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Reservations O.K.

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Dance Theatre)

by

Paul Timothy Laurey

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2014

The Thesis of Paul Timothy Laurey is approved and it is acceptable in quality and format for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

George Evans Laurey and Rosemary Madeline Dodd Laurey.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Reservations O.K.

by

Paul Laurey

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Dance Theatre)

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Tara Knight, Chair

Reservations O.K. is a filmic dance journey through varied ways of moving and being in the natural world, the social world, and the divine world. Subjects and objects move and dance through snow and heat and gloom of night, within boxes, under the ground, spritzed in vapor, parallel in realms apart, and as one in the same. Ends are beginnings and the middle ground is moving. Life is the predestination. Questions regarding Reservations O.K. are addressed, explored, considered, and further developed.

Reservations O.K. Descriptions, Questions, and Answers

Two sentence:

Reservations O.K. is a filmic dance journey through varied ways of moving and being in the natural world, the social world, and the divine world. Life is the predestination.

One paragraph:

Reservations O.K. is a filmic dance journey through varied ways of moving and being in the natural world, the social world, and the divine world. Subjects and objects move and dance through snow and heat and gloom of night, within boxes, under the ground, spritzed in vapor, parallel in realms apart, and as one in the same. Ends are beginnings and the middle ground is moving. Life is the predestination.

One page:

Reservations O.K. is a twenty-one minute dance film. Or better put, a twenty-one minute film that dances. Movement of people, animals, technology, and nature is choreographed on film in an exploration of the ways and means that dancing survives and thrives in the 21st century. Dances of the body, dances of the mind, dances of the eyes, dances of fingers on buttons, and dances of open palms and responsive fingers. A human pyramid, a floating bubble, the Lone Ranger atop his trusty steed Silver, deep water divers,

and swimming rabbits move and dance as a spiraling path upwards, backwards, forwards, and on the level.

Context and meaning is shifting more rapidly than ever in our digital, informational age, but the song remains the same. When is movement liberating, revelatory, emancipatory, clarifying, magical, appropriate, and adaptive? Can this be found as a spinning top, in rain drops, a single point on a mountain top? What does dance reveal about the world? How can we dance in the world?

Film choreographer, dancer, and cognitive scientist Paul Laurey arranges movement from found and captured footage connected to folks music, pop songs, classical orchestra, and environmental sounds. Andrew Vargas contributes scintillating sound design. The paintings of Steven Blandin Wright intersperse the moving images with a tour of still designs wrought with bright color, rough form, and an ephemeral call to duty and desperation. Dance in your seat as the film unfolds, weaving the currents of dance into your brain/mind from back to front.

Question 1. Process

***Reservations OK* is comprised of found footage intermixed with original camera footage.**

Describe the process through which you arrived at the images selected for the final film. How did you search and select footage? What were some of the guiding principles for how you edited these moving images together? Revisit an earlier 1-hour draft of this film and compare how the film has transformed between this earlier draft and the final version.

The process through which I arrived at the final images in the film involved a variety of methods that developed over time. It began with capturing footage with dance collaborators. We danced in studios, a theater with stage lighting, a forest, a tunnel, a fishing pier, and in abandoned WWII battlements. Most of the dancing was duet work, with some solo material most often leading into and out of the duets. We also worked with group scores that were structured by the specifics of outdoor sites. A common quality of all the dance making was attention to the nature of the context, one's individual somatic status, an empathic and visual understanding of the dynamic states of partners, and a continuously appraised emotional compass of how to optimally move.

The dancers filmed each other with moving cameras and fixed cameras. Most shoots were done with two cameras. The fixed camera provided a wide shot and the moving camera applied the eye of the dancer/cameraperson's somatically directed framing of visual interest. In other words, the dancer guiding the camera first understood the dancing taking place through kinetic and emotional empathy, with some inclusion of visual design, and the allowed their emotional processing to guide the eye and the camera to the most salient view as found by a dancer watching dancing.

Another camera technique was applied with the duet shoots in the theatre. Two cameras were placed on tripods downstage left and right. They were angled to upstage center. The geometry of this arrangement provided for a pair of perspectives capturing dance in the space so that movement near each camera would only be captured by that single lens. Movement further from the cameras would be captured by both lenses. This camera geometry informed the score for movement so that each dancer had space to solo for a specific camera, duet space upstage captured by both cameras, and dancers had the option to duet close to a single lens.

I also collected quite a bit of material when studying dance, music, ritual, and traditional healing in Bali. Video included private performances, public performances, temple performances, dance classes, and exploration of the island and people. In Bali I also collaborated with a contemporary dancer from Canada. We filmed dance site specifically.

It was this this material that I began editing in the fall of 2013. At the outset, I was impressed with the great scope of possibilities. I was not working within any pre-established method for how to put together a film. I was interested in manipulating time, perspective, proximity, set, color, dynamics, detail, the intricate/nuanced/complex nature of a dance dialogue, and other qualities I have experienced as meaningful and potentially liberating, revelatory, and inspiring in dance. I was seeking to create a video experience for the film viewer which would share the socially productive magic of dancing. I decided not to be overwhelmed by the seemingly infinite options for approaches to structure the visual sequence. I trusted in the experience inside of me from thousands of collaborative, wonderful dances. Like the descriptions of dance work above, I resolved to carefully attend to the visual scene created by video footage, my internal somatic states as I responded to that video environment, and be guided in editing and assembling by the same emotive intuition seeking

optimal movement in a given context as a specific self creating a film for an audience. Through this process, my attention was shared between these connected components. Emphasis shifted through time to prioritize content, context, self, or audience.

I have described sensing how to best move or moving optimally as a guiding principle of my dance making and film making. It would be good to illustrate this more specifically. Fundamentally, this practice comes from contact improvisation. Steve Paxton describes this dance in a recent video document entitled “Contact Improvisation and War.” His wise words expressed two ways people behave when in contact: they can improvise together or are otherwise engage in some manner of battle.

I have found this experience of dancing so that when two people are in contact and realize that the quality of their experience is immediately and directly affected by the movement of their partner- that people often become guided by the emotional system’s knowledge of benefits of cooperation. People who are in contact and dance find reward in being kind to each other. The variety of kindness in these dances are informed by the needs and desires of each dancer. Steve describes this cooperative instinct in duets leading to a blossoming of a third party that is greater than either dancer. That third party is the dance itself. In this dance, no one is leading or following- it is the dance, the collaboration, that determines movement.

This practice of finding points of contact and engaging cooperatively is the core of my artistic practice and work. In a contact improvisation duet, the point of contact and the cooperative behavior is physical and immediate. As a dancer’s skills develop, point of real connection, mutually felt can be established and developed without any direct physical contact. Two dancers can move in and out of contact with a high level of smoothness and informedness so that there is never any separation of knowing the other’s kinetic, emotional,

or energetic dynamic.

I worked on Reservations O.K. in this way searching for contact points to work cooperatively with the partners of cultural context, video images, myself, and audiences. An example sequence of events in this work is as follows: intellectually and emotionally consider the state of the world and societies, allow my body to feel its response, sense the direction of movement my body wants to move, and search through video material of movement that satisfies this in some way. Four clips are identified and edited together, I imagine how different audiences may read the movement, I imagine how different audiences may feel the movement, and the sequence edit is modified to suit multiple reads and feelings.

Working this way with the footage collected with dance collaborators I encountered the desire to include movement of other kinds. I filmed animals in the zoo. I looked online for movement of nature and constructed objects. As the sequences developed, they called for this or that kind of movement and I would search for, or capture, what was needed. Examples include a whirlpool, an animal in mud, and a person with an apple on his head. I also began using movement sequences with preexisting cultural references. This range of collected and found footage served as an expanding palate from which to draw in assembling and shaping the film choreography.

This process produced a 1-hour version which was cut to a shorter piece. The cut was made in response to the question if you cut it down to 15 minutes what would be left? To that 15 minutes another section was created to complete the 21 minute short. In screening the full and shortened versions, some audiences preferred the full, others preferred the short.

Question 2. Positioning

You have used the term "film choreography" to describe your MFA thesis film. How do you define this term?

In defining this term it is practical to first examine its origin in usage. The term came up in conversation with Tara Knight while viewing and discussing the film in process. We were talking about the process by which the movement sequences were developing. I described how the methods used in making the film were essentially the same core skills I used in developing choreography in the studio for the stage. As those methods were now being applied to film, the term "film choreographer" arose. I was choreographing the film. Shaping the selection, manipulation, and playback of still images that produce a visual experience of seeing movement. Film choreography is the creation of a film through applications of principles of dance choreography.

How does this differ from more well-established roles like "film editor" or "director" or "choreographer"?

I see a film editor's focus as usually on something other than the movement in a scene. It may be narrative line and timing, character development, visual perspective, etc. A film choreographer works with the movement in order to make the movement dance. This was my focus. I did also take up other roles at times. I released my role as choreographer and watched as an unexpectant audience member, as if I was watching someone else's short film and didn't know what to expect. For example, taking on how many audience members would

see the film, I allowed my left brain to generate and identify potential narratives onto the choreography. The film was developed so that no single narrative could dominate the meaning of the movement.

The term film editor came from early days of the film industry, its technology, and how scenes shot separately were edited and put together. Film was expensive, used sparingly, and had to be physically cut then taped together. These technical requirements determined the work a film editor did. Digital technologies have expanded the role film editor. The process in making *Reservations O.K.* was substantially different due to the nature of digital film capture and publishing allowing a filmmaker to work with far more material, arrange and edit faster and in many different ways.

A director's role is to be the central vision that organizes the talent of the creative team. Or a director's role is to organize the talent of the creative team into a collective vision. I experienced both methods of working. I estimate I spent 90% of work hours in the latter role, that of connecting with the movement material assembled on the video palette and allowing their inherent relationships, within our contemporary context, to inform me as a dancing vessel through which the movement passed through and experienced reformation from my thousands of experiences in deeply collaborative dancing and the resultant inclinations for pattern development. In other words, I opened myself up without an endgame agenda to be the pathways of the process of meaning finding and meaning making. The creative team consisted of dance collaborators, Andrew Vargas with sound design, and the camera operators and filmmakers whose footage I found and incorporated.

The 10% of the time I worked as a director with a specific vision was when I selected context to explore, associate, and dance within. For example, with the *Tonto/LoneRanger/ Godzilla* sequence I selected the classic TV serial as material which

represented and demonstrated operations of colonialism. As another example, the “Teach your children” section was intentionally selected with the vision of how elders prepare children for challenges they may face in life through children's stories which can be enjoyed playfully on one level, while also, often metaphorically, present grim faerie tales that can quietly prepare us for grim experiences that may occur in real life.

A choreographer works with live performing bodies and their infinite variations and possibilities. Film choreography has access to this realm, then also works in video capture, assembly, editing, and presentation. Dance choreography is an ancient practice. Film choreography is in its infancy. Film is a powerful baby.

How is creating a score for dance both similar and different from a film?

As described in my process section, I worked, essentially, the same way in filmmaking as with making live dances. Outside that essence are differences that arise from the physical distinction of being with dancers in the dance studio and being with video sequences in the editing studio. The strongest difference I experienced was the close, immediate proximity with collaborators in the dance studio as compared to being, usually, alone in the editing studio. The temporal and spatial distance between myself and the dancers recorded on video, the movement recorded on video, the music or sound recorded in the past and far away, was functionally met with my diving into association with the enduring meaning held in the recorded media. This connection through time and space via meaning digitally preserved is one of the great powers of film. Extending my perception and emotion into this remembered and imagined world created a vast and varied art workspace. For

example, as I worked with video of historical movement from Evel Knievel motorcycle jumps, modern giant work trucks hitched in a circling tug-of-war, and GoPro first person perspective cameras riding a bicycle, a motorbike, and swimming into a whirlpool the independent meanings of these sequences were connected with new associations forming new meanings. These meanings across time, location, context, material, and manner of movement provide a vast terrain of image, motion, emotion, association, sequence, and lineage.

And what practices did you utilize to make your choices for this film choreography?

My primary mode of choice making was follow guidance of my emotional compass of intuition and empathy for generating light while traversing the light and dark terrain of human condition. I would assess meaning, apply a technique, reassess, and continue. An intellectual code set certain motivations, goals, and constraints on the work. Motivation was to personally and socially celebrate the finer parts of life, to heal from the not so fine points of life, and to engage in the inherent and adaptive mystery of life. The work was limited in form from shocking audiences and alienating them. The work was also steered from spiralling into designating some single message or narrative. These intellectually defined directions and boundaries were in conversation with the emotional compass which drove the work. As the emotional compass through time reinforced the validity of the intellectual code, I believed in the code, and maintained it.

What artist lineage(s) do you see this film in conversation with, be they filmic, dance, and/or dancefilm?

Pascal Magin's "Reines d'un Jour" (Queens for a Day) is a famous dance film shot on the lush lower mountain sides of the Swiss Alps. The film inspired me by how it presented dance as a human journey. I see Reservations O.K. as a dance journey as well.

Terrance Mallick's "Tree of Life" was tremendously influential to me. I watched it half dozen times in the theater, never tiring of the visual beauty, the impressionistic quasi-narrative path, and the associative visual commentary on humanity, life, and the universe. Reservations O.K. grew through similar forms.

Martin Arnold is an experimental film artist who by used the still by still nature of film to claim total control over the replay of time. His arrangements slowed, paused, reversed, and spun time forwards and backwards as a hip hop DJ scratches a vinyl record underneath the needle. His examinations of social scenes with this control of time revealed details, hidden elements, and absurdities in human relations portrayed in classic hollywood film. His work provided a method of looking back, looking forward, and looking deeply into scenes that I used in many places in Reservations O.K.

While Reservations O.K. exists in the world of dance film, or experimental film-- it came from the world of live dancing. In identifying my lineage and peers, I first like to express gratitude to the our first hominid ancestral dancer. It may have been hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions of years ago. There was a beginning to dancing, to artful movement, and I seek to connect to that essence, or essences.

One dance artist whose work began in the 1950's, whom I believe was successful in essential dancing at a time when dancers were straining to break free from the objectification

and idealization of staged dance, is Anna Halprin. Anna's accomplishments and contributions are legion, legend, and too great to summarize here. She strongly influenced many of my dance teachers. There is a good argument that her workshops were a pivotal point of conception for the Judson Church and Grand Union postmodern dance revolution. Anna connected dance to nature, dance to function, and dance amongst diverse peoples.

Sara Shelton Mann and Contraband, the group she led through the 80's and 90's, richly and powerfully inform my dance making and appreciation. Sarah creates vigorous, visceral, emotionally vibrant, insightful, socially interconnected and responsible performance, healing, celebration and transformation. Her work continues to inspire and influence my work.

Lemi Ponifasio is a Samoan choreographer and director of the dance company MAU. His work brings indigenous dance, arts, and community into the contemporary art world. I see his movement, song, sound, design, and social culture as potent protector and cultivator of the human spirit. I took up this goal and practice in making Reservations O.K. Balinese theater and dance filled my recent summer with connection, community, ritual, action, belief, music, energy, and spiritual transcendence. The film that came after this study was directly affected by the experience. Both the 21 minute and one hour versions of the film contain footage from Bali.

Question 3. Collaboration

Dance and filmmaking are both collaborative processes. Describe a collaborative *production* experience you had while an MFA candidate that you believe was successful.

What qualities made it successful, specifically? How did your participation in the collaboration foster this environment?

I helped organized a collaborative interdisciplinary performance production in the fall 2013 Crossing Boundaries show. Performers were Lisa Franks, Gerard Joseph, and Hannah Corrigan, and myself. Lisa and I created work primarily as dancers. Gerard and Hannah worked primarily as actors. Lisa and I had danced together wonderfully many times prior. She and I share a similar aesthetic and way of working based in contact improvisation (CI). The physical form of CI creates a philosophy of deep collaboration where practitioners find true, mutually understood, contact that can be physical, energetic, emotional, mental, and/or otherwise. From that point of known contact, sensation of the exchange of creative reflexes creates a collaboration action where the human, often necessary socio-political illusion of leading or following dissolve away with increased awareness of the ongoing, looping dynamic of influence, empathy, and the system of social neural interconnectedness and interdependency. Lisa and I find this way working highly rewarding and were eager to share this with the audience.

Gerard approached me at the very beginning of our time together at UCSD with kindness and collaborative conversation. A solid friendship grew as we spent time in conversation about the arts, politics, and how we felt life is best lived. Gerard asked me to help him buy a good used motorcycle and I was happy to help. He and I went on a number of day rides and overnight trips through beautiful countrysides and stimulating cities. From this

friendship and conversations he and I were eager to collaborate on a performance project. With Hannah, I first felt a connection with her as she also has a background in cognitive science as well as the arts. We began to spend time together socially with Gerard on “improvisational adventure walks.” We would begin a walk from the Rita Atkinson Residences where we all were housed and collaboratively steered a path through campus, different scenes, towards a scene, or within in a scene. We spent time dancing in sports fields and making rock sculptures in rock fields. I was eager to collaborate with Hannah because of her bright spirit and gorgeous singing.

In the performance collaboration, I identified and worked on an opportunity to interconnect dance with theatre. I suggested a performance score which included a dance conversation, the voices of actors leading the dancers, movement of the dancers influencing the voice of actors, dancers leading the bodies of the actors, actor vocal responses, and space for this exchange of leading roles to expand into a greater social understanding, collaboration, and group operation.

The performance was a great success and very well received by the audience. Several said it was their favorite piece of the evening. The most enthusiastic responses came from members of the department who had not seen this kind of dance before. I was happy with the successful collaboration of dance and theatre.

I believe my participation fostered this success through deep listening, commitment to somatic artistic, social, and verbal understanding, offering a performance score that prioritized both dance and theatre, and being responsive to contributions to the score from Lisa, Hannah, and Gerard.

Similarly, describe a challenging collaborative experience, and, in retrospect, what you would have done to better foster a positive collaborative environment?

A challenging collaborative experience was working with Halei Parker in designing costumes for the WinterWorks dance piece. It was distressing to me for a collaboration to conclude ineffectively and confusingly. Having a collaboration I was emotionally invested not end well was dispiriting. I often reflected on this dynamic. Our social world is complex. I seek to continue to gain skills to effectively work with different people, in different contexts, in different ways while staying true to my values.

My first thought on how a more positive collaborative environment could have been created is to have more enthusiastically invited Halie to be involved in a deeply informed co-creation of costuming and choreography. In past projects, costume designers came to early rehearsals to see the dancing and discuss costume ideas. Costume elements were brought to rehearsals, put on, and moved in. The designer tested and developed costumes with the dancers dancing. The costumes affected the choreography and the choreography affecting the costuming. The collaboration was deep and involved a complex, dynamic co-creation.

I realize this kind of ideal collaboration faces some practical limitations. Director Peter Brook in “The Empty space” encourages this deep collaboration with designers, but then states that logistical limitations of scheduling and funding often necessitate a shorter collaborative cycle. While I enthusiastically invest and strive for ideal collaborations, I can do better with making the best of collaborative partnerships that are limited in their scope. A better approach for me may be rather than simply strive for my ideal collaboration, to instead strive for effective collaboration where it begins.

A second place where I encountered confusion with Halei is how language was used

in conversation. My use of language comes from decades long practice of scientific conversation and also speech coming from embodied dance. Scientific language is a collaborative exchange that builds and tests conceptual models of what is going on in order to know how to best work. Speech from dance, as I been taught and practice, is an directly embodied utterance of words. A method of allowing direct sensation, feeling and action to produce words aims to accomplishing truthful speech. My dance teacher Chris Aiken termed this poetics. I dedicated my work to these usages of language as I found it created the most accurate, humble, and collaborative use of language to identify subjective and objective realities. Both personal poetics and science avoid saying more that you know thereby creating the space and opportunity for peaceful collaborative conversation and understanding.

A use of language that I actively avoided was narrative. I, and science, had observed narrative to be a nexus of cognitive bias that causes misunderstanding, psychological conflict, and a narrative arms race that pressures parties to make up more extreme and more complex stories. Science reports that the only place story exists in nature is in the language areas of the brain. I had experienced a difficult collaborative relationship where my partner's narrative changed without explanation and at times in direct contradiction to earlier statements. I observed this was often due to some undeclared emotion which motivated a desire for the story to change. This type of collaboration was immensely difficult and draining for me as I continued to invest emotion, cognition, time, and resources into my committed ideal of personal poetics and collaborative rationality. Careful observation led me to believe Halie also spoke in this narrative manner.

Impressed by this pattern, I took up an intensive study of the psychology and socio-politics of narrative. Beginning my first year in this MFA program, I neurally digested

around one hundred books, dozens of articles, many documentaries, song lyrics, theater and dance performance, and film regarding the issue. Two springboard books were “The Believing Brain” by Michael Shermer and “The Folly of Fools” by Robert Trivers. There were many springboards along the way taking me to a new view of human society which identified emotionally guided narrative story invention and telling as good use of language.

In short, social politics make the social world an inherently and necessarily mysterious place. In this world, the scientific model of “collaborative rationality” will often be clumsy and confusing. The simple sincerity of personal poetics can also, ironically, be confusing in amidst social and political maneuvering. Our cognitive susceptibility to narrative “explanation” along with inborn and developed empathy means that the stories other people tell affect us cognitively and emotionally. While practicing personal poetics and collaborative rationality in committed relationships can yield tremendous social rewards, it is often risky and clumsy with the social world at large.

A conversational social exchange of emotionally guided narrative is an opportunity to identify and develop trustworthy relationships. The illusory, ambiguous nature of narrative text and subtext provides a theater of social exchange made safer by virtue of how the mind can fluidly believe or disbelieve a story which may represent reality but cannot claim to be reality. The emotionally guided nature of narrative formation allows our survival instincts to guide us through these narrative exchanges. Intuitive social assessment can adaptively guide us to direct expression and open acceptance of story or, alternatively, towards ambiguous speech and deflection or redirection of story.

Participating in the theatre of emotionally guided storytelling with Halie may have worked better to foster a positive collaborative experience. I am now practicing speaking in story. My twenty year ethic of denying narrative thinking and speech may put me at some

kind of disadvantage in the social exchange of stories. However, the value of that rigorous personal poetics and science may be selectively offered into the theatre of narrative as if it were story.

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