

March 2018 PROPOSAL: Independent Study -- Name of artist: Waverley Leung

Collaborators: **Rhamzi Burks** [at the planning stage]; **Marsha Pierre** [in the duration] and **Amelia Sanders** [for the “final” stages] Semester of presentation: Fall 2018

I. Project Intention

We are collaborating together to experiment and push the boundaries of dance and movement as “performance” in a contemporary setting. To do this, we want to explore an original idea reflecting upon the relativity of performance as a spectacle to the audience. Therefore, we will focus on the movements and connection of the dancers to the physical body and emotional and mental states -- without the eyes of others. Our objective is to challenge and possibly re-establish the structure and parameters of dance as a means of performance, physical narration or spectacle.

We seek to find answers to these posed questions:

- Would the value of the audience change when considering their physical presence but disregarding their thoughts and opinions?
- Is it possible to create something meaningful and intentional between the two of us, and *only* for us, knowing we will not be performing it?
- How will our experience from this purpose of process inform how we approach other rehearsals we are a part of? How much of it will reflect our previous experiences?
- What will we value about our process and the product of our creation?
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II. Research

We will research Merce Cunningham, the artists of Judson Church group, and other avant-garde artists of the 1960s because of how they pushed boundaries for their time. It can be argued that they were the first to truly challenge the presentation and performance aspects of dance. As such, there is a lot of material from their works and processes for us to refer to. We can see how they approached experimentation to inform and reflect on our own exploration.

III. Process

Once a week we will meet with prompts in mind to challenge and experiment with either individually or with each other. Our process will be strongly “improv” based with a focus on the experiment and experience of the process to influence how we develop our product. To show our progress, we will record our explorations in the studio. We will be in charge of where the camera is placed in the room and turning on the camera. In addition, we will have a written and/or video journal to document our process and developments.

The prompts will range from abstract to specific movement ideas, and we will move in the space both as individuals and as partners.

For example:

- What does it mean to completely give yourself to someone else in a physical sense partnering/contact improv or an emotional sense? How would this be expressed?
- Is it possible for people to occupy the same space but have no relation to one another?
- Can movement from a sensory level be shared or experienced the same between different individuals while doing the same movement?
- If we are inspired by the same thing, how can we take each other's interpretation and be inspired to create something new?
- How can we challenge and motivate each other to push our personal boundaries physically and mentally in our approach to movement?

The prompts will be used as manipulated variables that we will further develop into complex scores. From there we will begin to structure our actual piece. As a result, our process will mainly be **structured improv with sequences of choreography**. By the end of the fall semester we would execute our final product (the physicalization of our investigations) by opening the space and results of our movement research to onlookers.

IV. Justification

During my time here at MSU, I feel as if I enjoy the process of learning and rehearsing a piece more than performing it. There is no difference between my rehearsal and performance "face" because in my opinion, the body and what is doing is so captivating that as long as there is life in your face, you are performing. Ultimately what your body is doing will naturally reflect in your face, and so you should focus on your movement and where it's coming from (the intention) to work on your "performance". To me, performance does not mean a stage or having an audience, but rather when I am the most connected to my body and emotions and am just enjoying dancing.

I feel, especially as a dancer, I am so concerned with the criticism and feedback of others that I often feel a conflict about how I feel about my work. This is enhanced when we prepare for performances where we tend to focus on the audience's reaction and hope for good feedback. While this is a natural desire, in my opinion the creativity and exploration of a piece can be stunted once we get concerned with the idea of a performance in order to present something "perfect." Therefore, this project will give me the opportunity to fully invest myself into my craft and develop the artist I feel trying to come out. My artistry, movement, and choreography skills will also be put to the test in a setting different from the norm. I look forward to seeing how I connect my physical, mental, and emotional states in this intimate and vulnerable setting.

I envision that this project will allow for me explore the concept of process as the purpose to a work; entering the space knowing that there is no performance, your approach and energy to your work will change. Naturally, your relationship to the audience is changed as well. Placed in this situation, how will our movement develop? Is it possible for us to completely explore and develop an idea to the point that we feel there is nothing else to do, and would this mean that it's finished or a piece? How far can we take our movement research and choreography

in a process-focused setting? By essentially completely stripping away the stage and audience factor, I will be able to focus on movement and collaborating with like-minded people in a positive and safe environment. Despite no ending performance, I believe it is possible to still

make the time spent in the studio meaningful and worthwhile.



[Late spring, 2018, email from Waverley to NB/advisor] Hi Neil, I've been thinking about the independent study, and as much as I want to do it, I have a concern: Since Rhamzi is graduating this semester and will be working on her own development as a working artist, I do not want to inconvenience her to work on something with me at MSU. She has said that she will give me full support, but I know that what she wants to do might conflict with this project at times, and do not want her to have to choose between doing something for me while pursuing her own career. In a way, I feel it would be more beneficial for both of us if I had her as a consultant/guest who would come at times but do not have a strict commitment on her schedule. Therefore, if we continued this, I would like to include other people in this project to collaborate with (preferably who will still be here next year).

[NB response to Waverley] - it is not up to me to decide if you should continue. that has to come from you. you need to get together with rhamzi, be honest and forthright with each other, make a decision 'yes' or 'no,' and then commit to doing the work. if the answer between you and rhamzi ends up as 'no,' and yet you still truly want to do the project, then your motivation is the only force that can drive others to follow through with it under your leadership. this is your project, it is a great idea -- but ultimately you are the artist and you will have to decide what is the best path.

[Later that day, NB sent this quote to Waverley] Pamela Tatge, the director of Jacob's Pillow, praised Faye Driscoll's philosophical approach to choreography. (Ms. Driscoll has described her work as "an obsession with the problem of being 'somebody' in a world of other 'somebodies' and all the conflicts and comedy born in our interactions with others.")

"She is keenly aware that the moment of performance is only made by the presence of both performer and audience member, and she is interested in the highly charged space that forms between them," Ms. Tatge said in a statement. "She's consistently interrogating what it means to be human and all the ways we put on personas in our lives."

[NB to Lori Katterhenry, Sept 12, 2019] LK - marsha pierre joining waverley leung in independent study project mentored by NB this term. very exciting!

[LK to NB] Two artist/scholars.... nice!

[Waverley begins her stream-of-consciousness Project Journal - September 13th, 2018 @ 6-7:30pm (Room 1200), improvising and expanding upon her original Project Proposal of the prior spring]

Rhamzi could not be present due to a family emergency, so I decided to go forward with **Marsha Pierre!** I started this “rehearsal” with Marsha by discussing what I am addressing with this project/study. In my description, I detailed that this project would give us the opportunity to explore our artistry and our movement in its purest form. I mentioned that I have felt that when we are in rehearsal or class, we are so often pushed to perform, or have a performance deadline, that qualitative things are lost in the process. Therefore, this project would give us the opportunity to dance, move, and collaborate simply because we want to. After all, how often after we graduate in May will we be able to use studio space to move for the sake of movement without having to worry about life? We discussed the duality of performance and movement; Marsha suggested one day we teach a group a phrase and record them without them knowing, at random times, and show it to them at the end so that they can see what they look like when they are moving for themselves. I personally like this idea of having a “workshop” because when I take class and invest myself in the movement and my body, often afterwards I wonder what I looked like. The phrase, “dance like no one is watching” is so heavily repeated, but I feel recently that the phrase has become “perform like no one is watching”; dance and performance have become interchangeable. And sure, while dance is a performing art, what is the boundary between performance and dance? When the avant garde artists of Judson Church and Merce Cunningham did movement for the sake of movement, they still choreographed and had audiences attend, so were those not performances? Nowadays, I hear that there is no such thing as movement for movement’s sake, but what does that mean when exploring, innovating, and choreographing? Does this mean that ultimately, every dance (piece, work) is created in mind with the end being performance? Can’t dance have the purpose of personal, artistic, human fulfillment for the dancers, disregarding what the audience says? I am in support of the approach that dancers are sharing parts of themselves, their movement and choreography saying everything, not what their face expresses. Instead, the face is something that is added as an extra layer but not the essence of the dance that the audience comes to see. I guess this means that I want to redefine what the “ending” of a dance is, and how that can be just as fulfilling if not more than the performance aspect of dance. I feel that with dance, or any art form for that matter, there is never a finishing point. Choreographers constantly adjust, edit, and change their works. Even the ones that remain the same and are passed down, the new dancer(s) bring something different than the previous times it was performed. As we all know, each performance is different from another, giving performance a life and breath quality. With this in mind, when did performance mean the end or the facial performance of a dancer? The honesty of the body and human should be seen in the movement in addition to the face, and combined I believe means more than a dancer who put on a “performance face” and forgoes the honesty and sincerity of movement. Is that not what the essence of dance and movement is? Moving to express, not show? “Actions speak louder than words” After all, don’t we differentiate dancers from one another by how they move? That if you only saw their back from far away, you would still be able to point out who they are? If you want to show the emotion of a dance, a dancer’s movement (because of the honesty of the body) should be able to reflect that, not just their face. Someone said to me that even though the audience may be too far to see your face, they can still get a feel of what your face looks like. I think this just means that if you fully invest yourself in your movement, your face will naturally follow and support it. While it might be something that needs to be rehearsed or practiced, I also think they shouldn’t feel pressured or stressed by it or else that may also influence their performance in more than just their face.

Nonetheless, once we started moving, for the first day, we decided to just put music on in the background and choreograph just feeling each other out and being sensitive to our environment. When we finished our phrase, we decided for the last time to continue on and improv to the end of the song. With a relaxed first session and plans to stay true to what we as artists and dancers want to do, I am looking forward to what else we do this semester. We will go in depth on the subject of performance and how it relates yet differentiates from dance. Nevertheless, we decided to come up with a list of what we want to explore and general themes, and each week we will pick one to work with.

Here's my list:

- moving big and continuously
- moving in parts (isolation only)
- how do you feel today?
- be present
- release
- share
- energy
- quiet
- fierce
- different
- never face _____ (front, back, left stage, right stage, or the diagonal)
- challenge!
- improv with your eyes closed
- acceptance
- invest
- rhythm/beat
- floorwork

[**Waverley's Journal, continued, September 27th, 2018 @6-7:30pm (1200)** Today Marsha and I met with our advisor, Professor Neil Baldwin, to discuss about what we will be doing this semester as well as other plans. **Theme: "Share"** We felt like exploring partnering, contact improvisation, and weight sharing today so chose the theme "share". At first we weren't sure how to start so we just played some music in the background and rather than facing the mirror to communicate, especially because we were trying to explore contact and weight sharing, I thought it made sense to face Marsha who was already turned towards me. We then started to mirror each other to lean forward, eventually touching hands, and then

share our body weight through our hands and forearms. We then started to move just sharing our weight and staying connected through our hands and other body parts. Our movement somehow became us exploring how far we could go and stretch in opposition but remain connected. It was interesting to see how much you can really read about your partner's body and then learn your initial reaction to it. The closer I was to Marsha, naturally, the more I could feel and read her body. Weight sharing is the basis of partnering so being able to explore this slowly made me feel closer to Marsha, and with the shape we created on the floor I felt as if we were one.

Honestly, towards the end I could feel how much Marsha was giving me and that I wasn't giving her enough back. Since we are in charge of our own bodies, at times I was reverting back to trying to balance or move my own way without Marsha. I did this because it was easier for me, but I noticed how this would disrupt our connection and make it harder for Marsha because she gave so much of herself to me.

After noticing this, I found that this also relates to how I have my relationships with people. The main reasons I did not give her all of my weight was that I wasn't sure how much I should give her, how much I trusted her, and most importantly, I didn't want to make her uncomfortable physically and/or annoyed, frustrated, and unhappy. In my own way, I was trying to accommodate her, however rather than working it out together, I tried to deal with it on my own. I tend to do this a lot in my everyday relationships with people, but I genuinely appreciated how Marsha was positively encouraging me to give her more.

At the end, rather than trying to work out on my own how much to give her, I gave it my all and we had our bodies communicate what was happening while giving verbal feedback instead. As a result, I felt I can trust Marsha more on a physical level in addition to my already deep respect for her as a dancer and artist. Nevertheless, I was once again reminded that who we are as people manifests in our dancing and questioned the boundary of dancer/artist and human. How are we supposed to separate the two and yet put them back in a different, specific way when we dance in class, rehearsal, and performance? How can you be anything but what you are?

What I took away from our meeting tonight: The relationship between dancers who really share physical contact with each other is different even from dancers who are dancing together. Partnering you really understand your partner's strengths and weaknesses, how you need to support them, where you need to push them, and in general is a form of communicating through touch. As dancers we use body movements to express ourselves, the choreographer's vision, and tell a story. In some ways I feel that while this is still true in partnering, a new layer of expression and "performance" is added because you have someone so close to you. This person is in your space, interacting and influencing you while the audience remains just the spectator from a distance.

[Waverley's Journal, Friday, October 12]

One of my teachers said that we need to perform in class, continuing to mention your eyes and the way you present yourself in class. From what I understood, he meant that your eyes and energy in the room is how you perform. The conviction, commitment, and confidence in not just your movement but you face, your eyes, can convey so much before you even start moving. However, rather than call it performance, I would say it's the energy you bring into the room. I think it also has to do with how you take class and mindset of the class. Naturally if you're nervous or intimidated, your body language will reflect it. In this sense, you have to "perform" to show that you are not feeling this way; this then contributes to the work environment and atmosphere of the space. As the instructor I can understand not wanting to have this

negative energy in the room, much less in the space, after all as dancers we are constantly told to leave whatever baggage we have at the door. But I also feel that since we are told to use our time in the studio as the place to make mistakes, see how far we can go, etc., why can't we also be true to our emotions in the studio? We can't always have a good day but when we do have bad ones we still need to work through it. We also need to learn to accept when we aren't having a good day and rather than being called out for not being on top of things or being present in class because of it, we should feel supported because dance isn't just a job. The day I, or anyone for that matter, sees dance as just their job, I think that's when the artistry and passion dies. That's when the dancer in you dies. I hope that day never comes for me. We're going to have off days, and knowing tools on how to still work and get what you need from class is great and important, but saying that essentially we can't have bad days, or at least show them...What makes dance special and unique out of the art forms is the human quality of body language and movement. In our training, when we take out the human we are in order to grow in technique and please the person at the front of the room, are we really dancing? "Make connections and respond naturally"- often we are told to not to execute movement as we are told to do it, even though that is essentially what choreography is. What is the boundary between keeping the choreography as it is envisioned by the choreographer and making the choreography you own?

[Waverley's *Just Move* Workshop Reflection- October 25]

Marsha took charge leading the group so I thought this would be a good opportunity for me to observe while everyone had their attention on her. It was amazing to see how the dancers responded to Marsha's prompts and energy through the night; as they continued to go deeper they became more open and vulnerable in their movement. While they were internal in their exploration of their body and movement, they were also listening and in tune to the bodies around them, responding and sending out their own energy into the space. Observing I could see how Marsha was investing herself into her movement and word choice, letting what she also needed and felt inform the dancers. Since she herself was also participating, she knew how to get the dancers comfortable with doing their thing and what they needed for themselves. As for feedback, Amelia Sanders mentioned that she liked having the phrase that we created as the base for them to go in and out of. It was like the phrase was the set language and the dancers made the vocabulary, having the freedom within the structure we created. I also noted that changing the lighting in the room had an effect. Once we wanted the dancers to really improv and move for themselves, I decided to change the lighting so that it was darker in the room. Personally, I like the cover of dark to be able to completely let myself go; I feel less self-conscious. It is a physical reminder and reinforcer that there is no reason to be doing something for someone else. It makes my world smaller, and I get lost in it. Therefore, I believe that changing the lighting at the end to calm everything made everyone go from a "showy" place, to a moment of introspection.

Telling everyone at the end that we were recording them they were surprised, nervous, and curious to see what they looked like. When we finished by watching the footage we took, they were looking at it and said that they didn't know that was what they looked like. For me, watching the video I remember certain moments where I was thinking of what I wanted to try and do. In general, I see that there is more possibilities for movement choice and exploration of how much my body could do that I'm sad I didn't explore them at those certain moments.

[Waverley's Journal, November 8]

“The very act of performing is both terrifying and enlightening: It illuminates the soul of the performer so that the audience sees beyond the costumes, beyond the movements, beyond the physical body. The stage somehow is able to reveal the true spirit of a human being. I have always loved the purity of this concept.” - Petra Conti

<https://www.dancemagazine.com/petra-conti-dance-2613638974.html>

I can understand what Conti is talking about the “true spirit of a human being” being on the stage. When it is time for the stage, and performing, there’s something about this being ‘IT.’ That you finally reached the performance and all of your time not just in rehearsal, but in your training has come to fruition. Something about that does make your spirit soar and feel alive. All of your hard work has been done, all that’s left is to enjoy.

“I don't know if this gift of dancing is for other people to enjoy, or for me to live. Do I dance for the people, to touch their hearts, to make them feel something? Or do I dance for myself, for my own well-being? I think for both. But the magic happens only if both parties are present: one in front of the other, connected together on a higher level, in a mystical way.” - Petra Conti

<https://www.dancemagazine.com/petra-conti-dance-2613638974.html>

I come from the second part described here; I dance for myself. When I go to see dance, and if I’m being true to myself, I don’t see dance to feel something. I see dance, because as cliché as it is, I want to see the beauty of the movement and spatial patterns. I go for the movement quality, choreography, the ebb and flow, connection and transition, and admire what is being done on stage for the dancer’s ability to have such control over their body and movement. Sometimes, this can tie into a specific emotion for me or convey a message, but I like the abstracted-ness of it all and would rather discuss with others what I saw vs what they saw than interpreting what the piece means. Since dance is a performing art, I like that every person has a different experience and may notice something different from their seat/perspective compared to me. I like being amazed purely by the movement, therefore rendering the piece’s interpretation irrelevant. I appreciate hearing the different interpretations, including the choreographer’s intention behind their work, but since dance is so abstract, I believe once it’s on display the interpretation and intention behind the dance is out of the hands of the choreographer. I like to hear about the audience’s interpretation because I believe it also tells you about their character and experience as a member of the audience. Nonetheless, as for the emotional aspect, when I want to feel something I tend to gravitate to listen to music, read, or watch a movie. Perhaps it's because they are so much more accessible than dance, but for some reason it is easier for me to have dance make me feel something when I am the one dancing, not watching.

Then again, perhaps this need to make the audience feel something, to please them, stems from the history of dance. Ballet started from performing for royalty, and only those who had higher socioeconomic status were able to dance. They had to be contained/controlled and presentable, as entertainment. On the other hand, social dances, also referred to as the “peasant” dances, were just for each other and themselves. Each has their own connotation that has influenced how we are trained as dancers, to find the balance between dancing for others and dancing for ourselves. “Dance like nobody's watching”, yet dance for others. Naturally, I would say I dance for myself before I dance for others. I believe that once you dance for yourself, your dancing will change and become something that will be more pleasing for yourself and the audience who watches. I think that because dance is underrated of

the arts, less accessible (location and economically), and has certain stigmas, we need to address these issues in order for dance to progress by updating the idea that we need to dance for others. Dancing for others isn't wrong, rather that being told constantly from our instructors, choreographers, etc. that we need to think about the audience is wrong. If you want to dance to make the audience feel something, if that motivation comes from yourself, it's different. By externally forcing the dancers to dance for others, while it might work for a while for both the audience and the dancer, until the dancer is able to find a reason themselves to dance, including if they want to dance for others, for longevity purposes of the dancer and dance as an art form, there may be some unwarranted consequences.

In this day and age we are promoting mental health and needing to be happy and proud of oneself before making others happy. I believe as dancers, who are constantly needing to make their teacher, mentors, directors, audience, etc. happy and satisfied, this idea needs to be addressed and seriously discussed. Some communication does need to be done verbally after all. As a result, the dancers' movement and performance will become more genuine and when they are frustrated and doubtful, will be able to remember why they dance so it's not just a job.

[Waverley's Journal - *Moving Experiences* Workshop Reflection- December 4th]

This final workshop was not what I was expecting going into it; Marsha and I had difficulty choosing a date, scheduling studio space, and then with getting people to come. Since Dance Collage auditions were the next day, people were busy with rehearsing and finalizing their pieces. Nonetheless, I was extremely grateful to Amelia Sanders for joining us. Our concept for our "final" kept changing from us wanting to present something to doing another "improv jam." If we presented something we wanted to emphasize the idea of us dancing or moving for ourselves and thought to wear blindfolds and move in the space with others coming in to observe us. From there, we considered at some point taking off the blindfolds and working as if the audience is not there; we would make a phrase on our own. After considering not many people coming due to their own rehearsals, having limited availability of studios, and remembering feedback from those who attended our previous workshop that they would like more improv jams, we decided to do another improv jam but with a twist: Rather than it being structured this time, I had the concept that if you walked into an empty studio and had to share it with others to move, what would you do, or how would you move for yourself while being with them? Thankfully, Amelia came and since she was already familiar with our concept from attending our last workshop, she brought a different perspective to our work.

We moved for about ten minutes straight. I don't remember much of it, other than when I made a comment about loving the poles in the studio and all of us from there on out explored what the pole could do for us. Personally when I am in that studio to improv, I love being able to use the pole as something of a partner for myself. I like to see how much I can push and have it support me. It's easy to use a wall but using a pole adds dimension to when you use it, and often it's hard to have a chance to experiment with a pole. When we talked about dancing with the pole after, we agreed that it was interesting to see what the pole could do for us, since when we normally have class in the studio they get in the way of us moving.

My favorite part of our session was our discussion. After moving and not really knowing until we walked into the studio who was coming, I wasn't sure how to approach our discussion. That was when Marsha

simply asked Amelia what she thought of our concept, “What does it mean to you to create something that’s not meant for anyone else but yourself? It’s not meant for show, money, publicity, etc... what would your dance look like?”

Amelia’s answer brought up something I had never really considered or thought of before; the difference in your movement between choreographing and improvising. I expected her to say that she did not know, because it is a heavy question that we ourselves were working on answering, but I did not expect her reasoning behind it. Amelia’s own background is different from both Marsha and I, since she has trained heavily in Taylor and Duncan, so hearing her explanation made sense to me but was not one I had really considered before. The rest of our discussion was very interesting for me to listen and share my own thoughts as the space felt very safe between the three of us. However, from that discussion I took away some things that I am intrigued about and want to explore more of.

[In early December, 2018, Amelia Sanders, who had begun participating occasionally since October, joined Waverley and Marsha as a willing dancer in their “final,” and then shared *her* thoughts for this collaborative Project]

I was very glad I got to participate in **Moving Experiences** with Waverly and Marsha. I really enjoyed working with the studio’s poles during the improvisation session. Ordinarily, when in a class in this studio, everyone views the poles as an obstacle and a hindrance to moving freely in the space. However, I found a new appreciation for the poles in the context of improv, and it was nice to have a positive relationship to the space. They are great partners, offering support and resistance for movement exploration and I discovered new movement ideas with the pole. I was inspired by the different ways the three of us responded to the impetus of working with the poles.

I was startled to realize that I do not know what a dance made only for myself would look like.

Once I began thinking about it, I found nearly infinite numbers of outside influences that affect my choreography. My dances are usually geared toward a particular show. If not, they are made for a specific assignment or class. I have sometimes made pieces in reaction to other choreographers’ work or other works of art. In some way, my choreography is always relating to something outside of myself, whether it is thinking about someone else’s opinion or trying to challenge the way others see me as a choreographer. Professional choreographers also face the issue of what will get them booked, what will get them critical acclaim, and what will make them popular. I think an interesting route for exploration of the idea of a dance solely would be through the kinesthetic experience of movement rather than its visual appearance.

On Monday, December 10, 2018, Waverley Leung <leungw1@mail.montclair.edu> wrote:

Neil: here are the “final” videos from last Thursday's "**Moving Experiences**" and also some images from our earlier *Just Move* sessions. In *Moving Experiences*, one of the cameras wasn't able to record all the way through and other than that, I just edited the transitions of the beginning where I turned the cameras on, when we sat down to talk, and the ending where I turn the cameras off.

LEFT IS Moving Experiences: <https://youtu.be/5LzqaP1A4BA>

RIGHT IS Moving Experiences: <https://youtu.be/a2dhIkmeKao>

Waverley's "final" comments/questions on her Project - As mentioned in the beginning, last spring, I am interested in exploring what separates choreography from improv, specifically if it has to do with the mind and thought process.

Furthermore... what separates the dancers from the choreographers, or is there a difference?

These are topics that I am looking forward to going into next.