Testimony Coming to Life: Revealing the Lord through Dance

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Testimony Coming to Life: Revealing the Lord through Dance

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Senior Honors Project

Submitted to

The Honors College

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Abstract

This honors project is a choreographic work based on a testimony of a woman named Ashley Abercrombie who went from a journey of excellence, to drug abuse, to salvation. The objective of this project was to create an artistic social action piece based on faith. The final work of choreography was movement that was directly related to the story line of Ashley Abercrombie’s testimony, at seventeen minutes in length, and includes a cast of eleven. The final work was publicly presented at the Paul A. Daum Theater, Kolbe Hall, The University of Akron on April 24-25, 2015 as part of the Emerge concert given by senior dance majors.

Keywords: dance, Christianity, testimony, rape
I have always been a Christian. I grew up in the Church and did what was culturally acceptable to do as a Christian. However, I never knew what it meant to live for Christ, when my grandmother passed away recently my entire world was in a state of confusion. During this life changing event, I learned to live for God, drawing closer to him each day. This passion brought me in line with an idea for my honors project. It occurred to me there were many avenues I could take. Some ideas I had were experimental in nature but not persuasive enough. I decided to do a project based on something that meant the most to me and currently means the most in my life. After adding up all these recent experiences I decided to do a dance for the Lord.

While I was researching Christian based dance, I was taken by Chara Christian Dance Company, founded by Shanna Hartman Kirkpatrick in 2002 and based in Texas. This company has dedicated its repertoire to the Lord. This dance company practices and performs many different styles of dance that are “Christ-centered and scripturally based” (Chara Christian Dance Company, n.d.). Another dance company which attracted me for the same reason is Light World Ballet based in Syracuse, New York- state the company’s mission here too. (Light of the World Ballet, n.d). These two professional dance companies have a ministry to represent God’s gospel in unconventional way through dance.

I wanted to use my dance as a venue to proselytize to non-believers. I have experienced how other Christians reach out to non-Christians, in ways that are conventional and well-known such as booths at the Student Union, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, and person to person testimony. My offering to non-Christians would be a piece of art that would illuminate how Christ’s power and love saves people.

I have come to learn through my dance training that art not only acts as an emotional event for an audience, but can be educational, instructive, and change their lives forever.
to terms with this process was difficult, demanding, and life changing for me because I learned how vital understanding my piece was for the audience.

Stage one of my project was to find testimonies that would be the most effective for my choreography. One story was about Jeff Markin who died on the operating table and was resuscitated miraculously back to life through his physician’s prayer and God’s desire to give Jeff a second chance (Fountain, 2010). Another powerful story which eventually became the one that inspired my dance was that of Ashely Abercrombie. She interviewed on the “700 Club”, and told her story of being a teenager and receiving a full scholarship to college for athletics and grades. She finished high school with honors and had a bright future. Yet while in college, the trauma of her parents’ divorce caused her to fall apart emotionally. She began to abuse alcohol, eventually losing her scholarship. Her destructive behavior led her to a downward spiral. And adding fuel to the fire, she was raped. She eventually dropped out of school and worked as a waitress in Delaware (Leaving, 2012).

While waitressing she became friends with her fellow colleagues. She noticed something different about them. She noticed they possessed a hopefulness and happiness she had never witnessed before. She inquired regarding their behavior and they led her to Christ (Leaving, 2012).

This story of Ashley Abercrombie’s journey from excellence, to drug abuse, to salvation was the one I wanted to use for my dance. Her story was so personal that I could see it as a vehicle for my piece, and felt my way of presenting her life through dance would be an effective story for my audience to witness.
After I discovered my focus through the inspiration of Ashley’s life I began the process of making the dance. In the beginning I embraced the “chance method” of choreography and was excited to see the effect. I had my dancers improvise based on word images. I asked them questions regarding life experiences that were related to Ashley’s struggle. Afterwards, I asked my cast to write descriptive words that they felt during this process. Then the dancers improvised to their written responses.

The result of this experiment was exciting yet I felt this was not a process that would produce desired results. I needed a narrative. I couldn’t use the chance method as a frame for the choreography. I felt it was confusing and the audience wouldn’t understand the continuity of the story. And, I felt the chance method would dilute my personal witnessing of how Christ can effect a person’s life. I decided to make the narrative easily understandable, so I changed my focus of form from the chance method to a narration.

The narrative process allowed me to determine characters and to assign roles to my casts representing Ashley’s story. I asked my cast members to divulge some of their own personal hardships in their lives and act it out in movement. I needed to add sound and to see its effect on the visual display of movement. I played a section of music and asked the dancers to pick three words from their list personal hardships and dance out these words. This was to act as counterpoint to the idea that movement is a metaphor choreographers use to tell their story and how this particular story began with “Ashley’s perfect life” I wanted to use the dichotomy of Ashley’s perfection and its evaporation into despondency, self-abuse, and finally rape.

In Pat Ryan’s article, choreographers want their dancers to be perfect all over from their work ethic to their body type everything need to be perfect (Ryan, 1989). Using this idea as a metaphor and conceptual tool I used Ashley’s emotions and projected them onto the stage as
text, which symbolized perfection and her state of life as it seemed to be in the early stages of her college life.

As I began developing the choreography, it was imperative that I select the appropriate cast members to convey emotions that I was trying to portray. For example, the dancers who were angular and powerful in their movement related to “sinful” roles. Whereas, the dancers who had graceful or lyrical abilities represented virtues of truth, honesty, and god-likeness.

To organize and create the many qualities in the scenario of Ashley’s life, I had to seek out various styles and types of music that would fulfill my quest. One of my selections was quite controversial. “Pursuit of Happiness” by Lissie had the line “hands on the wheel, fuck that” twice within her song along with “people told me slow my roll, I’m screaming out fuck that” On first notice, why would a professed Christian, choreographing a dance about Christianity use such objectionable language? Poetic license, is the standard by which artist create. I know some will see this particular lyric in question as wrong (Poetic License, 2015). Yet, we live in a fallen world and the world is part of the triumvirate, the world, the flesh, and the devil. I wanted the observer to feel the anger, the ugliness, and the debauchery that a secular life can create. I however, redeemed myself later on by demonstrating that God’s love and redemption can wash away all sin.

As I learned in choreography class music can act environmentally. Such as in film, music augments the truth and the feeling of the scene and acts as a vehicle to touch the spirit, the heart, and the intellect of the viewer. In this way, I chose music that would appeal to the righteousness of Ashley’s life, such as “Dance, Dance, Dance” by Likki Li. Then the downfall of her life was supported by music composed by Lissie, titled “Pursuit of Happiness” which equated to that particular episode. Then finally music that would fulfil her process of salvation. The music I
chose was “Happy Day” by Fee. Each rehearsal was an exercise in discovery of the continuity of movement, storyline, and music.

In regard to my choreographic process I waited until rehearsal to create movement. However I knew the music well enough that I didn’t have to worry about rhythms, counts, or phrasing. This particular method of dance making I learned in Professor Tom Smith’s UADC pieces. Furthermore, Tom felt that he had enough movement in his own body, like I do in mine that the music and the idea were the blueprint, and the movement that I created on the spot was the language of the dance. In an article written by Maria del Pilar Naranjo Rico (2015), she explains how dance making through improvisation is a tool that works often. I embraced this tool as part of my process.

Rudolph von Laban uses the twenty seven directions of movement for his choreographic process (Naranjo Rico, 2015). I didn’t use all twenty seven directions, but his mapping helped me in some of my directional decisions. Effort Shape, another movement theory; developed by Laban, has elements of slashing, gliding, pressing, flicking, wringing, dabbing, punching, and floating (Cohen, 2004b). They inspired my work in manipulating movement to support the telling of my story.

Other choreographers use imagery as part of their creative process. For example, a choreographer might ask their dancers to think of a flower, and all its elements of action. From seed to breaking through the earth to budding wilting, and finally decomposition. In my case I used the image of depression. I requested that my dancers mentally think about how they would move if in a state of depression. Since depression is an abstract concept I followed the same sort of process Alwin Nikolais did. In focusing on an abstracted image, Nikolais was able to create realistic movement. (Cohen, 2004c).
As I stated earlier, music was important in my creative process and how the facility of using it furthered my idea in the same way I employed text. There is a continuing debate on who determines a piece of art the artist or the audience. After doing research I realize it is a matter of an opinion. The audience has many opinions and the maker has an opinion. I agree with Lois Tyson, that the artist is the main component to the meaning of the art work and the audience can make up their mind. In my process the use of text and the spoken word helped to convey the realistic truth that would create no doubt in the mind of my audience (Tyson, 1999).

I had fun conceptually using text as part of my set design and back drop for the piece. I used technology via PowerPoint to display the words on the screen behind the dancers, and it acted as part of the environment yet as part of the “musical sound”, meaning the text adds to the environment of the piece just as the music does. Later on, as I continued to develop the project and the piece began to mature I added photography as a dramatic effect for “flashback” sequences in my heroin story.

In dance making there are often times of conflict where a piece eventually takes on a life of its own. I wanted the certainty that all of the movement supported the story and that my choreography sustained the rhythm and style of the sound used as well as the poetic rhythm and style of my intent. My conflict was, will the audience understand the emotions behind the movements which in fact are to represent the events of this woman’s life? And yet, I understood that the dance was becoming a living entity in and of itself and that I can’t fret about the finished product. In order to resolve my conflict I decided to pray that the spirit of God worked through me in the creation of this piece.

And in its finality the heinous act of rape; and the sense of darkness that Ashley felt, was the bottom of the proverbial pit. At that point in my choreography it was an easy “ride” to bring
her back to the beloved person she is. By representing the sequence of events in Ashley’s life and through my choreography, it’s my intent to show that no matter the despair we feel, God is our ultimate out to the temporary aspects of the world, the person who will bring us to new life, being born again. I’m hoping that the viewer will have no questions in their mind regarding the glory and abundant love that God has for us, his creatures and children. And, that if my dance can convey even a moment of that, then I consider my work successful.

The final work was publicly presented at the Paul A. Daum Theater, Kolbe Hall, The University of Akron on April 24-25, 2015 as part of the Emerge concert given by senior dance majors. A copy of the DVD will be digitally attached to this paper.

Works Cited


