood Bowl that used digital technology in innovative ways. The Hollywood Bowl worked in partnership with Mousetrappe, an award-winning immersive design agency and media studio, to create a new type of production series called "Immersive Live-to-Film Concerts," which they have continued to develop ("The Little Mermaid: Live-to-Film Concert Experience: Hollywood Bowl"). Hollywood Bowl's innovative productions begin with audiences watching, on multiple big screens, a Disney animated or musical film or video segments of movies that have well-known musical scores like *Star Wars*. When the musical scenes are about to start, the film and screens are turned off and the characters enter and come to life on stage as live performers singing and dancing the scene with a live orchestra. This experience prompted me to research technology's historical use in live performances, particularly in dance.

One of the earliest choreographers to use technology extensively was Loïe Fuller. Fuller, deemed the first leading figure to practice and develop American modern dance, considering her career precedes Isadora Duncan's by a decade, is recognized as "a pioneer in what today would be termed mixed media" (Anderson 182; Reynolds and McCormick 3). Fuller developed and utilized state-of-the-art technology of the time to expand her craft, including using an electric switchboard and gas lights to illuminate various forms of lights and images on moving fabric that she typically wore during a performance (Reynolds and McCormick 4). Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick explain that "Fuller was interested in every means of combining color and movement" (5).

With to the invention of electricity, Fuller's lighting effects became more elaborate with electric stage lighting and illustrated how theatrical lighting can be expressive and add another aesthetic element to a production. To achieve this, Fuller experimented with multi-colored slides (what we would call gels today), adding them to one another and removing one to create a different, instant effect. Another innovation she created was for her *Fire Dance* (1895), in which "she performed on a glass plate lit from below (her own invention)" (Reynolds and McCormick 5). To augment her effects, Fuller draped everything in the theater in black velvet and used no scenery, making the focus on light during her productions "one of her earliest and most dramatic inventions" (Reynolds and McCormick 6). Fuller developed her craft with dance and theatrical stage lighting for roughly thirty-six years and is credited for helping "initiate a new dimension in dancing and laying a foundation for the moderns who came later," including contemporary ballet

artists of the time like Michel Fokine and Vaslav Nijinsky (Reynolds and McCormick 8-9).

Two other notable figures active during the modern and postmodern era of American modern dance who are credited with experimenting and utilizing technology to develop their craft are Alwin Nikolais and Merce Cunningham. Nikolais wanted his choreographic works to become more of a spectacle and became very skilled in all areas of theater production such as lighting, scenery, music composition, and costume design. He utilized digital technology in film, sound, and lights to create his “metaphorical” enhanced works (Anderson 203-204; Reynolds and McCormick 374-377). *Prism* is Nikolais’s first work where he expanded on Fuller’s concepts on the use of stage lighting by projecting slides onto backdrops, scrims, and dancers’ bodies (Reynolds and McCormick 377). I was inspired by this work in the creation of the videos for *Bullied*.

Cunningham also used digital technology in film, music, and lighting to augment his concepts of chance and indeterminacy, which he developed to reflect the unpredictability of life (J. Anderson 204). He was known for his innovative use of stage space by using corners and sides. He experimented with having separate events happen at the same time on stage. His concept on how each production component is a separate entity and, as such, should not determine or influence each other during a live performance was also a major innovation (Anderson 204-206). He expanded on this idea with digital technology. An example of how Cunningham used digital technology is well illustrated in his work *Variations V*, where “dancer’s movements activated slides, films, and the sounds of an electronic score by means of radio antennas mounted about the stage” (Reynolds and McCormick 366). Although there have been many innovators in the

use of technology and dance, Fuller, Nikolais, and Cunningham were highly influential. Their work stands today, even in our intensely digital era, as a model of innovation for a variety of contemporary dance choreographers around the world.

Elizabeth Ashley explains how Pierre Rigal (French contemporary dance choreographer and artistic director of Compagnie Dernière Minute) has frequently utilized technology in film, sound, lighting, and projection in his works since 2003. Ashley also explains how the technology components in Rigal's pieces are mainly achieved through collaborations. In the same article, Ashley also mentions New York City based choreographer Tom Richardson and founder and former director of Chunky Move dance company Gideon Obarzanek to illustrate how current concert dance choreographers are using digital technology in performances today. Richardson uses an art-projection video to open and close his piece *6 Breaths* to introduce and convey the piece's artistic message. Obarzanek uses an interactive, motion sensing video projection in his piece *Glow* to produce live, innovative visual effects on stage, which are produced by a computer sensory system reacting to a performer's movement. These contemporary choreographers are contributing to a new era of dance in which technology is being used more and more to enhance artistic expression.

An Overview of the History of Ballet and Contemporary Dance

Throughout the 18th-20th centuries, there were also innovators in the development of western theatrical dance movement practice. Researching key components in the development of ballet helped me identify the historical foundations on which I stand as a choreographer. Most prominent is the connection between movement and music that has been a major attribute in ballet since its beginning (Z. Anderson 3; J.

Anderson 66). “Dance and music should work closely together to convey the chosen theme, with steps that look natural and appropriate to the dramatic situation” (Z. Anderson 3). In addition to the light and elegant fluidity that became synonymous with the ballet aesthetic, elements of technique were also important such as turnout, virtuoso foot work, and turns (J. Andersen 57, 66; *Ballet, Illustrated Guide* 147). Through the innovations of Jean-Georges Noverre (1727 – 1810), ballet dancers began using facial expressions and gestures to express emotion and further a story line. Jack Anderson explains: “Eighteenth century dancers took conscious care to shape their steps and gestures to serve as images of states of feelings. Through their actions they depicted desires, passions and feelings known to human beings throughout history” (65).

Marius Petipa was a master choreographer of the late 19th century choreographing such classics as *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake* (Z. Anderson 32; J. Andersen 116-117; *Ballet, Illustrated Guide* 78). Particular aspects of Petipa’s choreography are: 1) separating pantomime and dance scenes in conveying the plot of a story; 2) creating a pas de deux to showcase top dancers; 3) encouraging dancers to be expressive in their faces to help establish the mood and emotions of the movement vocabulary, expanding on Noverre’s work; 4) creating elaborate choreographic patterns for the corps de ballet; and 5) creating significant divertissements to simply divert, which often never progressed a plot in any substantial way (J. Anderson 120-121; *Ballet, Illustrated Guide* 97; Z. Anderson 38; Reynolds and McCormick 37).

The next major event was the modernist era in ballet. This era was ushered in by Sergei Diaghilev, whose mission was to contemporize ballet through establishing his company the Ballets Russes, which operated from 1909-1929. Diaghilev facilitated many

experimentations regarding contemporizing ballet and creating a new aesthetic to the art form by coordinating many collaborations of leading artists in all fields of the arts. These artists reformed ballet by new innovations in set, costume, lighting design, and music (Reynolds, McCormick 34-35). Ballet Russes choreographers Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska, Leonide Massine, and George Balanchine and other artists recruited by Diaghilev to collaborate with them, had a major influence on ballet throughout the 20th century. These choreographers created new one act ballet works that were often plotless and abstract, proving ballet could exist without a complex story structure and divertissements (J. Anderson 138). Through Ballets Russes productions, Diaghilev “showed how the seeds of the new could be contained in the old: he introduced not only the classics of the Maryinsky but choreography that broke the mold and brought ballet as a respected art form to the West” (Reynolds, McCormick 35).

Created roughly at the same time, American modern dance and one of its founders Isadora Duncan, greatly influenced Fokine by inspiring him to adopt an aspect of modern dance’s attitude, which was to resist codified concepts in ballet. He did this by mixing classical ballet’s vocabulary with other, more natural movements or changing the traditional format of a full-length ballet (Reynolds and McCormick 3,19, 40-44). For example, Fokine choreographed *Chopinana* (renamed *Les Sylphides*), which had no plot or theme, and proved the “adaptability of the classical dance vocabulary toward a new end -- the evocation of mood -- the beginning of a concept of dance of and for itself that would be explored throughout the twentieth century by such diverse masters as Balanchine, Robbins, Cunningham, and Tharp” (Reynolds, McCormick 42). For Fokine, “there was no such thing as a single all-purpose balletic style. Rather, he believed that

each work must be choreographed in a style uniquely appropriate to its story, setting, or theme” (J. Anderson 136). One choreographic breakthrough of Fokine’s was separating dramatic sections with ones that showcased “the beauty of motion itself” (J. Anderson 138). Another breakthrough was making one-act ballets a choreographic normalcy in the United States and Western Europe (J. Anderson 136).

The neoclassical style in ballet was developed by George Balanchine (Jack 5). This neoclassicism is seen in his use of space – all about lines and form. In addition, “Rather than using the corps in the conventional way, as window dressing for the principal dancers, Balanchine creates a complex conversation among the corps, the ensemble, and the principals -- weaving them together in intricate and surprising patterns” (Jack 10). Another important aspect of Balanchine’s choreography is his blending of multiple styles of dance. Jack Anderson notes that: “Balanchine seamlessly combines contemporary innovations of the Charleston steps, turned-in legs, and jazzy elements drawn from black dance (particularly the thrust forward pelvis that would become Balanchine’s trademark)” (Anderson 5). This combination of dance influences and genres that characterized both Fokine and Balanchine’s work laid the groundwork for the combinations of forms that are characteristic of today’s contemporary dance.

The Term “Contemporary Dance”

During the latter part of the 20th century, a form of dance began developing that is specifically called contemporary dance. Confusion exists among many dance educators and professionals in terms of what the terms “contemporary” and “contemporary dance” signify. As educators are updating training curricula, it seems important to unpack and try to define the meaning of these terms. Victoria Looseleaf alludes to this issue when she

explains her reasoning for writing her article, *Modern vs Contemporary*: “To further muddy the waters, we've got Fox's hit TV show ‘So You Think You Can Dance,’ where seemingly every barefoot number is dubbed ‘contemporary’.” Looseleaf continues by theorizing that contemporary dance is currently developing into a distinct, new style. “Perhaps modern and contemporary genres have taken on new meanings because the global village has created a melting pot of moves, a stew of blurred forms that not only break down conventions and challenge definitions, but, in the process, create something wholly new, but as yet unnamed” (Looseleaf).

My research revealed that many of those working in the dance field believe that contemporary dance is closely related or is a hybrid version of American modern dance and postmodern dance, which has enhanced or slightly altered both genre’s aesthetics. As stated in Natalie Cenci’s article, “A Guide to Interpreting Contemporary Dance,”

In the U.S. today, contemporary dance is widely considered to be the outgrowth of explorations by the Judson Dance Theater in New York, where the vision of dance went beyond “defining what dance is” to “expanding what dance can be.” Discussions of the origins of contemporary dance in North America almost always trace back to performances coming out of cultural hubs like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles from the end of the 19th century into the present. These traditions stem from a strong matriarchal lineage of modern dance, with Isadora Duncan at the helm.

This notion is echoed by Jack Anderson in his book, *Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History*, when he discusses the initial attitude of those in dance towards the term “modern dance” as it developed, which is similar to how many today feel about the terms “contemporary” and “contemporary dance”:

No one has ever really liked the term ‘modern dance.’ Dancers, choreographers, and critics have found it awkward, or confusing and have had difficulty defining what modern dance is. One reason modern dance is hard to define is that it is not so much a system or technique as an attitude toward dance, a point of view that

encourages artistic individualism and the development of personal choreographic styles. (181)

Further research uncovered that different characteristics and aesthetics found in contemporary dance are associated with different contexts and that the term is not fully translatable across those contexts or even within them (Kwan, 38; Giguere 25). Miriam Giguere states that “One reason that there are so many different uses of the term contemporary is that there are so many realms of dance—concert, commercial, world dance—all of which use the term in one way or another, and sometimes in multiple ways” (25-26). Although contemporary dance is somewhat elusive in terms of an exact definition, it is generally characterized by a fusion of various other genres of dance, often commenting on present day concerns (Looseleaf). According to SanSan Kwan, any artwork considered “contemporary” must depict or involve current themes or concepts of its time (38).

This information leaves me to believe that change is happening and will continue to happen in dance. I see current contemporary dance artists exploring, adopting, and molding whatever aspect of dance and life they want into their work. Unlike modern and postmodern dance, in which choreographers were trying to break new ground and separate themselves from what came before, today's contemporary artists are embracing the past and present, fusing many different forms of dance to create their works, thereby opening up a new direction for the future of dance.

Methodology

Starting with a base of all of the research I conducted, I began to work on my performance project: music, choreography, lighting, and costumes.

Music

My point of entry for any new choreographic work has nearly always been inspired and established through music. As far back as I can remember, music would naturally inspire me to envision images, events, or scenarios I either experienced, witnessed, or learned in my life. However, there have been a few instances when a choreographic idea of mine was not first inspired through music, but instead by an impactful, lived experience, which was what occurred regarding my initial conception of *Bullied*. With *Bullied*, my emotional response to the theme came first, and then I worked to find music that evoked similar emotions, as well as to devise movement that would embody the theme. For *Bullied*, I searched for music that gave me a sense of sadness, yearning, or frustration as well as inspired my envisioning scenarios of isolation, resistance, and self-questioning. My motivation and reasoning for those music qualities stemmed from how I felt when I was bullied as a student and from what I was informed of and observed in students regarding bullying at CSArts-SGV's Dance Conservatory. The school's guidance counselors and dance conservatory director Alison Hennessey held an informative meeting for dance conservatory faculty when incidents of bullying and cyberbullying were occurring among dance students in the spring and fall of 2019.

The music I first selected was The Cypress String Quartet's version of Antonin Dvorak's *String Quartet No.12 in F Major Op.96 "American": II. Lento*. Within the first thirty seconds, I knew this was the composition I wanted to use to open the piece. It encompassed everything I wanted and more, in particular a sense of emotional weight that I could create in movement. I originally interpreted the violin melody as an internal scream of angst, which I tried to represent in the first partnered lift of the first movement. The second choice of music I selected was Shlomo Mintz's version of Johann Sebastian

Bach's *Partita No. 2 in D Minor for Solo Violin, BWV 1004: V. Ciaccona*, which contained similar qualities to Dvorak's *lento*. I used this for the second movement of my work. For the third movement, I sought digital music to represent digital technology and to further contemporize the piece because this section would depict actual incidents of cyberbullying.

For my second Special Projects course during the Fall 2019 semester, I collaborated with music composer Braden Pontoli to create original, digital music as an experiment for my idea of using smartphones as a prop and source of lighting. This mirrored what I intended to do during the cyberbullying section of *Bullied*. We had a very successful collaboration, so I commissioned Pontoli to compose music for me again for the third movement of *Bullied*. Pontoli was originally supposed to compose the last movement as well. In the last movement, I wanted to convey a sense of hope and compassion to conclude the piece optimistically and inspire viewers with a sincere desire to stop bullying. However, the piece developed slower than originally planned, and I simply ran out of time to work with Pontoli again. I, therefore, used music with which I was already familiar, Brian Crain's *Spring Waltz*.

Performance Venue & Recruiting Dancers

I began searching for a venue and recruiting dancers in the summer of 2018. After extensive inquiry, Alison Hennessey Director of CSArts-SGV's Dance Conservatory determined that my thesis project would be an excellent opportunity for the school and students in the conservatory's classical-contemporary and commercial tracks. Knowing that I was researching contemporary dance and the use of the term, which was a major topic of discussion among the faculty at CSArts-SGV at the time, Hennessey and I proposed that I have weekly contemporary dance choreography exploration workshops.

Through this workshop method, sessions (rehearsals) could be held once a week and the piece could be performed in the department's annual Student Choreography Concert *Mélange*, which was to be held on March 12 and 13 ,2020.

Hennessey explained that I would need to recruit students through an audition. Roughly fifty to sixty students from both tracks attended the audition. For political reasons, Hennessey advised that I choose dancers with the following considerations: 1) students from both tracks, 2) students who attended the audition unless permission to miss was approved by her, and 3) students who could attend most rehearsals and were not cast in any non-required school performances. Ultimately, I selected eighteen cast members consisting of eleven women, three men, one gender-fluid student, and three understudies. To guarantee students' commitment, I proposed, and Hennessey agreed, to make a contract with each dancer to ensure their commitment to the project.

Rehearsal Process

Once the cast was confirmed, I began to solidify my ideas on how many dance movements would make up the entire piece and who would dance in each section. This was necessary to determine early because the leading roles in the opening short film would be the featured dancers in one or all of the movements. I wanted each victim to represent forms of bullying today: in-person verbal and physical bullying, and cyberbullying. After casting was determined, I planned and organized a timeline of rehearsals leading up to the performances to adhere to deadlines and inform students and parents in order to bypass or prepare for any schedule conflicts. A major change I had to make was extending the last eight rehearsals from two hours to three hours as I needed more time to complete the project. At the beginning and end of each rehearsal, I spoke to

the students as a group to bring them closer into the process. This allowed me to confirm areas of the piece they believed needed to be rehearsed or reviewed more.

In terms of movement in my contemporary works, I draw on methods and movement vocabulary of, not only ballet, but also musical theater, modern, jazz dance, and everyday pedestrian movements to create variety in my hybrid contemporary movement vocabulary. Thus, I drew on the same genres in developing the choreography for *Bullied*. The first stage of my creative process with *Bullied* was envisioning choreographic ideas by listening to music repeatedly throughout a day. The ideas I envisioned as I listened to the chosen music included: a formation, a dancer dancing a solo, and a group of dancers representing a modern-day bullying scenario.

In developing the movement phrases, I applied choreography devices I used in previous works such as canon, accumulation, and movement motifs. To expand on my toolbox of devices, I also used new ones I learned from Professor Claire Porter in the 2018 summer semester Creative Practices I course. One device I learned from Professor Porter was taking a movement idea and applying it on specific parts of the body. I did this frequently during the creative process for *Bullied*, especially when trying to variate movement vocabulary I use frequently. For instance, I applied the same movement dynamics of being startled when I had dancers' look at the audience towards the end of movement one, to create a series of arm movements in the closing section of movement one. I also fused the body language of bullies and bullying victims I learned from my preliminary research with the vocabulary of classical ballet, modern, and jazz dance. One physical gesture/pose I used frequently throughout the piece was both arms wrapped around in front of one's stomach, which victims often do to give a sense of security. I

abstracted the gesture to create less literal poses, but still giving the sense of vulnerability.

I often created the movements on my own body and then came into rehearsal ready to teach the already “set” movements. I find this to be simplest and most time-efficient, especially when working with student dancers. The main challenge using this process was coaching students to execute specific movement qualities and dynamics in the vocabulary and adding the right amount of facial expressions to convey an emotion or action. Therefore, I used visual imagery and metaphors to help them understand how to execute a movement. Helga and Tony Noice’s essay “Artistic Performance: Acting, Ballet, and Contemporary Dance” aligns well with my thoughts on metaphorical analogies. They compared the results of experiments that tested dancers and non-dancers’ motor skills trying to achieve certain movement qualities using imagery as a learning device. They found that, “among the 44 dance teachers who responded [to a survey], the majority employed both kinesthetic imagery and metaphorical imagery (‘Imagine you’re moving through water’). The teachers reported that such metaphorical imagery was highly effective in getting dancers to move slowly and smoothly from one location to another” (Noice 500). This research supports my use of imagery to enhance my dancers’ understanding of specific movement phrases. For example, many of the classical track dancers had trouble loosening up their torso and limbs to execute a smooth, twisting, ripple movement that began with dancers jumping into a *rond de jambe en dehors* in *plié* and ending with the head arriving last to make a held pose during the last ensemble section in the first movement. To assist them, I suggested the image of seaweed swaying

in the water. The part closest to the sand is less mobile, and the top of the seaweed nearly always arrives last as it sways smoothly in the water in a particular direction.

For some sections, I also worked collaboratively with the dancers to create new movement material. This was challenging due to their wide-ranging level of abilities, experience, maturity, and personality, but seemed necessary whenever I needed to modify premade movements or work on solos or partnering sections. I knew I needed to make the students comfortable to make mistakes in front of their peers and me, particularly when working collaboratively because they were more exposed when offering their own choreographic ideas. I worked on making them comfortable by asking questions like: “Where do you feel like you want to go with this movement?”; “How does that feel, or could you try doing this?” Once they responded, I assured them of my admiration and appreciation, which helped those who were insecure and made them more confident to explore movements and ideas in collaboration. Elizabeth Ellsworth explains this notion of collaboration and transmitting ideas through movement in the concept of “embodied knowledge” in her book *Places of Learning*. She explains Anthony Dunn’s “genotype” theory of “learning as a lived experience” (Ellsworth 17). The theory is that knowledge and skill are gathered not only through personal, but shared experiences and assessments, which are absorbed by a mind/brain/body sensation or learned directly from someone else (Ellsworth 16, 166-167).

Creating the Digital Technology Component

I wanted to be as practical as possible with the narratives on bullying. My goal was for the narratives in the film to be reenactments of real-life incidents of bullying which I gathered by watching NBC’s *Today* show’s segments on bullying during National Bullying Prevention month in October 2019 (“October Is National Bullying

Prevention Month”). My selection method for the visual scenes I wished to portray was based on the following criteria: 1) They needed to pertain to “in person” verbal or physical bullying or cyberbullying; 2) They needed to occur in a high school; 3) They needed to be able to be filmed on CSArts-SGV’s campus; and 4) They needed to be easy to reenact in a silent film and on stage. Imitating the Hollywood Bowl’s *Immersive Live to Film* productions, I thought it best to start *Bullied* by having the audience be introduced to the narratives first by watching the short film projected on the stage scrim. My reasoning for the large sized projection stemmed from Wearing’s piece *Bully* in Spain, which projected its video onto an entire wall. I believe the large size was a key component to increasing the emotional response of viewers and heightening the quality of being transported into the projected scene. The emotional impact was also increased by audience members being submerged in the darkness of the theater.

I commissioned videographer Karla Espino to collaborate with me to make the videos for *Bullied*. Before shooting on November 11th, 2019, Espino and I met several times and created and organized scenes based on anti-bullying campaigns. I had studied the effects of camera angles and shots in my Digital Technology course with Professor Kathleen Kelley during the 2018 summer semester, so it was easier for me to understand and work with Espino. I developed the script, camera shots, and sequences, and I selected and reserved filming locations on CSArts-SGV’s campus. These were discussed and fine-tuned by Espino based on her professional experience. Espino and I only had two hours to film and audio record everything, due to my budget. Therefore, every aspect needed to be simple, including the acting scenes because of the students’ lack of acting experience as well as the time constraints. I knew if the acting was not realistic enough, the audience

would not invest in the film, and the immersive/emotional stimulation component would not reach the level I desired. To ensure success, we decided lead dancers would only have one verbal line, which they practiced with me several times. The only “heard” lines were recorded after the filming session. All other acting lines were seen, but silent in the film due to the music overlay.

My idea and the method I used to incorporate a video of computer animated text messaging boxes, sparked from seeing this type of animation in television shows and commercials. Before *Bullied*, with my 2019 spring semester’s Special Project titled *Notifications Off!*, I experimented with this type of computer animation by making a short video using the Adobe After Effects computer program. The results were highly successful and made the process easy for Espino and I to create the video that is shown before the third (cyberbullying) movement section of *Bullied*. The last video, in the 4th movement, was conceived as a backup plan, which I utilized because I ran out of time to make the fourth dance movement. I used the similar method anti-bullying commercials do to inform viewers of facts of bullying, which was a fading in and out of written text that appeared while composer Brian Crain’s song *Spring Waltz* played.

The Choreography of Bullied

Movement 1

The first movement of *Bullied* is an example of my hybrid contemporary ballet vocabulary, which I create by combining the light, flowy aesthetic quality of ballet’s dance vocabulary with the bolder and more grounded qualities of modern, jazz, and lyrical dance. Another predominant characteristic is my play with tempo, in which I often contrast a suspended movement or a still pose with sharp, quick movement that frequently is syncopated to the rhythm of the music. This can be seen in all of the group

sequences danced in unison in this first movement. In addition, I used intricate formations and choreographic devices like canon and accumulation. I used unpredictable or overlapping transitions. Like many ballet choreographers before me, I separated and highlighted featured dancers by placing them in front of an ensemble on stage and setting different phrases for each, which would complement the other visually and contextually. The pas de deux is a good example in addition to the individual variations scattered throughout this movement and piece. I also made elaborate ensemble sections for non-lead cast members. To ensure continuity with the opening short film and to heighten a kind of immersion into the emotional components of bullying, I started the first movement dance sequences with a series of separated dance-pantomime segments that reenacted parts of the same bullying scenes in the short film. This involved the same lead and supporting actors, who danced and portrayed their same roles from the film on stage.

I also used improvisation in this movement. Improvisation is a device I rarely used in any of my previous works, therefore, I purposely concluded the first movement with an improvisation section. The dancers separately broke away from the final, tight group formation on center stage that eventually transformed into a recap of the opening formation.

Movement 2

Because of the scheduled rehearsal time, the cast could not participate in any other CSArts-SGV productions or guest artist master classes. Therefore, I wanted non-featured cast members to have a variation or special moment in the second movement to showcase their strengths. My ideas for the second movement were inspired by Petipa's divertissement concept from my research on the history of ballet; the movement in this

section did not progress the narratives, but diverted so I could make elaborate ensemble sections and variations for “soloists” or “corps” dancers without needing to stick to the bullying theme. Because many of the students in this section were from the commercial track at CSArts-SGV, I wanted their choreography not to be as balletic as other sections.

I asked each student to create a phrase of movement vocabulary or to improvise with me on a movement idea if they felt too self-conscious to create their own. The movement vocabulary they created, surfaced new movement or dance vocabulary discoveries. As a result, each dancer’s variation influenced the development of who and what followed in the piece afterwards and varied my choreography tendencies, especially regarding the movement’s relation to the music. It also helped me to stop using the movement motifs from movement one. This finding, in return, helped rid the movement of an “angst” feeling. Professor Christian von Howard, my professor for the 2019 fall semester Special Projects course, gave me feedback on my project of creating the first movement and opening video. He stated that I was overusing the feeling of angst. By working collaboratively with my dancers and moving away from the theme of bullying for this section, I was able to diverge from the angst-driven choreography. I would ask the dancers how they perceived certain facial expression, gestures and poses, particularly if they sensed a feeling of angst viewing them. This process helped me develop established motifs to convey a sense of compassion during the last half of the second movement.

Movement 3

The conception of this movement was inspired by two events that I witnessed in 2018 and from my research on current trends in the general entertainment industry. The

first event was watching audience members hold up their smartphones' lit screens and LED bracelets at Taylor Swift's *Reputation* Stadium tour. Seeing how visually stimulating this was, this moment inspired me to create a choreographic work that utilized smartphones' lit screens as a prop and lighting source. The second was watching the TV show *America's Got Talent*, in which a dance group performed a piece in total darkness, but with their costumes lit up, creating images, patterns, and scenarios that would appear, disappear, and transition into the following scenes. In addition, the notion that cyberbullying and the anxiety disorder called FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) rose due to the increased usage of smartphones and social media, prompted my Special Project *Notifications Off!* in the spring of 2019. I used aspects of this choreographic work to aid my design of the third movement of *Bullied*.

Composer Braden Pontoli and I collaborated to make this movement's music in the fall of 2019. Pontoli created a rhythm that I insisted he keep throughout the song because I found it exceptionally intriguing. I was inspired to fuse movement vocabulary from hip hop dancing. I researched, practiced, and applied the pop and lock style to bring diversity and a more "current" pop culture feeling to this section as a method to connect and inspire younger generations. (The commercial track students in *Bullied* had suggested pop and lock style when I inquired about styles of hip hop to research). The hybrid movement vocabulary I created involved upper body movements of pop and lock with leg marches and movement vocabulary of modern and postmodern dance as well as ballet. My reasoning to have dancers march as a method of transitioning formations stemmed from the rhythm of the music, which even though it is a $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature, has

qualities of a march. To bring further continuity, I used the same actress who portrayed the cyberbullying victim in the short film as the featured dancer of this movement.

Movement 4

When the 2019 fall semester at CSArts-SGV ended, I knew I would not have time to complete the fourth movement as I intended. I then began conceptualizing how to create a short, informative video on anti-bullying to close *Bullied*. The third movement ended very dark, and I wanted the last movement to conclude with an uplifting message. I knew the choice of music was going to be extremely important to the film's effect, so I looked to composer Brian Crain, whose music I have used previously, and selected his song *Spring Waltz*. The idea of communities standing together to protest came to mind, and I imagined a line of people standing together holding hands. This prompted me to make a short pantomime scene with dancers during the first minute of Crain's song, which would conclude with the stage going dark, dancers exiting, and the video playing with text information on bullying fading in and out.

In the last rehearsal, I allowed only a forty-five-minute timeframe to put the scene together because the other movements still needed rehearsal "cleaning" time. The cast and I worked collaboratively. After I played the music and walked the students through the scene to delegate musical landmarks for their entrances and actions, students were amazed by the scene's profound, emotional impact. They insisted that I extend the scene's length, which I did by having the featured dancers have their own, separate pantomime scene.

Costumes and Lighting

I wanted the costumes to have a pedestrian appearance, but not to define too much of a character. The director of CSArts-SGV dance conservatory Alison Hennessey and I found costumes that fit my idea in the school's costume inventory. These consisted of two styles of pants as well as sleeveless or capped-sleeved shirts for both male and female dancers with halter tops as another option for female dancers. The costumes were in various subdued tones of green, tan, black, grey, and blue. The featured dancers wore identical costumes: black shorts and navy-blue tight-fitting shirts, which helped viewers identify who the featured dancers were in the cast and understand that the lead actors in the film were the same dancing these roles on stage.

My lighting choices were made to embellish the immersive quality, set the atmospheric tone of each movement, and direct the audiences' gaze. To establish a heightened immersive quality, I used the typical method of submerging an audience in darkness. I also made sure the projection of the opening film was the same large size as the stage scrim and was of high-definition picture quality, like the art exhibit in Spain. I used cool tones for lighting throughout movements one through three to establish a serious, dark, intense feeling. Movement three utilized mainly the light glow of dancers' lit smartphone screens and its small backlight when the dancer's phone's flashlight feature was turned on. I did this to illustrate how these digital devices could be used as a light source and prop on stage and to further contemporize the piece. For the fourth movement, I used warm colors to convey a more uplifting feeling when the cast made its final formation and pose of holding hands in a line.

The most challenging aspect of my lighting ideas for the lighting director was lighting different portions of the stage while the rest remained in darkness as well as finding the proper mix of colors to create overall cool and warm tones depending on the section. The lighting options at this theatre were not extensive. Knowing this, as well as that a student with limited experience was going to cue the lights, I arranged for several major cues to be made and be reused throughout the piece. This lessened the overall amount of lighting cues and made technical rehearsal very time efficient.

Results and Implications for the Future

Bullied was only performed once in front of roughly fifty dance conservatory students and several faculty members from CSArts-SGV on March 12, 2020, due to California's mandated restrictions on large gatherings caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The dean of CSArts-SGV's conservatory graciously allowed me to run the piece to video record it in the theater before it was shut down that same afternoon. This was on the date that would have been the first performance of the Student Concert *Mélange* of which *Bullied* was its third act. The students were devastated by the cancellation, yet this worked to some advantage for they knew the run might be their only performance, and they danced *Bullied* passionately.

Exploring the theme of bullying through choreography as well as digital technology, *Bullied* consistently stimulated viewers who watched it in person or through a video to feel a sincere sense of empathy or sympathy towards bullying victims. This was indicated in responses to the questionnaire I gave to the few people who watched *Bullied* live or the video recording of its performance as well as through more informal responses. Questions on the questionnaire were:

- Was there a specific part(s) or moment(s) of the piece that stood out to you favorably or unfavorably? If so, what, how and why?
- What was your first natural reaction when the piece concluded?
- Were you emotionally moved or inspired by the piece and if so, do you know why you were?
- If moved emotionally, do you think the reason stemmed from the subject of bullying, the choreography, the music, or the depicted narratives of bullying that was conveyed through videos and choreography?
- Did you like the video component of the piece? If yes or no, why?

Alison Hennessey, who is the director of CSArts-SGV Dance Conservatory, wrote on my questionnaire regarding *Bullied*,

I believe the combination of different elements utilized throughout the piece (i.e., choreography, cell phones used as props and lighting, the video component, etc.) never took away from the piece, but only enhanced the message in a positive way. Truthfully, I'm not sure the piece would have been as moving if it didn't have the video element. I think without it, it would be another beautiful piece, but I don't believe the message would have hit the audience members as deeply.

Here are some additional samples of comments that I received either verbally, via email, or through my questionnaire on *Bullied* from people who saw the one performance or watched the video of the performance:

- "Bullying is a relatable theme."
- "The piece was dynamically engaging."
- "Narratives were practical."
- "Smartphones as props and light source were cleverly effective and visually appealing."

- “Having same cast members portray their same roles in the film and on stage helped create a personal connection to the characters.”
- “The piece raised the level of communication through use of digital technology.
- “Younger generations were particularly more stimulated by technological effects, specifically the smartphones, computer animated text messaging video and films.”

I found that viewers who viewed *Bullied* via a video recording, like my former thesis sponsor Neil Baldwin and current sponsor Elizabeth McPherson, were still moved by *Bullied* due to the augmented clarification of the context of the piece through digital media.

The success of *Bullied* epitomizes to me one of the key attributes of contemporary dance – that it often contains themes which are a comment on contemporary life. Dance can express and encapsulate particularly emotional topics that may be hard to fully express in words. Richard Kislán described this well: “It has been said that great art should express for us what we have experienced but are unable to express effectively ourselves” (7). By utilizing digital technology, we can enhance a topic like bullying with even more clarity, particularly to younger generations for whom technology goes hand-in-hand with their daily lives. They cannot imagine a world without it, although I am not sure any living person can at this point.

In the future, I would like to create works of this type to depict other current social issues like immigration, gender roles and equality, domestic abuse, substance abuse, or positive events like humankind globally fighting the COVID-19 outbreak together. To me, the list of potential themes is endless because any key concept can be showcased and understood through a combination of video and dance choreography on

stage. In addition, my research on clarifying the use of the term “contemporary” or “contemporary dance” has enhanced me as a dance educator and will be applied to refine the courses I teach in dance history and choreography. Through examining my choreographic habits during my MFA coursework as well as this thesis project, I can now confidently and accurately explain in detail how and why dancers have movement habits and illustrate to students ways to break their own. Knowing how younger generations favor the use of technology in performances and knowing how advancements in digital technology are affecting the arts at a steady pace, implies that use of technology in dance performance is only going to continue to grow. I aim to be part of that growth.

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