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Mid-Twentieth Century Modern Dance in the Twenty-First Century

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Dante Puleio

Thesis Committee:
Professor Mary Corey, Chair
Professor Lisa Naugle
Associate Professor Chad Michael Hall

2017

DEDICATION

To

Lane Wood

For knowing what I was capable of even when I did not.

If words were adequate to describe fully what the dance can do, there would be no reason for all the mighty muscular effort, the discomfort, the sweat and the splendors of that art.

José Limón

The Dancer believes that his art has something to say which cannot be expressed in words or in any other way than by dancing.

Doris Humphrey

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Mid-Twentieth Century Modern Dance in the Twenty-First Century

By

Dante Puleio

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Mary Corey, Chair

The relevance of modern dance being performed today has been a growing topic in the dance field as legacy companies age and the field of contemporary dance continues to expand. This thesis begins with critical response to mid-century modern dance in the work of well-known dance critics John Martin, Edwin Denby and Louis Horst and how they substantiated modern dance's place in dance history. My interviews with dance critics Alastair Macaulay and Sarah Kaufman discuss how the intention of dance writing has changed over the years and I examine the impact that some of those changes may have had on the state of modern dance in America today. I also discuss my interviews with artistic directors of the Martha Graham Dance Company and the Limón Dance Company. I examine their ideas about finding unique approaches to engage and grow a newer, younger audience while maintaining a connection with their current fan base. They attempt to combat what some critics have identified as mid-century modern dance losing relevance with today's dance audience.

My research inspired a concert presentation on April 25, 2017, involving my restaging of a mid-century modern dance masterpiece in tandem with a premiere of my own choreography inspired by the same themes. This product is my response to contextualizing older work and

giving the audience a reference point for understanding new choreography. The final aspect of this paper explains my creative process of how I put the ideas of critics and artistic directors into action. I discuss restaging and choreographing through the inspiration of my interviews and research and how that work provided ideas which enabled me to build an evening of work to better engage an audience with mid-century modern dance and contemporary choreography.

INTRODUCTION

The day I was featured on the front page of the Arts section of *The New York Times*, performing with the Limón Dance Company, was a very memorable one. My parents were the first to call to congratulate me. Pride, excitement and validation was just a fraction of what I felt, standing in a Starbucks, seeing myself in *The New York Times*! I was dancing for my dream company, dancing dream roles. I had made it further than any goals I had ever set for myself professionally; I was living the dream. Moments later I received a call from Verizon. “Is my mobile company calling to congratulate me too?” I thought. No, Verizon was calling to tell me I had twenty-four hours to pay the overdue balance on my bill before they would be forced to terminate my service. Shame, embarrassment and sadness was just a fraction of what I felt, in Starbucks, unable to pay my bills. I hadn’t been paid in a month and until Limón received its funding I would not be able to pay my bills.

Several years later, in 2014, the company was preparing for its season at The Joyce, our home theatre in New York City. Days before opening night, the president of the Board of Directors came to watch rehearsal and have a company meeting to discuss what we thought would be our contracts for the following fiscal year. He had much grimmer news. Not only did he not offer anyone a contract, but we were warned that our participation for the upcoming Joyce performances was optional and voluntary, because they could not promise a paycheck or any work for the following year. This was a defining moment for me. How could a company that codified a technique, housed work important enough to have been performed around the world for the past seventy years, and inspired so many, not be able to garner the support needed to continue its legacy? What kind of future do surviving modern dance companies have without

their founder? Should they be spared? Is there worth in the choreography and does it speak to today's dance enthusiasts? If it doesn't, is there a way that it can again?

This has led me to ask if the modern repertory of the 1930s to 1960s is still relevant today. Those sentiments have been mentioned over the past several years in reviews about modern dance work that is being performed for today's audience by these legacy companies. Because of these occasional mentions of 'relevance' I began investigating what is and is not relevant about mid-century American modern dance today and looking at what its future may hold. My research focuses on examining points of view from different aspects within the dance community in the U.S. In the first chapter I examine the changes in critical response to modern dance from the late 1920s to the present, based partially on my interviews with current dance critics. In the second chapter I discuss my interviews with artistic directors of the Martha Graham Dance Company and the Limón Dance Company. This research provides an overview of where mid-century modern dance is today, possibilities about its future, and its importance of historical work in the contemporary dance world. In the third chapter I discuss my process of how this research culminates in a concert, in which I apply the ideas from critics and artistic directors by a restaging a masterwork and choreographing a new work inspired by the same themes.

When referring to 'modern dance', I am focusing on mid-century works from the late 1930s to the late 1960s. 'Legacy Company' refers to companies operating today, founded by a choreographer no longer living, such as Martha Graham or José Limón. 'Contemporary dance' refers to present day choreography, in contrast to mid-century modern dance.

In addition to reviewing collections of dance criticism and secondary sources on modern dance, I conducted personal interviews with artistic directors Colin Connor (Limón Dance Company) and Janet Eilber (Martha Graham Dance Co). I interviewed dance critics Alastair

Macaulay (*The New York Times*), Sarah Kaufman (*The Washington Post*) and Deborah Jowitt (*The Village Voice*) about reviewing modern and contemporary dance.

I have not included the work of Paul Taylor in this study. He is a living choreographer, still able to create new work. He also has the ability to re-choreograph his modern work when he revives his own choreography. As a living choreographer, he can change the mission of his company, the repertory and the presentation. This differs from the work required of legacy companies that present work of a founder/choreographer who is no longer living. I did not include Alvin Ailey American Dance Company and the work of Judith Jamison and Robert Battle. The Ailey Company has predominantly operated as a repertory company, not one that presents the work of only one choreographer. The Ailey Company has maintained a connection with its dance audiences over the years through the frequent practice of including a variety of current choreographers from company members such as Hope Boykin and Matthew Rush to well-known choreographers such as Maurice Béjart and José Limón. The company is not bound to or defined by Ailey's body of work. I did not include Nikolais Dance Theatre; those works are primarily owned by the Ririe-Woodbury company which operates as a repertory company and lies outside the scope of this research.

The result of this research has produced this paper and a concert presentation at the Claire Trevor Theatre, University of California, Irvine. The concert presentation applies the ideas of critics and artistic directors by my staging of José Limón's, *There is a Time*, paired with my own choreographic response titled *Ecclesiastes 3*. I demonstrate the link between historical and contemporary work as I put into action ideas about preservation, performance, context and influence. This research honors older work and provides an opportunity to change the impression contemporary dance audiences have of mid-century modern dance.

CHAPTER ONE

Sitting in the Dark and Writing in the Light¹

Some dance writers of today have questioned the “relevance” of mid-twentieth century dance performed for contemporary audiences. While some may see the value in maintaining mid-twentieth century modern dance through performance, there is speculation about how effective it still is or is not. The choreographers of such legacy companies as the Martha Graham Dance Company or the Limón Dance Company are no longer living, which leaves these organizations and their repertory of masterpieces in uncharted territory. How does choreography that was once considered groundbreaking and revolutionary continue to speak to dance audiences today and how do today’s critics engage with this work in a provocative and interesting manner?

The new and undefinable practice that is now known as modern dance found its footing as a respectable form of art because of champions like John Martin, Louis Horst and Edwin Denby. They recognized the strength and power behind the “new dance,” understood its value, and explained its worth to a broadening world of performing arts.

John Martin was the dance critic for *The New York Times* from 1927-1962. He was a “powerful spokesman for the pioneering movement”² of modern dance. He gave an emerging artistic movement literary presence with thoughtful and provoking analysis. It was his advocating for modern dance in its earliest of days that gave the field legitimacy and relevance. He initiated an intelligent conversation between many developing choreographers and their new

¹ Alastair Macaulay, interview by author, New York, August 10, 2016.

² "John Martin is Dead at 91 - Times Dance Critic 35 Years," *The New York Times*, May 21, 1985, accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/21/nyregion/john-martin-is-dead-at-91-times-dance-critic-35-years.html>.

and uneducated audience. Martin wrote books on the philosophy of modern dance and offered strong opinions about what the form was and how it was to be defined.

The composer Louis Horst was another strong presence in the modern dance world. He founded the magazine *Dance Observer* in 1934 as a way to “expound the theories and publicize the development of modern dance.”³ *Dance Observer*, which was in circulation until Horst’s death in 1964, contained reviews, editorials, stories and advertisements for classes, workshops and intensives. This monthly publication created a buzz around this new form of dance that was beginning to take root. Horst lectured and taught choreography at The Juilliard School and The New School. His influence on Martha Graham for twenty years as her choreographic advisor and mentor is well known.⁴ As Neil Ellis Orts describes Horst’s role,

Horst demanded of Graham (as he did every student) rigorous discipline. His influence on her choreography and technique for such works as *Primitive Mysteries*, *Frontier* and *El Penitente* is unmistakable. In fact, dance critic John Martin once said to longtime Graham student and group dancer Dorothy Bird: “Don’t you realize that without Louis standing there beside [Graham], day in, day out, adamantly refusing to let her improvise. . . she would have changed the choreography . . . until it finally became diluted . . . No one else could possibly have done this for her, and no one else ever did! It was *all* Louis!”⁵

Horst was also the musical director for The Denishawn School, directed by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. During that time, Horst became a mentor and advisor to one of Denishawn’s students, Doris Humphrey. He eventually convinced Humphrey to leave Denishawn to begin crafting her own work.⁶ After Humphrey left Denishawn, Horst became one of Doris Humphrey’s and Charles Weidman’s concert pianists. His role in modern dance was pivotal

³ "Dance Observer," Oxford Reference, January 23, 2016, accessed October 19, 2016, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095659338>.

⁴ Gayle Kassing, *History of Dance: An Interactive Arts Approach* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2007), 210.

⁵ Neil Ellis Orts, "Louis Horst," *Dance Teacher* magazine, February 9, 2010, accessed October 19, 2016, <http://www.dance-teacher.com/2010/02/louis-horst/>.

⁶ Janet Mansfield Soares, *Louis Horst: Musician in a Dancer's world* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1992), 64.

for the advancement of the first generation of modern dance choreographers.

Edwin Denby was another important advocate for modern dance before and after World War II as a poet, dance critic and artistic collaborator. He is widely known for his writing about Balanchine's choreography; however, his poetic sensibilities brought life to the world of modern dance in his writing for *Modern Music* (1936-1942), *The New York Herald Tribune* (1942-1945) and as a freelance writer after 1945.⁷ Martin reviewed Denby's collection of reviews, *Looking at the Dance*, in 1949 and wrote "here is the honest and courageous attitude of a highly cultivated, often keenly perceptive, mind toward a subject which he has studied closely and respects deeply."⁸

The pioneering efforts of choreographic expression grew during the late 1930s to the late 1940s and these writers laid down exceptional groundwork for the future of dance critique and analysis. Despite the tension between choreographer and critic, early modern dance had a need for this support and critique. It allowed the audience to engage with this new form of movement that may have needed interpretation. Dance criticism as defined by *Encyclopedia Britannica* consists of:

Valuable insights communicated by knowledgeable, objective observers increase the understanding of choreography and technique among those who have not seen a performance, and such insights frequently add layers of meaning for those who were in attendance.⁹

Choreographer Merce Cunningham claimed that writing about dance is like "nailing Jell-O to the wall,"¹⁰ but without that initial critical effort, modern dance would have had very little written about it. The work of these "new dance" advocates cemented modern dance's place in

⁷ Jack Anderson, "Edwin Denby, Dance Critic, Dies at 80," *The New York Times*, July 14, 1983, accessed October 19, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/07/14/obituaries/edwin-denby-dance-critic-dies-at-80.html>.

⁸ John Martin, "Denby on the Dance, Mainly Ballet," *The New York Times* 22, no. 2 (June 5, 1949): BR27.

⁹ "Dance criticism," *Encyclopedia Britannica* Online, accessed October 19, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/dance-criticism>.

¹⁰ Arlene Croce, *Writing in the Dark, Dancing in The New Yorker* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 6.

history. Through analysis and explanation these writers supported the creation of masterpieces and the pioneers that choreographed them.

The next generation of dance critics, Arlene Croce, Marcia B. Siegel and Deborah Jowitt continued to foster the relationship between the choreographer, their work and the audience. They significantly contributed in helping the audience in the late 1960s get a deeper level of engagement with the evolving world of dance. Each writer has produced several books, most of which are collections of their critical responses to performances. Their commentary guided dance audiences spanning the late modern and postmodern era of dance; however, their relationship with choreographers shifted away from the personal connection that Horst had with St. Denis, Shawn, Graham and Humphrey. It also shifted away from the style and purpose behind the critique: Martin and Denby often promoted the work of Graham or Balanchine as a way to legitimize their work in a larger context, while this newer generation of writers had a different function and approach. Croce, Siegel and Jowitt had to critique performances of work that had already been analyzed, discussed and reviewed. Their hurdles were not to establish modern dance as an art form but to examine and/or reexamine the work in its current and evolving state, with a new era of performers. They also had the responsibility of capturing the new dance boom of post modernism occurring in the late 1960s and early 1970s and defining a new approach to dance and theatre.

Siegel offers, “Anyone who undertakes to establish what an old dance was steps on shaky ground”, then qualifies the importance of continuing to do so: “but we all attempt it in our own way. We must.”¹¹ The questions critics must ask themselves include: Do they review the work

¹¹ Marcia B. Siegel, *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), x.

itself? Do they compare the pioneering choreographer who performed the leading role, such as Limón or Graham, to the fresh-faced dancer replacing him or her? And if so, how can any dancer compare to the charismatic presence of Graham or Limón? For a choreographer's perspective, Jowitt quotes from a personal interview with Paul Taylor.

A dance is going to change a little, no matter what. And that's not always bad. If you've seen the piece done before by another cast, you're naturally going to make comparisons, but that's a fact of life. And it has to do with the viewer, not the dance or the new cast.¹²

Jowitt relates a conversation with Alan Kriegsman of *The Washington Post*, who referred to the “hum” surrounding a particular work and asserts her role as a critic:

Critical writing, along with the responses (public and private) to what is written, lobby conversations, interviews, dancers' tales, and so on cling to a dance performance, making it resonate in the memory, prolonging its life. To add to that “hum” by stimulating thought, and perhaps dissent - that's what continues to interest me.¹³

Jowitt, however, seems cautious when reviewing older work, even questioning her role and responsibility to historical modern dance.

For the critic, writing about revivals or reconstructions hold all the terrors of playing hide-and-peek in the dark. Do we simply consider whether the ballet in question ‘works’? Do we set ourselves up as watchdogs of tradition? And how do we figure out what the tradition in question was like?¹⁴

She answers herself with another query, “A more fundamental question is, ‘Would you rather see a bad revival or no revival at all?’”¹⁵ Siegel simply puts forth, “The best a scholar can do with an old dance is to regard it in its present state and try to ascertain the source of its past or present greatness, taking into account whatever changes we're aware of.”¹⁶ Croce says, “It is the afterimage of the dance rather than the dance itself which is the true subject of the review.”¹⁷

¹² Deborah Jowitt, *The Dance in Mind: Profiles and Reviews 1976-83* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1985), 47.

¹³ Jowitt, *The Dance in Mind*, xi.

¹⁴ Jowitt, *The Dance in Mind*, 132.

¹⁵ Jowitt, *The Dance in Mind*, 132

¹⁶ Siegel, *Shapes of Change*, xv.

¹⁷ Croce, *Writing in the Dark*, 6.

These varied approaches to critical writing of work from the late modern era depart from the early days of reviewing modern dance. For John Martin, his goals as a modern dance critic were quite different. According to Siobhan Burke,

He [Martin] aimed diplomatically to elevate the popular sensibility toward a deeper understanding of modern dance. Challenging the notion that the art was impenetrably difficult, he insisted on the innate interpretive capacities of each viewer and provided the theoretical tools he thought necessary for a full appreciation of dance.¹⁸

It was the writing about these modern dance masterpieces, in their original form, that was significant to the survival of that age of choreography. Critics play a meaningful role in the historical aspect of modern dance. However, different critics have different philosophies when it comes to their role in dance history. In 1972 Siegel says that her collection of reviews, *At the Vanishing Point*, “doesn’t pretend to be history.”¹⁹ Seven years later her position changed and she believed that a dance critic is “in some ways a self-appointed historian.”²⁰ To explain her reason for compiling a collection of her critiques in the 1979 collection, *The Shapes of Change*, she states, “I began this book because of a desperate and continuing sense that not enough was being done to impede the extinction of yesterday’s dance.”²¹ It would seem that an additional seven years as a dance critic, her connection to the past and the changes she saw happening to masterpieces, combined with the direction in which concert dance seemed to be moving, caused her some concern. Words like “desperate” and the phrase “fear of extinction” demonstrate her observation of a changing field that needed something, her writing for example, to impede the erosion of a body of work in the face of a rapidly changing landscape. In terms of being a source in dance history, Jowitt admits the “major concern is to write for the here-and-now reader,

¹⁸ Nathan Jones, "Rejecting Artifice, Advancing Art: The Dance Criticism of John Martin," *CJAS | The Columbia Journal of American Studies*, 2, accessed October 20, 2016, <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cjas/dance2.html>.

¹⁹ Marcia B. Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 6.

²⁰ Siegel, *Shapes of Change*, xi.

²¹ Siegel, *Shapes of Change*, xi.

although I have to be aware that dance criticism is sometimes a contributor to dance history.”²²

It appears that the relationship between dance and the critic continues to change. Modern dance is an established art form with a canon of masterpieces. Legacy companies tour the world and license their most famous works to other repertory companies. Today even, ballet companies purchase the rights to perform modern dance works, giving critics the opportunity to review how a ballet company is performing a work choreographed by José Limón, for example. The critical eye must, once again, learn to engage with this work differently than the way in which it once did.

This evolution or devolution of the relationship between dance, critic and audience led to Madison Mainwaring’s article, “The Death of the American Dance Critic.” In August 2015 Mainwaring wrote “Over the course of the last twenty years dance coverage—and dance criticism in particular—has been decimated in the mainstream press.”²³ This article points out the small number of full time dance critics still employed by the major news publications and highlights the issue of limited dance coverage and the shortened word maximum for articles on dance. With a vast number of outlets of blogs and social media, anyone with a Facebook page or a website can be a dance critic.

In a time when fewer knowledgeable writers are engaging with contemporary concert dance performance, the field is left with fewer educated critics to examine what is happening and why. Mainwaring contends, “As emerging choreographers come onto the scene—and there’s some very substantive work being made today—it remains unclear as to who will have either the expertise or the outlet needed to discuss the importance of these developing artistic

²² Kay Richter, "A Conversation with Deborah Jowitt," *The Dance Journal*, March 1, 2012, accessed October 20, 2016, <http://philadelphiadance.org/blog/2012/03/01/a-conversation-with-deborah-jowitt/>.

²³ Madison Mainwaring, "The Death of the American Dance Critic," *The Atlantic*, August 5, 2015, accessed September 28, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/08/american-dance-critic/399908/>.

voices.”²⁴ The lack of educated voices may cause dance to lose the footing established by the modern dance pioneers and their critics. Mainwaring suggests “This means that dance is becoming another item in the experiential supermarket, a thoughtless art without a memory.”²⁵

Although Mainwaring’s article mostly concerns itself with the “death” of the position of a dance critic, it also reflects readers’ interest by noting that people today “are not going to dance concerts, and consequently not reading about them, at anything close to the rate that their parents did.”²⁶ Alastair Macaulay of *The New York Times* and Sarah Kaufman of *The Washington Post* are the only two full time dance critics remaining in this country, compared to the dance boom of the 1960s and 1970s when “dance solicited unprecedented attention in the press, with up to ten professional critics writing up a single show.”²⁷

The relationship Alastair Macaulay has with dance and the audience is further removed from the previous generation of dance writers. Macaulay seems to offer a hands-off approach when talking about the field at large. Macaulay, who has been the chief dance critic for *The New York Times* since 2007, discloses, “I sit in the dark to watch, then write in the light about where my mind was taken.”²⁸ He appears to shy away from making predictions about any future for dance and remains neutral when asked if the work being done by legacy companies is making any difference in keeping the era of modern dance vital. Macaulay says, “I don’t think it is my business,”²⁹ and when looking towards the future of dance, his position is, “It is not the job of a critic to predict.”³⁰

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Alastair Macaulay, interview by author, New York, August 10, 2016.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

The 2010 Pulitzer Prize winner for Criticism, Sarah Kaufman of *The Washington Post*, states, “My job is to make what I do interesting so people will read it.”³¹ She doesn’t consider herself a scholar, academic, or historian, although when asked about the future of modern dance, she offered this prediction: She believes mid-century American modern dance will serve as “teaching tools on college campuses.”³² She has witnessed an increased trend of modern works being licensed to universities, and although Kaufman hopes and believes modern dance works should live on professional stages, she sees its security and longevity in education. It seems that this prospect can ensure that future generations of university-trained dancers will at least have an embodied experience of masterworks from dance history. However, it denies contemporary and future dance audiences the opportunity to see these works being performed by the professionals whose expertise lie in these modern classics. Kaufman proposes her ideal, which would be a “national repertory company”³³ with access to the modern dance classics, as taking the responsibility for maintaining and performing the works of modern choreographers.

When asked further about a critic’s role as a historian, she suggests it as “documenting that it happened.” She further explains that she aims to produce “a piece of writing that captures the fullness of the experience beyond what a camera lens can capture. It [critical writing] is useful for setting the work in its context, in its time and the landscape at that point.”³⁴

When speaking about ways in which modern dance can combat falling out of fashion or losing relevance for contemporary audiences, Kaufman expresses it is not the responsibility of an art form to stay relevant. “Why must an art form bear the burden to stay relevant when it is not designed for that, at all. Art is made to endure.”³⁵ However, she still feels “this is time to shake

³¹ Sarah Kaufman, telephone interview by author, Irvine, November 26, 2016.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

things up a bit.” She admitted, “I would love to see more experimenting with the structure in an evening of dance, maybe it [modern dance] won’t go on in the format that we are used to.” She hopes for more “creativity in approach, packaging and delivery.”³⁶

These varied approaches of critical engagement with dance and the audience come at a time when, in 2009, The National Endowment for the Arts reports “more than 78 million Americans enthusiastically make art in their free time, but they are spending less time and money going to watch the professionals.”³⁷ This research is a discouraging find for dance companies already struggling to survive and may leave artists and critics wondering who is to blame for the decline in interest. Is it that the work is not as alluring as it once was? Is the critics’ “hands off” engagement leaving the audience without a source to help shape and make sense of what is being performed? This speaks to how work is being presented and how it is being written about. If critics of today engaged with the field in the ways in which John Martin and Edwin Denby did, would dance play a different cultural role? If there were a Louis Horst championing for the betterment of current work, could dance companies, new and old, make a bigger impact encouraging audiences to take notice and engage more deeply?

Dance companies that are performing work from the mid-century modern dance era have many obstacles to overcome. The artistic directors of companies such as the Martha Graham Dance Company and the Limon Dance Company are currently looking for ways in which they can make their repertory more accessible, and more relevant to the contemporary audience. They are looking for strategies to build their audience base and find new and exciting ways that they can make the work they are doing now more visible.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Elizabeth Blair, "NEA: Art Creation Up, Attendance Down," NPR, June 15, 2009, accessed October 20, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=105438556>.

In the 1930s it took a handful of writers to help grow and establish what is now considered a famous era of the performing arts. To help reestablish modern dance and give structure to contemporary dance happening now, a new generation of writers with a strong relationship to dance companies and choreographers might be the missing link in creating the next historical dance boom. In order to excite a new generation of writers, modern dance companies will need to create unique, cutting edge, and provocative ways in which to entice the public and the critic into becoming invested and ardent dance enthusiasts again.

CHAPTER TWO

Leaders of the Legacies

In an article titled “Can The Old Masters Be Relevant Again?,” *The New York Times* recently addressed the drop in demand for Old Master paintings. Alexander Bell, Co-chairman of Sotheby’s Old Masters Painting Department, responded, “We still very much believe in the Masters,” adding, “we’ve all got to evolve in the way we present our material and engage with our clients.”³⁸ This article asks a question that has also been asked in the field of dance. Gia Kourlas, in a review of the Limón Dance Company, states, “one of the most pervasive issues in modern dance is relevance.”³⁹ She goes on to mention that although Limon “is an integral part of American dance history,” the company “is trapped in another age.”⁴⁰ In reference to the Martha Graham Dance Company, Arlene Croce proposed, “Perhaps there’s a statute of limitations on how long a work can be depended upon to force itself through the bodies of those who dance it.”⁴¹ Croce stated in 1977, “The Graham technique - that supreme instrument of theatrical catharsis - has now faded to the point of ineffectuality.”⁴² Comments such as these plague the companies that continue to perform mid-twentieth century modern dance repertory.

If the population of art investors and museumgoers are failing to “believe in the Masters,” it becomes a concern for the museums that house their paintings and the art dealers that sell them. The art world has been quick to react to dipping sales and decreased interest in art from earlier centuries by addressing how it is curated in exhibitions and how it is presented at auction. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has initiated “The Artist Project,” an online forum where

³⁸ Robin Pogrebin, "Can the Old Masters Be Relevant Again?" *New York Times*, August 28, 2016.

³⁹ Gia Kourlas, "Art Bound By Its Time." *New York Times*, May 3, 2014.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Arlene Croce, *Writing in the Dark, Dancing in The New Yorker* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 194.

⁴² Ibid., 478.

contemporary artists discuss works in The Met that have inspired them.⁴³ The Met Breuer, a temporary satellite of The Met, experimented with an exhibition that presented contemporary artists with Renaissance masters. Christie's has tested their innovation strategies with "themed sales."⁴⁴ In April 2016 their centerpiece auction, "Revolution," featured "masterworks from the 18th to the 20th centuries, including paintings, drawings, prints, photography and sculpture, which explore the radical social, political and artistic changes that defined this period of history."⁴⁵ Another movement has been started by The Frieze Masters Fair in London, and has gained significant traction in the past several years. The Frieze Masters Fair offers a "contemporary perspective on historical art."⁴⁶ Curators explore the relationship between historical art and contemporary practice and "advise on feature sections for 20th-century art and focused presentations of historical art and objects."⁴⁷ The fair specifically concentrates on "showcasing art from the ancient era and Old Masters to the late 20th century."⁴⁸ This provides a way to "discover several thousand years of art history in a unique contemporary context;"⁴⁹ a successful approach that can offer a deeper insight for the audience and potential investors.

How can some of these approaches to making historical art more accessible be applied to understanding and appreciating mid-century American modern dance? Janet Eilber, Artistic Director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, thinks it is important to look at how all art forms are handling declining audience interest in historical work.⁵⁰ Her first idea references the

⁴³ Pogrebin, "Old Masters."

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "Press Center - Christie's," Christie's, October 6, 2015, accessed October 22, 2016, <http://www.christies.com/about/press-center/releases/pressrelease.aspx?pressreleaseid=8089>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Home | Frieze," Frieze.com, October 12, 2016, accessed October 22, 2016, <https://frieze.com/>.<https://frieze.com/article/fair-no-other>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Janet Eilber interview with Jeff Kimpton, *Logan Arts*, December 9, 2013, accessed July 8, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=by_cw9IPzpg.

audio guided tours in museums, which she believes is a point of departure that can be applied to concert dance. This approach inspired her to begin giving a pre-show talk that guides the audience by establishing a lens through which to view the work they are about to see. She also creates thematic programs, such as “Political Dance Project,” that explore the themes of social activism and what it is to be American. “Political Dance Project” features a commissioned theatrical work by avant-garde director Anne Bogart. Bogart’s *American Document* (2010), a work inspired by Graham’s *American Document* (1938), was presented alongside Graham’s *Chronicle* (1936). This grouping allows Eilber to highlight a specific aspect of Martha Graham’s work. In this instance Eilber uses the theme of American identity and social activism to connect a newly commissioned work with a Graham masterpiece. Eilber’s initiative addresses several issues at once. She generates interest, creating a new pool of potential audience members, while giving Graham followers an opportunity to see new work by a well-known living choreographer. She is also interested in expanding the company’s repertory and creating context for Graham’s choreography. This idea and new style of presentation also offers the Graham audience a fresh lens to watch a famous master work, with which they may already be familiar.

Arlene Croce says, “for the final, authentic image of Martha Graham it is we and not Graham who bear the responsibility”.⁵¹ Eilber, who became Artistic Director of the Graham Company in 2005, has initiated many major changes in an effort to increase visibility and to ensure that the Graham legacy stays current and part of the dance conversation. For modern dance companies that began under the leadership of strong personalities and charismatic choreographers, the key to survival after the death of their founder can be a difficult path to navigate. The obstacles become more apparent when the critical response from influential voices

⁵¹ Croce, 44.

such as Marcia B. Siegel wrote as early as 1968, “Martha Graham’s contractions and contortions originally may have been a realization of her own emotional states, but now they are dogma, and are most often used as a facsimile of the emotion that the dancer wishes to portray.”⁵² However, Siegel also admits “the best possible way” to preserve works from the modern era is “by performing them.”⁵³ The contradiction perpetuates the question, how can the current and future dance audience have an effective Graham experience without Martha?

In a 2013 interview, Eilber comments on how modern dance is “an art form that was birthed out of and driven by revolt.”⁵⁴ When I asked her to elaborate on this idea she stated that “the crux of the matter is the field needs to expand and figure out how to celebrate, maintain and keep relevant its classics.”⁵⁵ Her mission for the Graham Company is to “secure Martha’s place as a cornerstone of American culture.”⁵⁶ She was very candid about the company’s trials coming back from near bankruptcy and extinction in 2000 as well as the company’s five million dollar debt she inherited when she became Artistic Director in 2005.⁵⁷

In order for the company to survive she needed to find creative ways to combat these issues. She began researching the Graham audience with audience participation studies. These studies polled audiences about their theatrical experience. She discovered more than 70% of audiences don’t read their programs and wanted a “deeper, richer experience, in a shorter amount of time.”⁵⁸ This was the basis for many of her initiatives, such as pre-show talks and displaying titles and synopses of the ballets on stage before the work begins. Eilber believes that her pre-show speech, guiding her audiences into the sometimes difficult and unfamiliar world of a

⁵² Marcia B Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point; a Critic Looks at Dance*. (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 62.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁴ Janet Eilber, interview with Jeff Kimpton, *Logan Arts*.

⁵⁵ Janet Eilber, interview by author, New York, August 23, 2016.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Janet Eilber interview with Jeff Kimpton, *Logan Arts*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Graham work, can aid a newcomer so they can relate to or understand what they are about to see.

In the same stroke, Eilber is able to give long-time audience members new tools to access the work they may have already seen over the years.

The new efforts she has put in place have proven successful: the company has emerged from its debt and continues to garner more interest from the dance audience. Critical response has been positive. In August 2015, Brian Seibert of *The New York Times* wrote: “For *Embattled Garden*, the commentary was illuminating.⁵⁹ Mary Callahan also comments on the Graham performance experience.

Just because these works have been seen by audiences a hundred times before does not make them any less meaningful or relevant. There will always be a few Graham "virgins" in the house, experiencing the magic and mystery of the technique and canon for the first time. And on the other hand, there will always be Graham connoisseurs in the audience, ones that have seen each of the company's twenty-eight works. Even for them, however, the experience is new thanks to a different cast of dancers and an ever-changing contemporary lens.⁶⁰

In addition to helping her audience have a “deeper, richer experience,” Eilber has hired exciting, contemporary choreographers, such as Larry Keigwin, Adonis Foniadakis, and Nacho Duato, to create new work on the company as a way to contextualize the older work. She plans to expand Graham’s current repertory and gain new audience members who may be fans of these contemporary living artists, but whom have never seen the Graham Company live. Her goal being when they come for Keigwin, Foniadakis or Duato, they will be exposed to the historical work of Graham, and they will be interested in returning for more in the following seasons.

⁵⁹ Brian Seibert, "Review: Martha Graham’s ‘Embattled Garden,’ Deconstructed," *New York Times*, August 21, 2015, accessed October 22, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/22/arts/dance/review-martha-grahams-embattled-garden-deconstructed.html>.

⁶⁰ Mary Callahan, "BWW Reviews: Saying Something New About Graham: The Martha Graham Dance Company at New York City Center," *BroadwayWorld.com*, March 27, 2014, accessed September 8, 2016, <http://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwdance/article/BWW-Reviews-Saying-Something-New-About-Graham-The-Martha-Graham-Dance-Company-at-New-York-City-Center-20140327>.

Each season's collection of repertory is umbrellaed under a theme. "Shape and Design" focuses on the architecture of the Graham ballets while another popular theme "Myth and Transformation" presents her Greek era.⁶¹ This is an avenue Eilber has paved for audiences to navigate the program; she commissions a choreographer and gives him/her the theme for the upcoming season. When Eilber invited Foniadakis to choreograph, she gave him "Myth and Transformation." He created *Echo*, a work on the transformative and mythological tale of Narcissus.⁶² In the 2011-2012 season she asked Lar Lubovitch to create a version of *Lamentation* (1930) for the "Lamentation Variations" project that offered choreographers an opportunity to use *Lamentation* as a source of inspiration. She housed that particular season under "Shape and Design". In these projects the commissioned choreographer uses the proposed theme as a point of departure for their creation. This initiative gives Eilber a plethora of options when building themes and seasons to widen and deepen the Graham experience.

Eilber says many of the works can be used in different ways. She can attribute a given piece to more than one theme, making touring and performing more flexible. For example, she can use *Chronicle* in the "Political Dance Project" as a woman's political statement and in the next season or theatre, she can place the same ballet under "Shape and Design" to bring attention to the architectural design of the work.⁶³ She has several works actively touring, which gives her the ability to interchange pieces and themes. This gives program directors options on what they will want for their audience or venue.

Eilber took many chances in creating this architecture in hopes that the results would make for an organization that would avoid its previous financial crises and would give

⁶¹ Janet Eilber, interview by author, New York, August 23, 2016.

⁶² "Current Projects - Martha Graham," Martha Graham Dance Company, accessed October 22, 2016, <http://marthagraham.org/the-martha-graham-dance-company/current-projects/>.

⁶³ Janet Eilber, interview by author, New York, August 23, 2016.

tomorrow's audience a broader and deeper appreciation of work that will feel current and interesting. In their 90th season, the organization is clear of the five million dollar debt and they have doubled their budget since Eilber began eleven years ago.

When watching old feature films from the 1930's and 1940's, a viewer may notice that the style in which the characters speak to one another is recognizably different from that of people communicating in 2017. The vernacular that is specific to the earlier time period and those social norms may appear out of date today. The style of acting in the early to middle twentieth century, for example, may be interpreted by today's audience as overly formal or melodramatic. In dance, the same ideas of approach to style and presentation are applicable. When reconstructing work from the mid-twentieth century, a disconnect between past and present can occur because personal relationships have a more casual approach and contemporary movement reflects that ideology. The inclusion of pedestrian-like interactions that sprang from the era of postmodernism can be seen in the combination of athletic and gender-neutral gestural work that is popular today. The current style and approach to life and personal relationships separates who we are now from who we were during the modern era of dance. That difference becomes obvious when one sees choreography that is embedded with relationships about the human experience told from the perspective of a man in the post-war era.

The human condition was an important aspect and a heavily featured focal point for José Limón. It was part of the tradition that was passed down through his mentor, Doris Humphrey. Limón called on his dancers to build relationships onstage that spoke to the audience of his time. Masterworks like *There is a Time*, *The Moor's Pavane*, and *Emperor Jones* all deal with characters involved in some form of deeply connected relationship. A dilemma for the Limón Company arises when the audience of today watches how these relationships reveal themselves within a

work; audiences can be distracted by how the characters interact and by the social norms of a different time period. Dance critic Claudia La Rocco of *The New York Times* writes about the approach to bridging these gaps taken by former artistic director, Carla Maxwell.

The Limón troupe, under the artistic directorship of the former company dancer Carla Maxwell, seems to be seeking the answer in a mix of context and continuity. The context comes in maintaining (or reconstructing) works by the founding choreographers and their peers, the continuity in demonstrating how the language and sensibility in these works can be stretched into contemporary times.⁶⁴

La Rocco clearly defines what she means by context and continuity and is noticing that, in an effort to speak to the current audience, Maxwell is struggling with how to use the work from the older repertory to make that connection. It would appear that the style in which the work is communicating is not as successful as it could be, since she says Maxwell still “seems to be seeking the answer.” When young audiences are asked to sit through a concert comprised of pieces solely representative of another generation, the task to access, appreciate or even understand that work can become very difficult. To that end, Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone of the online blog Dance-Enthusiast.com and assistant editor of *Pointe Magazine* and *Dance Spirit Magazine*, which are commonly geared towards younger readers, is quick to comment in a recent critique of a Limón Company performance: “*The Moor's Pavane* struck the most dated note of the evening with tableau stylization that gives away its age.”⁶⁵

The newly appointed Artistic Director of the Limon Dance Company, Colin Connor, joined the organization in July 2016 and replaced Carla Maxwell after her thirty-eight year tenure. It is a big shift and a new path for this seventy year old company. Connor is interested in

⁶⁴ Claudia La Rocco, "Keeping a Choreographer's Legacy Alive With History Lessons and Handstands," *New York Times*, December 3, 2008, accessed September 24, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/arts/dance/04limo.html?_r=0.

⁶⁵ Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone, "IMPRESSIONS OF: José Limón International Dance Festival," *Dance Enthusiast.com*, November 2, 2015, accessed October 28, 2016, <http://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/view/Limon-Dance-Festival>.

contrasting the current repertory with work of contemporary choreographers that break some of rules that Limón observed in his choreography, First, Connor is looking at how gender roles can play a factor in contextualizing the work. In an interview with Connor, he discloses, “In *There is a Time*, Limón uses the men and women as archetypes; the men are temporal figures and women eternal figures. His work played to the traditional roles of the fifties and there is the danger that these stereotypes can make the work seem stuck.”⁶⁶ Connor wants the newly commissioned work to be able to offer “a contemporary sense of gender roles.”⁶⁷

Connor is interested in “exploring and juxtaposing José’s ideas of time, community, the individual and group mentality.”⁶⁸ He is interested in commissioning work with a “fractured sense of time to oppose José’s specific and cyclical sense of it.”⁶⁹ For example, *The Moor’s Pavane* (1949) distinctly places itself through the Renaissance costumes and music by Baroque composer Henry Purcell; furthermore, the ballet begins and ends in similar configurations on center stage. Connor is looking for a contrasting idea that offers a new way to frame time. He also wants the new repertory to possess other ideas of the community and individual. *Psalm*, *Missa Brevis*, and *The Traitor* all feature an outsider, a soloist, facing the masses. Connor suggests the connection between self and community has changed since the fifties and is interested in work that reflects that shift.⁷⁰ He also plans on confronting other presentational aspects that feel outdated, such as giving the current costumes and lighting a twenty-first century facelift.

His first endeavor is to hire choreographers who offer an understanding of the human experience that breaks through the barriers of conventional gender roles while staying rooted in

⁶⁶ Colin Connor, interview by author. New York, August 22, 2016.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

physical musicality and opposition. Connor wants to offer a new landscape of connection between the men and women in the company while maintaining rhythm and human intent. He has commissioned *Night Light*, a work by Kate Weare. This piece has a strong relationship to the music, as do the Limón ballets, but does not subscribe to traditional notions of gender. In *Night Light*, partnering comes in every variance, both typical and atypical. Weare has women partnering and supporting men, and vice versa, as well as men partnering each other and women partnering each other. Connor feels pairing this with Limón works that feature traditional male and female roles offers the audience a chance to understand the changing lineage of the how humans continue to “live on this planet together.”⁷¹ He is interested in provoking the conversation about who we are, who we were and who we will be. This piece also has a “fractured sense of time.”⁷² Connor can present this work in the same program as *There is a Time* as a counterpoint to give the audience a deeper understanding of what different interpretations of time can be, creating a fuller theatrical experience.

In his first season in this new role, Connor has a great deal to accomplish and more plans for contextualizing and bringing this twentieth century modern dance company into the twenty-first century. Along his way, he plans on a giving some of the other elements of the older repertory attention by experimenting with new costume and lighting designs. He wants to update and include the advancements of twenty-first century lighting and costumes to give the older work some new visual possibilities. He compared the state of the company to a house from the 1920s. “It’s a perfectly built house, it just needs a new kitchen.”⁷³ How the audience and critics receive this new vision will be important for the dance field at large and has the potential to facilitate ideas and possibilities for other legacy companies.

⁷¹ Colin Connor, interview by author, New York, August 22, 2016.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

In José Limón's autobiography, *An Unfinished Memoir*, he stresses the impression that early modern dance pioneers left on him by sharing his point of view on the lineage shaped his artistry:

My parents were Isadora Duncan and Harald Kreutzberg. They were not present at my birth. I doubt that they ever saw one other or were aware of their responsibility for my being. Residing at my emergence into the world where my foster parents Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. It was in their dance studio and in their classes that I was born. I had existed previously in human form for twenty years but that existence was only a period of gestation, albeit a long one, longer than that of an elephant. My grandparents were equally illustrious, they were Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn.⁷⁴

Ted Shawn was a pioneer in American Modern Dance. He was a visionary who, with Ruth St. Denis, started the Denishawn Company and school that spawned a generation of great artists, such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. Later in his life Shawn formed an all-male dance company and founded Jacob's Pillow, now a National Historic Landmark. The Pillow, as it is commonly called, is located in the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts and houses dance archives dating back to 1894. It operates as a dance school, with theatrical venues, and supports contemporary and historical dance with research grants and fellowships. Here is where Shawn stamped historical modern dance with his revolutionary all-male work that helped build a foundation for what is known as modern dance today. Shawn's work continues to be a source of inspiration for contemporary dance artists.

In 2013, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented an exhibition entitled "20 Dancers of the 20th Century," It was part of a three-weekend series, "Musée de la Danse: Three Collective Gestures," curated by French choreographer Boris Charmatz. Situated as a pioneering modernist choreographer, Ted Shawn was one of the choreographers featured, along with four of his early solos that were originally part of a larger collection of work he choreographed for

⁷⁴ Jose Limon, *An Unfinished Memoir*. (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 1.

himself and his company of men. Adam H. Weinert, a New York performing artist, was invited to reconstruct and perform these four solos.⁷⁵

A great deal of Shawn's movement vocabulary was inspired by the physicality and manual work of the male American laborer of the early twentieth century. For Weinert, and for a majority of Americans, twenty-first century "labor" involves mobile devices, keyboards and computer screens. Weinert was interested in exploring a different daily labor experience in hopes of a result that aligned with Shawn's intention and state of mind.

Shawn and his company of men spent their days, in the 1930s, outside, working in the gardens, farming and harvesting the food they used for the meals they prepared themselves during their rehearsal period. Weinert, using the same methods, spent his time at Jacob's Pillow with rigorous daily farming and rehearsing that included examining the choreography from video and photographs, books and rumor.⁷⁶ Weinert felt reliving this practice was a vital step to authentically recreate and perform Shawn's choreography.

During the process of bringing these solos to life, Weinert unearthed some interesting facts about Shawn's relationship to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

Weinert discovered that Shawn made a gift of his works to MoMA in the 1940's. The museum later gave these materials away, some to the newly formed New York Performing Arts Library and others to the Jacob's Pillow archive. This move contradicted MoMA's policy not to sell or give away works by living artists (Shawn was living at the time of his deaccession), suggesting that as a dance artist the museum considered his work outside its purview.⁷⁷

This discovery, along with the process of performing Shawn's work at MoMA in October of 2013,⁷⁸ inspired Weinert to investigate ways to continue to keep Shawn's work alive and

⁷⁵ "Adam H. Weinert, "Modernist Work in Augmented Reality." The Reaccession of Ted Shawn, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.thereaccessionoftedshawn.com/>.

⁷⁶ Adam H. Weinert, "Modernist Work in Augmented Reality." The Reaccession of Ted Shawn, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.thereaccessionoftedshawn.com/>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Musée de la Danse: Three Collective Gestures.

relevant. The plan came in three steps. First Weinert evaluated what he knew of Shawn's interests. He knew that Shawn made dance films dating back to the early 1900's and was constantly intrigued by the most advanced technology available.⁷⁹ The second step was reaching the audience. He asked, "What are people engaging with today?"⁸⁰ During the installation/performance at the MoMA, Weinert noticed much of the audience spent the performance recording him and watching him through their cell phones or tablets. His answer: "It's their mobile devices."⁸¹ The third step was to pay homage to Shawn's original intention of gifting his works to MoMA. These thoughts, questions and observations generated the scope of his next project: *The Reaccession of Ted Shawn*:

REACCESSION is accessed by a mobile app that uses Augmented Reality, a technology that enables audiences to find location-specific triggers throughout the museum to load Weinert's reconstructions of Shawn's works on their mobile devices in the exact location of their performances.⁸²

Philippe Tremblay-Berberri filmed Weinert's performance in the MoMA exhibition. This footage comprises Weinert's work, which is accessible with the application Augmented Reality, through a museumgoer's cell phone. An interested audience member can visit thereaccessionoftedshawn.com to download the application and review the list of instructions explaining where in MoMA to go to point a phone and wait for the digital replay of Weinert's October 2013 performance to appear on the screen. The audience can have a similar experience many people had the day Weinert was actually performing in front of them: they can watch him on their mobile devices.⁸³

⁷⁹ Adam H. Weinert, "Modernist Work in Augmented Reality."

⁸⁰ Adam H. Weinert, interview by author, New York, August 26, 2016.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Adam H. Weinert, "Modernist Work in Augmented Reality."

⁸³ Specific directions to access, watch and take part can be found at: <https://thereaccessionoftedshawn.squarespace.com/directions/>.

Weinert achieves many goals and defeats many of dance's obstacles with this project. It faces dance's ephemerality and is able to reach a wider audience over the period of time that the application is in operation. In this way, he engages audiences on their terms. Like Shawn, he has tapped into the latest technology available. For Weinert, the most rewarding aspect is that MoMA once again houses Shawn's work.

In the opening weekend of this project, the application had over 10,000 hits. Although this is not considered "going viral" in terms of internet standards, 10,000 people engaging with mid-twentieth century American modern dance over the course of a couple of days gives this idea considerable traction. This approach seems like a noteworthy path for modern companies looking for new ways to engage their current patrons and new ways to build a young and contemporary audience.

CHAPTER THREE

My Turn

“Modern dance is best preserved through performance,”⁸⁴ as Marcia B Siegel once said, but people simply are not very interested in watching dance history, and diminishing dance audiences are the result. To engage audiences, it is the responsibility of artistic directors, choreographers, and critics to create new and exciting ideas and concepts for their audiences. Dance is a demanding art to consume; the responsibility of creating a consumable product lay in the hands of dance makers and writers. Modern dance from 1930s and the dance boom of the 1970s came about because brand new ideas and concepts were being seen and consequently written about for the first time. Dance now must go further than it has before and should be recognized and spoken about in new ways to create a new boom. The field needs new and exciting ways to engage with new and exciting works. It is my venture to engage with modern dance history and present it with an updated look. I will also premiere an original work that is accessible enough to engage and excite the viewer.

I have examined what artistic directors of modern dance companies are doing to keep mid-twentieth century modern dance effective and relatable for today’s audiences. I have also explored the critical response to modern dance from its inception to recent performances for contemporary audiences. This research supports the performance aspect of my thesis which is a presentation of a concert with two works that implement the ideas, possibilities and options critics and artistic directors have offered as solutions to invigorate modern dance. The first work is a staging of José Limón’s *There is a Time* (1956) as a representative of work from the modern era of dance. The second piece is a new work, *Ecclesiastes 3*, based on the themes Limón used

⁸⁴ Marcia B. Siegel, *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), x.

for *There is a Time* as a source of inspiration for original choreography. This concert demonstrates a way to contextualize a modern dance work as well as highlight the impact and power that modern dance can have on a contemporary choreography.

In 1956 José Limón premiered his masterpiece *There is a Time*. This work brings to life sections of the biblical book Ecclesiastes. He begins this work with twelve dancers, arms stretched, holding hands and swaying in a circle, representing the infinity of time. The opening circle breathes, rotates, swells, collapses in on itself and finally breaks and unfolds to reveal a soloist on the brink of birth. This first solo, which Limón danced in the original cast, highlights the second line in Ecclesiastes 3, “a time to be born and a time to die”⁸⁵ He continues the piece with vignettes, breaking down each stanza in the poem. The dance clearly demonstrates the essence of events of the human experience in circular patterns and is undeniably steeped in the movement qualities of the Limón Technique.

The ballet continues to dance through the verses of Ecclesiastes, exploring what it is to plant and reap, kill and heal, speak and be silent, embrace and refrain from embracing, laugh, dance, love, hate, and leaves the audience with what it is to take part in war and peace. The music, *Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, by composer Norman Dello Joio, was a commissioned score written specifically for this dance and won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1957. *There is a Time* is considered a masterpiece and is one of the most frequently licensed works by the Limón Foundation to professional repertory companies and universities around the world.

In my process of restaging *There is a Time*, I used some of Colin Connor’s suggestions about how to keep Limón work fresh and exciting by redesigning the costumes and lighting. Limón was interested in a costume that appeared timeless, however his original costume ideas

⁸⁵ Eccles. 3:1 OT, AT.

can now appear dated. I hired Keiko Voltaire, a New York costume designer who has created costumes for major American modern dance companies including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and Limón Dance Company, to revitalize the costumes used for this piece. We discussed a look that stays true to the original intention of appearing timeless. We evolved away from the specific details of what timeless costumes may have been thought to be in 1956 and explored other designs in line with what an audience of today may see as timeless. The original costume designs by Pauline Lawrence have an eighteenth-century peasant look. The men wore shirts with a deep neckline exposing the chest with strings to tie or leave open, accompanied by pants that tie in a large bow just below the knee. The women wore long simple dresses, with scoop neck, a split down the middle of the dress to expose a muted underskirt.

We reflected on Limón's ideas and Lawrence's designs while considering current trends as an access point for a younger, current audience. I was interested in exposing more of the body while staying true to the principal of form and timelessness. We used a simple, loose, blousy black top for the women paired with black shorts and contemporary black pants (joggers) and no shirt for the men. This highlights the body while maintaining Limón and Lawrence's original intention of appearing timeless. This design feels current and shifts the focus to the dancers' bodies.

I also looked at the original concepts of the lighting design and worked with Sarah Resch, a lighting designer in the Department of Drama at the University of California, Irvine, to create a new lighting scheme. We responded to the original lighting story that is simple and follows basic autumnal coloring by creating ideas that incorporate and contrast those choices to enhance the work with new lighting options that offer starker and a more varied color schemes to give the work a more contemporary and cutting edge feel.

The pedagogical aspects of teaching *There is a Time* is another element of the process I explored. Learning choreography can be approached from an academic standpoint of learning the correct steps, or through understanding the authentic emotional intent. Ideally both are considered when teaching, but the way in which the material is presented can influence the dancers' understanding of the piece. It seems to me that dancers today learn differently than dancers of previous generations. It is essential that this material be shared in a way that is as meaningful to the artists performing the work in 2017 as it was to the artists premiering this work in 1956. While setting this work, I tapped into the intention of the movement over the textbook step. This approach gives the dancer and the audience a fuller experience of what is being expressed; if I can get a dancer to tear at herself in a "Time of Hate" for example, to express her self-hate because she has been given the cue to tear at the parts of herself that she despises, the choreography will have a stronger impact on the dancer than if I simply showed her the steps a former dancer did with little or no context. Even if I chose the latter and layered the idea of self-loathing after, the dancer would still have in mind the step as the primary focus, but if I ask the dancer to tear at herself to reveal and purge, then use that momentum to craft those ideas into the steps, the objective will be to rip at herself rather than to do a choreographed movement.

I also considered gender roles and how they can signal the age of a choreographic work. The opening solo of 'Born and Die', which Limón originally performed, has been traditionally danced by men. I had a female dance the opening solo to make the initial statement to those who are familiar with the work that this staging will be different, offering intrigue to the audience member that may have already seen this work. The next solo traditionally performed by a man is 'Time to Kill'. It is a very short and aggressive solo that choreographically indicates the use of a heavy and phallic sword piercing the earth and the sky.

This hyper masculine bravado of flexed feet and stabbing gestures was performed by a woman, the intention being that women are capable of the same strength and further demonstrate the fluidity of contemporary gender roles.

Limón choreographed 'Time to Embrace' as a sensual duet between a man and a woman. Many advances have been made regarding the visibility of male-male relationships since 1956 and they are often reflected in the art we see today. I have considered LGBTQ issues when restaging this work and saw the potential to bring attention to this topic and chose to set the duet on two men.

The final change I made is to a group section originally created for five to six men, and instead casted the entire company of women for 'Time of War.' This choreography reflects a time when war was typically thought of as a man's job (José himself went overseas for World War II). This ideology has shifted; not only are women part of the US military, but there is also a social-political war between many women in the United States and the newly elected president. The recent United States presidential election sparked a great deal of controversy. During the campaign a presidential nominee was recorded bragging about purposeful and forced sexual misconduct, which he then excused as locker room jargon. Regardless of this wrongdoing, he was elected. This caused over two and a half million people, worldwide, to attend The Million Woman March to protest his inauguration. This has resulted in a political movement of women asserting themselves in opposition to their government that has allowed that kind of banter to be condoned. Because of this development, it seems to me that women are fighting a war and "Time of War" is an ideal section to allow the audience to connect current events with a piece choreographed over seventy years ago.

Updating the lighting, costume design and staging pedagogy of a modern dance piece

fulfills one facet of my research into exploring how to make modern dance more relevant for the contemporary audience watching it. The process of staging and presenting modern work with updated costumes, lighting and gender role changes can strengthen modern dance performances, audience experiences and engagement with historical preservation. My research also reveals that how work is presented in tandem with other work can impact audience response.

I was interested in experimenting with Eilber's method of presenting newly commissioned work with a masterpiece umbrellaed under the same theme. I explored what it was to create a new work based on a Limón masterpiece and present that new work under the theme of "Concepts of Time," alongside the updated version of the original Limón work. With my staging of *There is a Time*, I used the biblical passage, Ecclesiastes 3, as Limón did in 1956, to create a contemporary work and premiered my choreography in the same program with a freshly lit, recostumed and regendered *There is a Time*.

My choreographic approach to time and the ideas of birth and death and all that happen in between differ from that of Limón's approach. Although I agree that time can be circular in nature, Limón doesn't address linear aspects of time from a personal perspective, and he also ignores the "season" in which these events in time occurs. Ecclesiastes begins with, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the sun." Limón created a ballet based on a "time for everything". My approach to choreographing Ecclesiastes, titled *Ecclesiastes 3*, was directed towards the other half of that first sentence, my choreography addresses a "season for every activity under the sun."

Limón chose not to use any quartets in *There is a Time*, to reflect this omission my work is comprised of a quartet, a dancer for each season. The seasons undergo their own relationship, while connected to one another, to the different passages of Ecclesiastes and thus have

contrasting understandings of birth, death and all that can happen between the two.

Each dancer represents a season. Each dancer is featured to establish the passing of time of that season. Each dancer has been given material that was created by movement inspired from the recurring themes from *There is a Time*. Limón used basic footwork reflecting folk patterns such as the grapevine, that repeat throughout the work. I have taken that material and used similar basic patterns to reference his work with added variations to levels, speed and intention.

Limón adopted specific choreography to represent what each line in Ecclesiastes meant to him. For example, in a ‘A Time to Reap’ he employs long sweeping motions of the arms to indicate a sickle leveling the crops, followed by circular movements of the arms swinging back and forth representing a basket collecting the fruits of labor. This is an action that normally occurs during autumn. Thus, in my work’s opening solo ‘Fall,’ those movements have been considered and included. I created a collection of the material that occurs throughout *There is a Time* that I feel reflect the actions of autumn and created phrase work that references those different sections. I gave this material to the dancers. Together we experimented with moving this work through space, together, separately, different facings, fragmenting who does what and when, then crafted the first featured dancer’s choreography to represent all that can occur in fall with supportive movement from the other three dancers. I choose to keep all dancers on stage throughout the piece, as the dancers represent time and the seasons, time is always present and seasons are always occurring.

There are other sections that can occur throughout the year, such as killing. A ‘Time to Kill’ can happen at any moment; therefore, in my choreographic process I was sure to include movements inspired by Limón’s ‘A Time to Kill’ in each of the featured dancers’ material. This speaks to the linear aspect of how I see time as forward moving from a personal perspective, but

still reflecting on Limón's idea of a cyclical pattern. This work honors the past while opening minds to possibilities for the future.

As Limón collaborated with Norman Dello Joio for a musical score reflective of *Ecclesiastes*, I collaborated with composer, Joshua Simmons. I gave Simmons Joio's musical composition and asked Simmons to create a new score using the concepts of seasons, while using Joio's music as a tool of reference and inspiration. Simmons created a score containing four sections of music divided by seasons. He took recurring themes from the original composition and stretched sections of it until it was indiscernible and added his own impressions to rebuild a new musical response to the passing of time and all the events that happen between birth and death.

In the thesis concert production, *There is a Time* opened the evening to give the audience a taste of dance history and dance present as well as a frame of reference for the next work, *Ecclesiastes 3*, followed immediately after. This allowed the audience to make connections between the two works. It afforded them different ways to engage with a biblical writing about a philosophical truth regarding universal patterns in life written thousands of years ago as well as a different way to engage with a historical piece of choreography and offer a lens through which to understand contemporary choreography.

This process of staging a masterpiece and creating a new work was inspired by conversations with different and valuable voices in the dance field. Dance critics are interested in having a concert they find interesting for their readers and artistic directors are experimenting with different tools to contextualize older work while presenting new work, offering optimal audience access that is both challenging and engaging.

My response to this research resulted in a process of staging and creating that involved many different aspects of concert presentation and gave audience members and critics alike to have much to discuss and analyze. As Marcia B. Siegel points out:

The tragic disregard for history afflicts nearly every major figure in dance today. In part it may account for the paradoxical condition of American dance, that as the most creative and prolific of our indigenous arts, it is also the poorest and least appreciated. If dance is to become truly a part of our cultural frame of reference it must be seen, and seen not merely at its present point of development but in the context of the past.⁸⁶

Siegel concludes, “We have a lot to do, and we have to find out how. Nothing may come of it, but that is the risk we take for being alive.”⁸⁷

My choreographic voice is inspired by my past and fueled by my excitement for the future. This research has opened doors and has encouraged me to find new ways in which historical and contemporary work can successfully feed each other. I will strive to give audiences a frame of reference, demonstrate artistic points of development and take the risks necessary to break new ground.

⁸⁶ Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point*, 182.

⁸⁷ Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point*, 202.

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