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Trevor Cook

University of Wyoming, tcook15@uwyo.edu

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University of Wyoming

Investigating the Creative Process and Inspirations of the Choreographic Work, VIA AIR MAIL

Trevor Cook

University of Wyoming Honors Program Thesis

Dr. Margaret Wilson

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I could never have imagined that a two minute Facebook video about a World War II veteran being united with a love letter he had written his wife during the war would be the catalyst of a great choreographic endeavor spanning months and resulting in my first full choreographic work at the University of Wyoming. Inspiration comes in the most unexpected of ways, and nothing could be truer of how I was inspired to create my work, VIA AIR MAIL. As someone who loves antiques, the 1940's and stories about people, I figured a two-minute video deviation from my Facebook scrolling might be worth a watch, and boy was I correct.

The joy that this man felt when a woman returned to him his letter she found in an antique store was very moving, and it made me think of all the emotions and memories attached to that single piece of paper. I decided to try and find my own love letters on EBay, and after buying one set of a husband and wife's correspondence, the rest as they say is history. In the following pages I will explain my process of creating VIA AIR MAIL from a pile of letters and the steps my dancers and I took in the studio to create the piece. I will also explain how this process affected me as a choreographer and an artist touching on inspirations and new points of view I will explore in the future. Who knew a few pieces of paper would have such a profound impact on my choreography and me as a person.

Once the collection of letters arrived and I began to read them, I knew I had hit a goldmine of inspiration. There were pages and pages of handwritten and typed letters echoing the yearning and desperation of the couple to see each other again. I was overwhelmed with the amount of truth and passion included in the pages and felt like I had a responsibility to save these letters and tell the stories that had been hidden inside the old yellowed envelopes for years. I knew I wanted to approach translating the letters into movement in a couple of ways. First, I knew I wanted to approach the project from a truthful and respectful state knowing that these people I was bringing to life through dance were real and their emotions were real too. Second, I

knew I wanted to highlight certain themes and passages in the letters without being bogged down by the wealth of information. In being respectful I didn't need to use everything ever mentioned, but the necessary elements that I thought were important to tell these people's stories. Third, was to do just that – tell these people's stories. I wanted to craft real in depth characters to create a real person onstage and not just a caricature. By grounding my dancers to the information and giving them a role in the collaborative process, we were able to achieve all three elements.

In working from truth and creating truthful characters, it was important for me as a choreographer to have my dancers feel like they were an integral part in this process. I chose dancers that I knew were technically strong, but were emotionally mature and would be able to tell a story with their bodies that was deeper than the physical movement. I really felt like this was a work that we created together, and by encouraging my dancers to find their own way to express given circumstances in rehearsal and to serve the goal that we were truthfully telling a real story about real people, we created the six section work using different choreographic techniques to best tell the story. I will now discuss the six sections in detail to illustrate how I as a storyteller worked to develop different themes and ideas in each section, and how I as a choreographer executed these ideas in movement.

The first section of the works is a video projection of the physical letters and their components such as handwriting, type, photos, stamps, and drawings. I wanted the audience to physically see the letters before they experienced their contents, just like I did originally. I overlaid sounds of a typewriter and handwriting to echo the visual images of both in the letters, and panned the camera across different important phrases that would be echoed later on in the piece. Lastly I zoomed in on the outside of one letter in the final frame that was stamped "VIA AIR MAIL" to give a hint at the title. To me, this section serves as a prelude to the piece giving the audience some tangible details without revealing too much.

The second section is inspired by a quote in one of the letters from the man saying that his favorite song is the Andrew Sisters' "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree." I listened to this very up-tempo song and wanted to alter it in some way. I altered the tempo making it much slower, giving the melody a haunting and melancholy quality. If this was his favorite song, I imagined he and his wife dancing to it often. It would have been their song, but they would not have been together to dance it. All of these letters were written with the couple separated, so I wanted to take this idea of dancing together and split it apart. I positioned both dancers on opposite sides of the stage in their own separate worlds and softly lit pools of light, and had the dancers learn a partner swing phrase, just separated. It was meant to look as if they were both in their own worlds imagining dancing with their partner, but were separated by a dark expanse. They were occupying the same physical space onstage, but different emotional space.

In choreographing this section, my dancers worked to master the swing phrase together and remember the feeling of dancing with another person. Then they broke apart and did the phrase first only a foot apart and then eventually a stage width apart remembering the quality of dancing with a partner without the partner being there. This was perhaps the most difficult part of the piece to time the movements correctly to really look like they were dancing together but apart. I gave the audience some more clues here by positioning the dancers apart from each other, dancing to an era specific song, and introducing period costumes.

The third section places each individual in their respective spaces during the war – she in her bedroom at home and he in a post somewhere in the Pacific. I wanted to keep this separation explored in the second section, and from a narration standpoint give the audience a little bit more information about each person through sound. For her, I used Alice Faye's "You'll Never Know" which discusses how much a woman misses and loves her man. I imagine her in the piece being in her bedroom all alone, listening to the radio and dancing out her emotions to this song.

For him, I used a recorded section from one of the letters discussing military matters and how much he misses her. He talks about how he will love her until his dying day and the transformative power of love in his life. Although not a song lyric, his sound is real and letter driven, and discusses themes of longing, missing, and love just like hers. I wanted the audience to see a little deeper into the couple's separate lives before they come together in later sections, almost as if the audience is peering in on the couple's separated personal lives.

The choreography for this section derived specifically from the sound. I wanted to illustrate the sound in movement form, and the choreography was designed to match the rhythms and inflections of the sound. He lunges as if he is catching her when the sound says "came into my life" and she reaches her hands into the air and pulls them into her heart when the sound says "love." I heavily used music visualization to emphasize to the audience in multiple ways that the sound is important in this section. I also introduced movement ideas such as articulation of the feet, ripples of the feet and hands, and different reaches that are echoed later in the fourth and fifth sections. I wanted to introduce these ideas to the audience and establish them as natural movement characteristics of each individual and help foreshadow themes that are to come later in the piece.

The fourth section shows both individuals doing what they do best - writing letters. I had such a wealth of recorded lines from the letters that several actors recorded, and I wanted to construct a section illustrating this action of writing letters from multiple angles. I had so many letters, and each one was crafted in a special way, so I overlaid lots of different sound recordings to show the repetitive nature of letter writing. I highlighted certain phrases and words in the mass of sounds that were important, and the variety of topics mentioned in the sound illustrates the variety of topics and emotions found in the letters. I put each dancer in a tunnel of light to keep each dancer separate but show that they are both writing letters in their respective locations. She

is in a cool tunnel representing the cool winters of Massachusetts where she was originally from, and he is in a warm tunnel, representing a warm island of the Pacific that he would have been stationed on.

The choreography for this section was totally inspired by the action of writing a letter. I wanted to incorporate both elements of handwritten and typed letters, as both were included in my collection, and I wanted to hint at this concept without making it too obvious to the audience. The actual action of writing a letter occurs in the hand, but I put the action in the foot and used the stage as paper, having the dancers “write” their letters in their respective tunnels across the stage. When they reached the opposite side of the stage, they ran back to the original side as if something was pushing them back. The idea of reaching the end of the line of type and pushing the typewriter back to the start inspired this action. The dancers increased their pace as the section went on and as the sound became more frantic and varied, their speeds varied according to their impulses. This idea of abstraction is one way that I was able to give clues to the audience without making the overall piece too obvious or not truthful.

The fifth section is perhaps the climax of the piece, and sees for the first time the dancers dancing in the same physical and emotional space. The dancers transition out of the fourth section by walking backwards to the back of the stage and sitting down together, representing going back to a memory for both of them, and letting that play out. They are reliving a memory of a warm summer day in a park, and the sweeping sounds and bright floral lighting reinforce this idea. The dancers move in and out of the floor, and repeat the same motifs from the third section such as suspensions, pulls, and foot ripples. The section grows with passion and intensity as the movement becomes bigger and more full and the sweeping sounds blooms. The voices come back in, this time with tones of regret, angst, sadness, and frustration, and as they build, the couple breaks apart and the dream begins to end. This honeymoon phase is breaking apart as the

grim reality comes back into being that the couple is not reunited and is indeed still separated.

The section ends with the dancers being pulled in different directions across the stage searching for the person that was just dancing with them. This section illustrates how memories and desires fade to make room for reality.

This was the most exciting section to choreograph as I worked very collaboratively with my dancers to create a section full of rich emotion, and movement complete with extensions, falls, recoveries, partnering, and suspensions that make the section full. Narratively I wanted to show this mini arch in the greater piece from relaxing in a park, to dancing and breaking away letting the movement be at first more flirty and simple and growing to be more sweeping and connected. I wanted the passion of the couple to echo in this section as well, and we worked to create movement that flowed from one piece to the next and avoided any steps that would cause a rift or break in this flowing emotional movement. Bringing back elements of tactility that were absent from the second section, now is the time for the couple to enjoy being with each other and touching someone who has been absent for so long. As the words are reintroduced, the couple has one more moment of contact before they break apart and drift back into their own worlds.

I really wanted the reactions of this split to be truthful and personal, so each dancer came up with a movement for ten emotionally driven words and then linked the movements together. These words included regret, loneliness, ache, and others. I wanted the dancers in this crucial moment of truth to be as emotionally invested as possible, and to allow bits of themselves to be a part of the choreography. Then, the dancers were pulled in different directions playing with moments of impulse coming from different parts of their body to split them up and take them around the space.

The final section is experimentation with minimal movement and small gestures to evoke the biggest emotions and meanings. Each dancer startles awake on the ground in a small pool of

soft light as if they are waking up from a nightmare. They are positioned in the same locations they began section two in. Looking to their side, they feel for their partner, pat the ground, and realize the other isn't there. Then they lie back on the ground and curl up facing away from each other, and then slowly extend their arms and open their hands reaching across the black expanse for each other as the lights fade. The radio sounds in the background emphasize the idea of a lost signal and searching for each other, and the minimal movement allows the dancers to show immense truth in their interpretation of the section. Sometimes the most moving things can be said with the least amount of movement, and I believe that is true here. There was no clear ending to the letters and no clue as to what happened to the couple, so I too wanted to leave that up to audience interpretation. By describing my intentions and choreographic process of each section, one is able to understand more in depth my approach to turning the letters into a concert dance work.

As a choreographer I hold several things to be true in my point of view and style. First, I am intrigued by stories about people. I think people and human experiences are fascinating and not always explored in dance, and I feel that human stories in choreography give the audience a perfect way to connect with dance. I also enjoy stories that have been lost to time, and feel it is my duty as an art maker to tell these stories in new ways through dance. I am interested in tangible inspirations that lend themselves to more open ended interpretations, which is one reason I love to work from documentation or sources such as letters, interviews, photographs, etc. By grounding my work in something familiar to an audience such as a story, emotion, or experience, it gives a sort of comfort and familiarity to an audience, which then makes it easier for them to view and understand dance, which for most audience members is not the most natural thing they have ever experienced.

I also believe that choreography should be about the audience, and not the choreographer. Sure, I might create a work to satisfy a desire or struggle in my own life, or to try and make sense of an event or idea, but for me, the end work should be geared toward an audience. Knowing what I want to communicate to an audience as a choreographer helps me better design my piece in a way that will read well to an audience, and by layering in different choreographic elements, I make sure that an audience with different levels of dance competency can take away different things from watching my work. In *VIA AIR MAIL*, I grounded the piece in a familiar time, (the 1940's) and in a love story, and then was able to abstract ideas such as separation, letter writing, and dreams from the piece in a deep way that people could see if they looked hard enough, but was not crucial to the understanding of the piece. For me, an audience goes to watch dance to get something out of it, and I make choreography because I have either a message or a story I want to share with an audience. It is a two way street, so if they show up to see my work, I better deliver and give them something in return.

I have learned from experiences that people connect to stories about other people and human experiences that they can see themselves in, and if people go and watch dance and don't understand it or like it, they don't go back feeling alienated. As a choreographer I want to be inclusive to audience members to show them that dance doesn't have to be just flailing around the stage, rolling around on the ground, or the Nutcracker at Christmas time. Dance can be a way to communicate real human stories and experiences and can be a uniting force, not a dividing one. I hope to continue these choreographic goals in my future work.

My goals as a choreographer come from years of being an active dance audience member. Too often I go and watch dance and spend twelve minutes with a piece and get to the end and have no idea what it was about. This is frustrating as I spent my own valuable time trying to make any sense of what I was watching, and came up short. Some pieces I watch seem

like a platform for a choreographer to process something for himself or herself, which seems selfish if they can't give that message to an audience. I try instantly to make connections when watching a work to discover the intent of the choreographer, because we as humans always try to make sense of foreign information and seek to understand as soon as we can. Sure, there are works where the point is to have no point or the point is dance for dance sake, which is valuable too, but too often I watch pieces that are stuck in a gray area of not committing to either way. I appreciate specificity and well-crafting in choreography giving me as an audience member a rich overall experience from the sound score, to costumes, and movement. Too often other elements are left out or become afterthoughts, and I strive to give my audiences an experience, not just a dance to observe and take with them. Some of my reflections of being a dance audience member have shaped my views and goals for choreography.

There are several elements that I learned are important to my choreographic point of view and perspective after creating this piece. The first is the importance of collaboration. I relied on collaboration for this work asking my dancers to be just as much a part of the process as I was while asking them to bring their own ideas, opinions, and points of view to the piece. This is one of the best ways I was able to infiltrate the piece with truth, as the dancers felt like they were an integral role in the process, and sometimes my ideas were not always the right ones, but ones that we came up with together were. Collaboration served to make the piece stronger because three great minds were bringing ideas and experiences to the table, not just one. Although I was the person that oversaw the process and had the final say, collaboration allowed us to work together for the good of the cause, which was truthfully telling this couple's story the best way we could.

Individuality is another element I see as valuable and important to my choreographic process. I was fortunate enough to work with very individualized and unique dancers who brought their own sense of identity to the process, which was important and enriching. In telling

a story about specific people, I needed specific dancers who were grounded in their lives and knew who they were as people. This way I knew if they could be themselves, they could be another character and bring a side of themselves to the character, rooting that character development in truth. I realize now that I like to work with dancers who know who they are and have a good idea of self. This individuality is beautiful, and greatly enhances my work.

Trusting the creative process is the final element I learned is important in choreography. One of my original dancers was forced to leave the project several weeks before the show for a job offer, and I was crushed, as we created the piece with her. She was meant to dance this roll, and no one could take her place, or so I thought. I cast another girl to fill the role, and knew that I had to make her feel like she was a part of the piece and that this role was hers, not that she was stepping in for someone else. I had worked on truthfulness with the first dancer for months, and now only had a few weeks to get the new dancer to the same level of truthfulness. By encouraging her to be herself in the character and no one else, the new dancer was able to bring truth to the piece immediately and learn the role in time for the performance. I thought the future of the piece was over when the first dancer left, but the new dancer brought new ideas and new ways of moving that in some ways were more interesting and compelling than the first dancer. I learned that the process will always prevail and that as a choreographer, it is my job to take whatever comes and make sure I am best serving the story and my dancers. There was no need for worry or stress, as it all turned out beautifully, and being flexible and trusting the process is sometimes the biggest key to success.

There are several performances I was lucky enough to attend in London, England in 2014 that helped shape my approaches to choreography and my points of view. The first was Luca Silvestrini of Protein Dance's *Border Tales*. This was a dance theatre work that blended dance, personal interviews, and dancer individuality together to create a work commenting on

multiculturalism in the U.K. Each dancer was an immigrant that shared their own personal story in the narrative of the work, and their individuality was integral to the telling of the story. This performance helped me develop my appreciation of personal narrative in dance, something I have since explored through with my own personal interviews in other works.

For VIA AIR MAIL I used this concept of personal narrative to really develop the narratives of each character, not through dialogue and interviews, but through the letters and through movement. A personal character story was integral to the success of my work, and by working with individualized dancers, I asked them to bring their own narratives to the characters. I was working with three narratives - the real narrative of the couple I read from the letters, my own narrative I designed for the piece, and my dancers personal narratives they used as character inspiration in the piece. All three different narratives were blended together to create the greater narrative for the audience.

Another transformative work I saw in London was Punchdrunk's, *The Drowned Man*. This immersive theatre promenade performance blended heavily elements of theatre and dance to create an environment that the audience was free to walk around and explore. The production used dance and movement elements to tell the story as well as theatrical elements such as sound, set, and costume in a blended way. Setting dance in a more theatrical environment inspired me to bring more theatrical elements into my own work and to try and blend elements of theatre and dance together in my work to serve best the piece. I used movement to tell my story, but I also used old music and recorded interviews in the sound, a video projection as a set design element, and period costumes as a costume element to help tell the story. By grounding the work in a real time and place, these theatrical elements helped reinforce this setting and style, setting the scene for the movement to be the storytelling vehicle. Both performances influenced me greatly as a choreographer, and helped me see concert dance and its possibilities in a new light.

As I have choreographed more works and developed my styles and points of view, there are three dancers and choreographers that I resonate with the most and who I identify with as an active member of their lineage. First and foremost, I must recognize Agnes de Mille who I highly respect and appreciate as a choreographer and artist. De Mille was the first person, and first woman for that matter, to make storytelling integral to classical ballet and musical theatre dance (Speaker-Yuan). With her ballet *Rodeo* and work on *Oklahoma!* she made dance the focus of the story and used dance as a way to further the plot (Speaker-Yuan). She was the first to infiltrate classical ballet with movement born of “folklore and nostalgia” and created works based off of real types of people, not fairy tale characters (Bauch 72). De Mille made sure that the “emotions were revealed to the audience through dance and pantomime rather than through speech by transporting the play from realism into fantasy and back to reality telling viewers what the characters could not” (qtd. in Speaker-Yuan 65).

In my own work with *VIA AIR MAIL*, I tried to do exactly that and reveal the emotional integrity of the couple to the audience through dance. Just like De Mille, I too value emotions as the best way to communicate storytelling, and I value stories about real people instead of made up ones. When asked about her linkage between dance and theatre she said, “I linked the dances tightly to the drama. I was sensitively aware of the play, its style, and its needs, and the dances I designed...augmented the characters which complemented the text and lyrics” (qtd. In De Mille 188). Just like De Mille I always try to serve the story first, and allow my dance to support that mission, and in *VIA AIR MAIL* I too used choreography as the main storytelling device to enhance the character development complimenting the music and lyrics of the sound.

I also appreciate De Mille’s fearless attitude and her unwavering self-truth that she kept with her through her entire career. She once said, “I was determined to survive, if at all, as me” (qtd. in Speaker-Yuan 35). This inspires me as she was always true to herself and did not change

her personality or work to fit what anyone else wanted her to be. In my opinion, this is why she was so successful, and this profound faith in herself first before anything else is something I want to take with me and apply to my own life. In a world of no, I want to first recognize that my work is good, and as long as I can please myself, that is all that matters.

This idea of pleasing myself first leads me to another dance icon of mine, Fred Astaire. Astaire said in his biography, “When working on my own choreography I am not always receptive to outside suggestions or opinions. I believe that if you have something in mind in the way of creation...you are certain to come up with inaccurate criticism and damaging results if you go around asking for opinions...I concur with what Howard Dietz once told me: ‘When I write something or produce anything, I do it for myself. If I like it - that’s it’” (Astaire 6). I resonate with this idea because in this subjective world of dance, one person’s opinion is no more valid than another person’s. Too often I have seen colleagues focus too much on pleasing other people with their choreography, that they lose sight of the original work they wanted to create. Reading Astaire’s biography has taught me that my own opinions and ideas are valid, and that pleasing myself with my own work is valid. I feel like no one will be able to love a work until you yourself love it, and if I put all of my passion and love into creating a work, that is evident to an audience when they watch it.

Astaire also talks about his appreciation yet dislike for classical ballet saying that he knew ballet was not going to be his medium of choice and that he could take elements from it, but that he was never going to be a ballet dancer (Astaire 325). “I felt that I was going to become a musical comedy performer or bust and this meant that there should be no limitations (Astaire 325). I too aspire to be a musical theatre performer, and am inspired by Astaire to take from all different forms of dance what I can to mold myself into a well-rounded artist. I too believe that I should not be limited in my dance pursuits, and will do everything in my power to expose myself

to as many different forms of dance and choreography as I can in order to make myself the most informed artist I can be.

The final artist I resonate with after choreographing VIA AIR MAIL is Anthony Tudor. An English ballet dancer and choreographer, Tudor too transformed ballet like De Mille into a more modern style, and worked stories about people into his pieces. For Tudor, dance was not about the steps, but about the style, and he created work similar to De Mille about “middle class real people similar to ourselves” (Anthony). He emphasized emotional detail over physical detail, and used physical gestures and positions to convey this emotional quality. Sallie Wilson commented on the importance of acting to Tudor’s technique explaining how real people had to be doing his movement and not just dancers, that acting was crucial to the success of his work, and truthful acting at that (Anthony).

This philosophy of real character dancers having truthful emotional experiences onstage is something I too tried to achieve with my dancers in VIA AIR MAIL always encouraging them to be truthful. If a movement did not seem truthful, I would remove it, and the importance of finding the exact right movement to communicate the right emotion was something I worked tirelessly to achieve. When asked what his choreographic style was, Tudor was not responsive, as his work transcends styles, and I too feel like my style is not defined in one genre (Anthony). For me, my style is dance theatre and is based in stories about people. Whatever style of dance will best serve my story is the style I use. Looking more into these three dance icons helped me understand the lineage of storytelling I come from, and the future I have in choreography and in dance as an art form.

The process of creating my work VIA AIR MAIL was an exciting and incredibly gratifying one. I learned so much about the creative process, my style and voice as a choreographer, and I was able to reflect on my inspirations and idols in the dance world that have

helped me get to where I am today. As I go out into the real world, I will hold the ideas and influences I received by studying several great dance icons close and use that to stay true to myself, create work that I love, and continue to pursue topics about real people and real experiences. My future time in London will give me new inspirations, and I will continue to search for lost and forgotten stories that need to be told. I will also use my love of both theatre and dance to integrate my work with multiple angles and perspectives, but most importantly I will pursue truth in all that I do. I reflect on this choreographic experience with a full heart as it taught me so much, and I cannot wait to put all the principals I have learned into action in future work.

Link to VIA AIR MAIL:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBenseEPGcDU&feature=em-upload_owner

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