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Name it, Speak it, Act it

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Name it, Speak it, Act it

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Dance Performance/Honors Senior Project

University of Wyoming

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Mentor: Margaret Wilson

Name it, Speak it, Act it

This project explores and challenges our understanding of racism and white privilege, specifically reflecting on perceptions and mindsets about these topics in the Midwest as compared to other regions of the country where diversity is more prevalent. I placed this topic in both a creative and a critical conversation by choreographing a dance performance piece driven from my experiences and research. This project combines my coursework in Theatre and Dance (concentration in dance performance) and my coursework in English by using work and research from relevant dance and English classes to create activism choreography.

Dance performance can be a provocative art form that raises questions, discusses issues, and creates conversation. Nonverbal communication expresses feelings and ideas, and it can reach a wide range of people in a way that verbal communication can't always do. My purpose for this topic adapted to dance performance is to create an environment which expresses frustration with this topic through movement, as well as spark conversation that will make change. My intention is to communicate these feelings and express them in a way that only movement can convey.

My experiences

This work is largely driven from my experiences doing the National Student Exchange in Potsdam, New York last spring, and from doing the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina last summer. Some of my most profound learning experiences from this time had not to do with school or dance, but with cultural differences. I learned quickly that though there was more diversity, racial groups formed that made it almost taboo to become close friends across the color line. This shocked me, as I believe that I've always formed my friends based on personality rather than color of skin. This project conceptualizes my thoughts about white privilege, racism,

and what my role as a white person is in a region where not many people realize how much racism is still thriving across the country.

My interest in this topic has developed consistently throughout my time at the University of Wyoming. I became very interested in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* in my freshman honors colloquium course. His story made me passionate about literature discussing the very real situation of being placed in a lower position than someone else simply because of the color of skin. Douglass tells his story with brutal honesty while at the same time writing engaging literature and appealing to pathos. This interest inspired me to take an "African American Literature" class the next year, where I became intrigued by the narratives about what African Americans have experienced and still experience in this country. Later, I took a "Slavery and Resistance in the Americas" class and learned so much more about how the western world (along with parts of Europe) have exploited entire nations just for economic gain. A class about "Race and Racism" that I took last fall helped me understand the structure that racism is built upon and why it thrives. Reading and research from these classes, combined with my personal experiences, made me feel able to address this topic with as much integrity and openness as possible.

Binaries of racism and whiteness

One of the most important aspects to recognize within this project is why it is an issue in the United States, and to what degree it is still visible today. Of course, our own American history introduces non-white people as lower beings than white people. Slavery especially created a gap between "white" and "color" that still has effects today. This superiority was most likely still intact from when Europeans invaded the Americas and took Native American's land. It has continued on through time as any immigrants who aren't white become low on the social

scale automatically. We still see this mindset about immigration today, particularly surrounding Mexican immigration.

In his critical essay, “The Fact of Blackness,” Frantz Fanon writes that racism exists because of binaries. When black people are around their own race, nothing makes them outsiders. White people must be present in order for them to really be black. This binary is exemplified when Fanon quotes a friend of his from Africa who said, “ ‘As long as the Arab is treated like a man, no solution is possible’ ” (Fanon 403). Black people have been treated as less than human in more places throughout the world than America, and not just in places that are primarily white. Whiteness means that white people get to just be people. While a person of color is always clarified as to what their race is when speaking of them (the black cop, my Asian friend, etc.), if a race is not mentioned, the person is assumed to be white. “The assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture” (Dyer 10).

While the cultures that develop regarding race are real, race in itself is a socially constructed concept. From a biological standpoint, there is just as much genetic variation between two humans of the “same race” as there is between two humans of “different races.” Race is a socially built idea, and so our definitions of what race someone else is and what race we are is really just our perception. Most discrimination based around differences is socially constructed rather than naturally constructed, like those discriminations surrounding “gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, ability and disability” (Amico 7).

In his book *Exploring White Privilege*, Robert P. Amico explains that white privilege is real, as much as white people often don’t like to admit it. White privilege exists because there is black disprivilege. “White privilege is a form of domination; hence it is a relational concept. It

positions one person or group over another person or group” (Amico 2). These advantages exist because there is a group that does not receive them. If everyone had the same opportunities, white people would not benefit as much. However, white people get better jobs and receive higher pay, they won’t get pulled over while driving just because of the color of their skin, they won’t have to worry about their safety when they are pulled over, and they are not followed by security in a store (Amico 6).

Whiteness gives advantages from birth until death. Since the families of white children do not have to deal with redlining (steering people of color out of wealthy white communities), white children are usually wealthier and go to better schools than black children. “The educational, legal, housing, health-care, law enforcement, employment, and environmental policy systems all interlock to create a white hegemony in which we live and breathe without noticing as long as we are its beneficiaries. . .” (Amico 14). Do we really not notice or do we choose not to?

Many do not want to discuss the idea of whiteness because it is a very uncomfortable topic. Others feel that by making the conversation about white people rather than about racism, they are putting white people at the center again. These small problems only prolong the real problem. “But rather than providing reasons to avoid talking about whiteness and white privilege, these concerns actually underscore our need to do so. Discomfort of this kind is a sure sign that we need to continue the conversation” (Rothenburg 1). This conversation can include many different opinions, but the conversation itself is what is truly important.

An important counter question contributing to the discussion of whiteness and racism is the concept of “reverse racism.” Do white people experience racism too? And should they speak out about their experiences? The class I took on “Race and Racism” helped me find some

answers to these questions. While white people certainly experience bias, any racism they may experience is so different from the racism that minorities in the United States experience that I don't believe it can be called racism. Racism in America has turned into an institutionalized system of giving preference to one race over others in a multitude of venues and facets. I think that racism as a general term goes beyond bias that every person will experience due to some aspect of themselves. Racism is bigger than discrimination against any race. It's the system of inequality that only minorities really experience. "The first step toward dismantling the system of privilege that operates in this society is to name it and the second is for those of us who can to use our privileges to speak out against the system of privilege as a whole" (Rothenburg).

Dance Project

Dance is a powerful method of communication. Nonverbal communication is a significant way to reach a wide range of people, and it is a diverse way to start conversation. Movement expresses feeling. The work that I choreographed is drawn from feelings of frustration, and I hope that the movement will stimulate people, even for just a moment, to feel that frantic feeling of wanting to send a message of acceptance. I have presented this dance piece at the American College Dance Festival (ACDA) and at the Shepard Symposium on Social Justice. ACDA is specific to the dance community, while the Shepard Symposium is for a broader range of people. I hope that both presentations of this piece sparked conversation and a willingness to create change.

Process

I started choreographing at the beginning of the fall 2017 semester, and used movement inspired from frustration, as well as a frantic feeling. This created dance that was strong yet out of control in a way. I cast eight people to be in this piece because I wanted to show the power of

group work. I cast experienced dancers because I wanted to bring a mature quality to both the concept and the choreography, and because I knew I could trust these experienced dancers to make bold movement choices during collaboration. I spent several hours a week in personal rehearsals choreographing and planning for the group rehearsal, then I met with my cast about once a week for an hour and a half.

Creation of movement

For movement, I wanted the piece to capture and convey a feeling rather than trying to literally tell a story. I wanted to play with a very uncomfortable movement quality. I felt as though getting others to understand how relevant racism is today is like pulling teeth—both mine and theirs. The movement should convey this, as well as a frantic feeling of wanting to care enough to get a message out there and make a change, while simultaneously not knowing how to do this.

As I was choreographing, I spent hours in the studio by myself coming up with movement, then tweaking it till I thought it worked. I made a playlist of music that I thought created a strong yet irritated quality. I would then play that music and improvise movement, often recording myself to catch any movements that I liked, so that I could recreate them later. I would take several movements or sections that I liked and piece them together to create a phrase. I would also envision group patterns of movement and write them down, then try to make those ideas more specific so that they could come to life.

Sometimes I had an idea or a movement concept and I would prompt my dancers to improvise with those ideas. I would pull little pieces of something they did and then create a little phrase for them based on the movements I thought represented the idea the best. I also utilized the dancers to help come up with duet work, as it's often difficult to create responsive movement

between two people with just one person. I would ask two dancers to have a conversation with one another through movement: one would start with a gesture, and the other would “respond” to that gesture with their own. This helped create organic looking phrases for sections that I wanted to look human and empathetic.

I used group unison work to symbolize the power group thinking. I started the process with a fairly simple walking phrase that was militaristic and strong. Seeing the whole cast doing this phrase in unison and powering across the stage showed the simplicity and ease of following the flow of what everyone else is doing and thinking. I used solo work to show the individual mind thinking for itself, and duet work to show listening to other people with empathy. I also used retrograding, which is the complete reversal of a phrase, as though it is being rewound. I wanted this to show how people and society can become backward-thinking and take steps back in progress sometimes.

Choreography

I started the piece with a soloist who does wild, out of control movement inspired from feelings of frustration. On the other side of the stage, another soloist paces back and forth, caught in his own world of thought. The two begin circling around each other, walking fast but stopping now and again to fling out one movement. As they retreat to where they started, the entire group comes out with the walking phrase. As they pass each soloist, the soloist joins in sync into the walking phrase to show the ease of following others’ mindsets. In the next section, the entire group painstakingly works their way forward on the floor, only to violently push themselves backward as though being kicked. I wanted this section to portray slow progress and the truth of small steps sometimes being overridden by regression. A large group of the dancers then tumble into the space, getting up to do a powerful phrase in unison driven by frantic movement

concepts. This phrase moves in and out of the floor quickly and has flinging motions that feel out of control. The dancers then go into the retrograde phrase, which dissolves into a duet in which the two dancers explore conversing through movement and the power of empathetic touch.

This duet eventually stands to simply look straight at each other to show connection, while the rest of the dancers trickle across stage with a simple twisted movement. This leads into a group section of jumping powerfully across the stage, with a trio breaking out into more spastic yet strong movement. A new trio enters with uncomfortable, binding movement. The larger group slowly turns away to ignore those in pain. This trio runs through the group, turning to face them, but the group then turns away again and runs offstage. One dancer from this group slows and comes to a halt right before exiting, as though having a slow change of mind. She stumbles back toward the trio and breaks into the same wild movement seen at the beginning of the piece from the first soloist. The trio joins her and they create a quartet built around seeing each other. This show the ability to listen and learn. This leads into a group section of measured, meticulous movement in which each dancer has their own path across stage. This shows the idea of slow progress. Duets break out during this section among all dancers, to again show empathy and human connection. All dancers then start walking through the space around each other, in unpredictable patterns and making eye contact with one another. This shows the dancers deliberately changing their pattern to oppose the strict and militaristic walking pattern from the beginning of the piece. They come to a stop in a long diagonal line, and move together in a final phrase of solidarity. The piece finishes with the dancers breaking out of the line one by one and spiraling out of control to the opposite diagonal. Each time they reach the edge of the stage, they run back to the start and try again. The lights go out on the dancers caught in a chaotic and

endless loop of trying. I wanted to communicate that I have no solutions. There is no end, but trying and continuing the conversation is what's really important.

Throughout the piece, there were several motifs that I thought were important for viewers to see continuously. One was the flinging of the arms and torso, which felt very wild and abandoned to me, like the feeling of not knowing what to do. This turned into a stiffer motion that froze in a crazed position each time. All dancers doing this at once created a frustrated effect. Another motif was a tension and release in the hands, which was driven from a feeling of anxiety. There was also a twisted arabesque motif, which was a way to show a beautiful, classic idea, then warp it to create an uncomfortable feeling.

Music and Soundscore

I wanted the piece to get straight to the point about the issue at hand, rather than beating around the bush about it or being subtle. I drew directly from my research about what it means to be white in America today and how racism affects minorities, and I created a script with various quotes. I then recorded four actors speaking these lines, giving them the direction of clarity and matter-of-factness. I then layered these recordings over my music soundscore.

I was influenced heavily in the beginning of my process both by Frederick Douglass and by Tim Wise. Frederick Douglass' speech, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" is powerful to me because it was created over 150 years ago, yet it still holds relevance today. He asks why he was asked to speak on a day that above all else, make it painfully obvious that he and all others of color are not equal in this country. Tim Wise gives a powerful speech called "White Privilege, Racism, White Denial and the Cost of Inequality." He says that the reason he gives this talk is because he is the aesthetic that many people need to be able to truly listen. "Privilege . . . bestows upon me that advantage and so as a matter of responsibility and

accountability I have to own that up front” (Wise). This speech helped me find the words that I was looking for to justify doing this: I’m trying to be an ally to the cause of social equality as a privileged person myself in hopes that others will follow.

For music and soundscore, I first chose music that would create a good atmosphere for strong dancing without being melodramatic or too intense. I found music from Ólafur Arnolds that had a strong beat in which my dancers could move together to. It also had an appropriate tone of intensity. I also found a piece of music by Philip Glass that had beautiful piano scales that created an atmosphere of uneasy energy. I worked with a musician to help morph and edit the music together so that it sounded coherent, rather than like three separate songs.

For my script, I compiled quotes (many were cited above from Amico, Rothenburg, and Dyer), conversations, and my own experiences. My original soundscore had the quotes from Frederick Douglass and Tim Wise, but I ended up taking them out because I wanted the sound to be organic to this piece and process, which meant recording my own script.

Other Technical elements

I wanted a neutral palate for costumes early on, and originally pictured varying shades of gray. The only change that happened was the addition of an earthy olive green to indicate a closer to natural human condition. Another student designed the lighting for my piece, using pinks and purples to portray frustration, high diagonal lights to showcase certain solos and duets, and only backlight at certain points so that the dancers would be in silhouette.

Feedback

Throughout this process, I was honored to receive feedback from many amazing people whose opinions and encouragement helped shape this project into what it became. Jennifer Deckert, Marsha Knight, and Margaret Wilson, the faculty of the dance department, helped me

throughout the process. They made sure that the project did not become insensitive in any way, and they asked me questions that helped me find my own voice. They encouraged me to develop the duet work and anything that showed human connection.

Tai Jimenez, former principal dancer with Dance Theatre of Harlem and professor at Boston Conservatory, was at UW in residency last fall, and she was generous enough to sit down with me, watch my piece, and provide feedback about it. She told me that as a person of color, she was not offended by any content in my piece and that she thought it was a brave endeavor to discuss racism and privilege from a white person's perspective.

I also spoke with my dancers, and their input was integral to the direction of the piece. We discussed their viewpoints and experiences surrounding race, and we encouraged each other to have open minds. One dancer suggested that I not only show movement represented the problem, but also movement that would show the power of a helping hand, which is the idea that the duets developed from. Another dancer proposed that we record the conversations that we were having to show the struggle of not finding an answer.

Presentations

This piece was presented at the American College Dance Association, where there are three adjudicators who view the work bias-free—they do not know any context such as who choreographed the piece or which school it came from. They then give feedback addressing only what they saw and heard. The adjudicators said that the piece was bold and heading down the right path. They recognized that it offered no solutions but was rather “work about making a work.” They gave me some suggestions like making the soundscore mesh better with the movement, and making the end of the piece the beginning.

This piece was also presented at the Shepard Symposium in April, and it was fascinating to see and hear the different response that it received from a non-dance audience. I started by giving a short presentation about my process and the inspiration behind this work. I introduced a few ideas about what to look for in a dance performance, and then the dancers performed. I then conducted a talk-back session in which I asked directed questions about what the audience thought about the movement, and how they felt about dance as a medium for communication. Several people pointed out movement that they noticed as strong or as vulnerable and open, and someone gave the feedback that not everyone communicates best through words, so it's important to have as many mediums as possible that anyone could connect to. Another audience member raised the point that we too often talk about different races of people with reference to their race, rather than just letting them be people.

Concluding thoughts

As I reflect on this project, I feel as though I've only scratched the surface of what it means to be an activist, what the solution to civil inequalities might be, and how to go about expressing the desire to help as a privileged person. In some ways, that is discouraging because I want to feel resolved at the end of a year's worth of work. However, I also feel proud of everything that I accomplished within this project. I knew from the beginning that this project would not come to some conclusion about "what to do." I knew that I wanted to create a piece that aimed to spark conversation and from there, potentially change. I'm overwhelmed with the amount of help that I've received from the entire theatre and dance department at UW, whether it was dancing in my piece, giving me feedback, helping me design and edit lighting, music, and costumes, speaking for my soundscore, or simply coming to showings to support my project. I hope to continue making work surrounding social justice as I continue into the world of the arts.

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