1987

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PROJECT IN CHOREOGRAPHY

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the
Senior Scholars Program

COLBY COLLEGE
1987
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Many dancers feel that if movement is not physically challenging, or if tremendous amounts of energy are not exerted to produce a movement, that something is missing. On the contrary, I have found that the less energy used to produce a movement, the more natural it is, and the better it feels. People dance because it is a wonderful feeling to move, although this concept has been swept into the closet in favor of creating fantastic visual images and performing feats only possible for the well-trained acrobat.

After researching the effects that Eastern philosophies and art forms have had on Western choreography, I noticed that those who implement the Eastern concepts of unity of body and mind produce dances which are more than phrases of movements strung together every eight counts. As a dancer, I have a tendency to view many dances in terms of pointed feet, straight legs, and cohesiveness of ensemble work, as opposed to seeing the actual choreography. However, when watching video tapes of some "new wave" choreography by various artists interested in East Asia, I saw the dances as whole entities. I was keen on the flow of the movement, the use of space and time, and the general feeling and tone of the piece. I
decided that this would be a major focus of mine--to create an aura of ease, lightness, and effortlessness within my piece. I realized that effortlessness is impossible to contrive, thus the movements would have to be conducive to breath support and natural pacing. A starting point.

Although "Ch'i" has no ultimate "meaning" to convey, the general inspirational theme has been the breath. By putting the three sections in the particular order that I chose (trio-solo-quartet), I get the feeling of one breath. The trio, with its more forceful, higher-engergied movement, is to me a "gathering up". The movements which become highlighted as a result of the use of the breath in this section are usually during a contraction in the body, similar to an inhalation where the diaphragm contracts. The solo marks the beginning of "exhalation," and the quartet continues the release of "breath" until stillness is achieved, and then the cycle begins again. Of course, "Ch'i" can be interpreted in as many ways as people who see it, but that is one of the joys of the art of dance.
The month of January was devoted exclusively to choreographing the section for the quartet. We met for rehearsals four nights per week, and worked for a few hours each time. The nature of Jan Plan itself—leisurely yet focused—seems to pervade the dance as I look at it now, in the more tense, hurried timeframe of the regular semester.

As I began choreographing, and thinking of what I wanted to take place in this particular dance, elements of Zen found a niche within my work. Many evenings I supplemented the movement we were currently working on with excerpts from Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. As a warm-up I would give the dancers various breathing exercises to encourage an internal focus and a general awareness of how the breath works as a life force. Later in the session, these images of the breath served as constant reminders of how the body keeps itself in locomotion, and importantly, the difference that breath-supported movement can make.

I remember in particular one instance where I explained to the dancers that as a frontally-oriented society, we often forget what is going on behind us, above us, beside us, and beneath us. I then instructed the dancers to try the movement by initiating it from the back, instead of the
front, and to pay attention to their breath at the same time. The change in
the quality of the movement was astounding. The bodies were
three-dimensional, the movement was so full! The startling revelation
that I had made sometime during first semester while researching—the
fact that we move best, and most effectively, when the mind and body
operate as one unit, or as "two sides of one coin" (Suzuki)—was true. I
was looking at it in living color, as the bodies in front of me were
breathing and thinking, creating an ease in their movement unlike anything
I had ever seen them do in everyday dance class.

When I asked the dancers if they felt anything different when they tried
the movement while attending to their breath, they felt a certain tingle in
their bodies—they had awakened their kinaesthetic senses as a direct
result of being aware of how their bodies were organized in space. The
dancers were entering a new realm of movement, or probably more
appropriately, re-entering the same realm which propelled them to take up
dance as children. Dance is self-indulgent, and I made it clear to the
dancers that they were free to indulge themselves in the movement with
its comfortable pacing and flow.

I chose Adreas Vollenweider's "White Winds" to accompany the
movement for the quartet. It should be noted, however, that the dance is
in no way tied to the music. Many choreographers choose music before they actually start choreographing, and occasionally the result is a dance that is either a slave to the regular beat and feeling of the music, or one that seems to regulate the music.

During my research, I came across notes from Eric Hawkins, a revolutionary modern choreographer, who actively practices Zen. His feelings regarding dance and music are based on the idea that the two should exist on separate planes. In his works, the dance and the music are strictly complementary. According to his philosophy, this allows for the movement to develop on its own, and also keeps the element of chance alive. Movement is not dependent on sound, and vice-versa.

This idea has been successfully incorporated into "Ch'i." Aided by the fact that I did not choose the music until after the dance had taken its basic shape, the dancers move with the music, rather than to it. "White Winds" possesses a certain quality of lightness that I was looking for. To me, the dance stands on its own two feet. The music does not bombard the audience with too much information, but rather it adds another dimension to "Ch'i."

One of my favorite aspects of seeing the quartet move is that they never count out beats of the music and base their movement accordingly.
This allows for the dancers to focus on more important aspects of the dance--their breath, their relations to each other, and their bodily organization in space. It is my feeling that this would be impossible to fully achieve if they were required to keep a certain rhythm and timing within the dance.

There is, of course, a sense of timing involved, otherwise the movements would not be synchronized as they often are. However, this synchronization occurs as a result of the dancers being aware of what is happening in the space around them. The quartet functions superlatively as a group--they seem to enjoy sharing the space with each other. This is of extreme importance to the nature of "Ch'i." One of my initial goals for the group was to achieve an ease not only in the movement of the dancers as individuals, but also in the group as a whole. The individuals have marked styles and abilities particular to them, which was in turn given the opportunity to be expressed. However, like the music and the dance, the individuals complement each other, creating an ease within the group work. Keeping in time with other individuals does not come across as a chore--it is a sense of sharing the experience of moving with those in the same space.

The end of the quartet also marked the end of the piece. This was not
pre-meditated. At the end of Jan Plan, I left this section unfinished with the intent of finding a smooth transition between the quartet and whatever was to follow. However, after the three sections of "Ch'i" were finished, and I could see the dance as a whole, it seemed most appropriate to finish with the quartet--leaving them on the floor, beautiful and relaxed, as one is after a full exhalation.

TRIO

As I had planned, the quartet was finished by the end of Jan Plan, except for deciding how it would end. It was time to start with a new group and new ideas, but the material I worked on during January had not been exhausted. Breath-supported movement still pervaded my ideas for choreography, thus I decided to use the breath not only to keep the bodies in locomotion, but also as a form of musical accompaniment.

Rehearsals for the trio constantly found their way to improvisation. The dancers were willing and enthusiastic about experimenting with their breath and with the movement. After choreographing a section of movement and teaching it to the dancers, I then instructed them to
choreograph their own "breath scheme" for the particular phrase(s), hence using their own sense of dynamics and pacing, one that was conducive to their particular sense of breath.

One of the dancers in the trio, Nancy Delorey, also participated in the quartet over the month of January. Interestingly, at the outset of rehearsals for the trio, Nancy was much more in tune with the kind of energy I was looking for, and also much more aware of everything that was happening both in her body and in the studio. Of course, the other dancers fell into the fold soon after, but it was particularly encouraging to me, as the choreographer, to realize that I had effectively broadcasted my message concerning the importance of an equality between the mind and body, and it had been put to good and proper use. Nancy was miles ahead of the other dancers when we began working on the trio. However, equally encouraging is the fact that now there exists no perceptible difference between Nancy and the other two dancers; Sonya and Marianne have achieved a level of consciousness that they previously lacked.

Another aspect of the section for the trio worth mentioning is the awareness the dancers have for what is happening in the space while they are moving, and how it functions within this section. This sense of group interaction served as a sound take-off point for improvisation. I felt
secure enough in the ideas I had presented to the dancers to allow them the freedom to choose among the movements, while looking for connections in the group and playing off of one another, and breathing all the while, naturally. "Are you holding your breath?", frequently echoed off the studio walls, and always brought the results I was looking for. A productive endeavor was the section for three.

SOLO

In the short report written first semester, I stated the intent to create four or five sections of dance to comprise one piece. However, the quartet and the trio sections both ended up longer than I had originally intended. Yet, after these two sections were complete, "Ch'i" was not, in my mind, finished. I considered choreographing a duet or another trio, but then accepted the fact that I wanted a piece of the action. I had created all the movement in both the trio section and the quartet, and felt so closely tied to the dance that I needed to be a physical part of it. It is fun to choreograph movement to breathe with, and even more fun to perform it.
Thus the work on the solo began, along the same lines as the previously choreographed sections.

My approach to the choreography was not quite the same for the solo as it was for the other sections, however. Much of this had to do with the fact that I selected the music beforehand, and therefore this section of the dance is more closely tied to the music than is the quartet. However, I was aware of the fact that this increased the risk of my movement depending on the music, thus I was able to focus on not letting this occur. Many movement cues during the solo are cues I take from the music, although this is not a result of counting. The cues I take are mere sounds I have become familiar with, and I then move with the sounds, and not to the beat of the music.

Some of the movements in the solo come directly from the other sections, although they are put in entirely different contexts. I felt this was important in order to tie the three sections together as elements of one dance. An audience member may not realize that a certain movement or gesture has been repeated in different sections, but it serves to subconsciously aid the audience member to make better sense of the dance. The music for the solo and the quartet are also closely-related, which naturally ties things together.
Creating the solo was simply a means by which I could indulge myself in that which I had spent all year discovering, and also a way for me to show my ability as a dancer and performer. I look forward to performing the solo in the concert; I anticipate that any pre-performance jitters will be taken care of by the faith I have in the power of the breath, and the importance of right effort. My effort will be to focus on the job-at-hand, the execution of the movement, and nothing else. Total immersion in what I am doing--moving and breathing--is what "Ch'i" has been all about, and I look forward to sharing the experience with the audience members.

LIGHTING AND COSTUME DESIGN

Preparing "Ch'i" for performance included taking care of finishing details, namely lights and costumes, which have considerable effect on the final outcome of a dance piece. As the movement is strong in itself, I did not want the lights to be any sort of distraction, yet the way the space is
lit contributes to general impressions an audience member forms.

After Stephen Woody and Cori Brackett viewed "Ch'i," we conferred to discuss possibilities for light design. Stephen asked me where the dance would ideally take place. I replied that a small clearing in the middle of a forest would be the perfect setting. With this idea in mind, we decided to use the tree gobos on the scrim. The way the lights are designed allows for transformations to occur in the general mood of the piece, and the trees add to the naturalness of "Ch'i."

In the section for the trio, the lights are rather cool, although there is a hint of warmth on the scrim from a dim amber light. At the end of the quartet, Nancy finishes in a blue special, which then changes to an orange one on me, marking the beginning of the solo. The cool-to-warm transition in the lighting begins here, and the lights proceed to an even warmer mood by the end of the quartet. Keeping in mind the inhalation to exhalation progression of the three sections of "Ch'i," I feel that the lights reflect my impressions of the breath, and the changes that occur in the body while breathing. Although lights are generally classified as cool or warm, I am not implying that a temperature change occurs within the confines of a breath. However, the colors I have chosen and the moods they create are in my mind appropriate.
Costume design was an easier task for me. I knew that I wanted the costumes to be simple, and I wanted everyone dressed alike—we (the dancers) were all a part of a whole. Loose-fitting black pants were a must, and plain cotton shirts would be worn. I chose a light green to dye the shirts, mainly because I wanted to add some color to the costumes, and green struck me as the simplest, most natural color. Also, I reconstructed the necklines on the shirts in order to open up the chest area on the bodies somewhat. Much of the movement in “Ch’i” comes alive by the proper relation between the head, neck, and torso, and it was important that the costumes not hide the beauty of the dancers’ upper bodies. Tying the shirts at the hip was a way to polish the appearance of the costumes.

FEEDBACK FROM THE PARTICIPANTS

After the choreography was finished, I asked the dancers to write a short summation of their participation in “Ch’i,” including their feelings toward the movement, the process that took place in rehearsals, and any comments they wanted to make. They appear here verbatim. Obviously, the dancers do not have the background in East Asian studies as do I, although judging from the comments they have made, the process involved
in choreographing "Ch'i" has been an educational one for all those involved.

During Jan Plan, four of us got together with Maura to begin working on a part of her Senior Scholars project. Our first few meetings were used to discuss and experience what she has been studying.

Our focus was to be on our breath. First we would lie on the floor, lengthening our bodies, and concentrating on our breath alone. We then began to incorporate working our breath into our movement. It was a very peaceful, relaxing experience. The focus helped me personally in that the movement came more easily and felt right in terms of my own senses. These feelings came about because we were working from within ourselves instead of mimicking shapes and forms of our choreographer.

Maura's approach to choreographing helped us help her when she began to put the piece together. By having us concentrate on our breathing patterns, being aware of our backs and our placement in space, our natural movements were able to come out. From that point she could take these movements and work them in with her own choreography. And from a dancer's point of view, I know that the dance becomes, and is, a part of me, and this (from the choreographer's point of view) comes across in a performance.

--Desiree Pullen

As a first year Colby Dancer, Maura's piece helped me to better develop myself as a dancer, especially in the art of modern dance. What amazed me the most was the breathing technique that we used throughout the piece as well as the rehearsals. Lying on the floor concentrating on our own breathing--the inhalation and the exhalation--taught me to relax and thus, approach the piece with a more natural, open mind. Once we got moving into the piece, I found that I could easily move through the motions while remaining aware of my own body as well as those around me. I admit that once I became involved in the movement, I tended to lose my concentration on breathing. However, when I thought about it, I found myself holding my breath. Yet, as soon as I realized this was happening, I would switch to more concentration on my breathing and would instantly
note the change in my movement which would become more open and full. Another aspect of working in Maura's piece that I found interesting was working through all of the motions, noting the changes that accompanied the breathing and finally, adding the music. I really love the music. This seems to be a relaxing type of music where you can simply concentrate less on the actual movement and more on the breathing and "feeling" the music. I really enjoyed participating in Maura's piece and likewise, I learned how to dance using a new method of concentration--a method that involved mere breathing as well as an open mind and a relaxed body.

--Karen Faunce

I really had an enjoyable time dancing in Maura's Senior Scholars piece. I think the reason for my enjoyment was that by being one of her dancers, I learned several new approaches toward dancing and looking at how my body moves.

To begin with, through the Zen practice of keeping an open mind and accepting things as they come, which Maura told us about, we took a new attitude toward dance, no longer focusing on the proper and exact positioning of the body parts, but just letting the body move naturally through space in a combination given to us. This was very pleasant for me as a dancer because I could just enjoy how it felt to move and not have to worry about pointed feet and rounded arms. It was fun and risky because many years of technique classes were almost thrown out the window.

Secondly, it was interesting for me to experience dancing with the use of conscious breathing as well. This was the second approach that Maura had us take. Our use of breath with dance started when Maura had us go through the combinations she had given us and pay attention to places in the movement where it would be natural to inhale and exhale. For example, at a point in the combination where the movement travelled in on itself (i.e. arms and legs drawn in toward the torso), we would inhale. Or when limbs were being extended away from the body, we would exhale. The use of our breath helped to enhance the movements we were doing. Using our breath in different ways also allowed us to extend the movement sometimes, or lengthen it during others.

Another approach which Maura had us take and which I found to be very new and different, was focusing on getting the movement we were doing to come from what we considered to be our central point. For me, this
central place was in my stomach area, just below my rib cage. Before I did any type of movement I imagined some sort of energy dwelling in my stomach and then if I wanted to make my leg move, for example, I would imagine this energy travelling into my leg, creating movement. For me this approach was interesting and more relaxing. Rather than the usual grunting and groaning involved in making my body carry out a movement, I could focus on this energy and it would thereby seem like the energy caused the movement rather than my muscles.

Finally, I think that my favorite approach to dancing "Ch'i" was that which involved being aware of the back of my body. This is a side of the body that is generally forgotten in dance, so it was fantastic to suddenly become aware of it. We started this approach by imagining we had eyes in the back of our heads. We then did movements with our heads, looking with the imaginary eyes. Through this practice it seemed that my neck was lengthened and the way I moved my head through space changed.

The second way we became aware of our backs was to always be thinking of it as we danced through a combination. This conscious sensing of the back made the movement we were doing seem so much more full, flowing, and relaxing. We were doing large movements that required a lot of energy, but they came easily, in a non-strenuous manner.

All in all, and I cannot emphasize this enough, Maura's piece was wonderful because I learned new approaches to dancing and the new ways that my body moves. It was also fun because her piece was so relaxing to dance. Dance has always been enjoyable to me, but it has never been so pleasant and relaxing.

—Jennifer Johnson

Dancing in Maura's Senior Scholars project has enhanced my awareness of the intimate connection between the mind and the body, as well as the crucial role that one's breathing plays in making that connection. Focused breathing served both to cleanse and relax my mind and body so that the two could unite to create an unparalleled intensity during the dance. Dancing solely to the sound of breathing offers a sort of spirituality which is not as easily achieved when dancing to music, because the music does not come from within. When the only things to contend with are your breathing and movement and that of the other dancers, it also causes an incredible bond of intimacy to develop between the dancers. Nothing could
be more individual and personal than one’s breathing, yet, when the other dancers are “let in on it” and allowed to perform to it, it serves to create a unity between them. All in all, it has been a breath-taking experience.

—Marianne Campbell

Working with Maura these past months has been a real departure from all of my previous dance experiences. Dancing in pieces before, I've always been wrapped up in whether I was doing the steps correctly and if the dance looked good. But as a result of working with Maura, my whole outlook on dance was changed this semester. Instead of focusing on the external beauty of the dance, I began to concentrate on the internal aspects, that is, how the dance made me feel as I was dancing it.

Beginning in January, we had rehearsals for the quartet nearly every day, which ended up being a very intense experience. She began with a brief introduction to Zen Buddhism. What I remember most out of everything she said was, 1) the importance of establishing a connection between mind and body and, 2) to let things happen as they will. These are the two ideas I have tried to keep at the forefront of my mind while rehearsing her piece.

Over January, I developed a whole new awareness of my body, how it moves through space, and what it feels like when I am moving. As we began to explore our bodies and make a connection between our bodies and minds, a new connection was also being established--one between the dancers themselves. A bond began to grow, a bond that could not have existed if Maura had not taken the Zen-based approach that she did. The result was a very enjoyable and productive month.

As the second semester began and she continued to work on the quartet, she also began the second section to her piece: a trio, of which I was also very happy to be a member. In the early rehearsals, the effect that January had on me became more clear. As the only member of the trio also involved in the quartet, naturally I could sense a gap between us (the trio) as I had already begun to grasp the effect that Maura was after, not a visual effect, but a more intangible and internal effect. The trio basis is its breath pattern. In fact, our breath patterns serve as the "accompaniment" to the piece. We focused on using our breath to support our movement. Gradually, the gap between us began to close and as the semester progressed, we now share a bond or connection like the one
developed by the quartet over January.

Overall, being a part of "Ch'i" has had an effect on my dancing and even on my everyday life, to a certain extent. There is a freedom to my dancing now, as the concern about how it looks lessens. The beauty of the dance now stems from the way it makes me feel as I perform it. This in itself is a big change. In everyday life, I am more aware of my body and what it is doing. Also, a new consciousness of my breathing has developed and I feel myself releasing tension through breathing exercises, sometimes even in the middle of classes. Basically, I would not have missed this for the world, and feel privileged to have been as involved with the piece so extensively.

--Nancy Delorey

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DOCUMENTATION

Included in the final report is a videocassette recording of "Ch'i." This videotape serves as the main form of documentation for my project. Included on the tape are two separate recordings of "Ch'i"—one recorded during a technical rehearsal, and one recorded during performance. The reason for including both recordings is twofold. The recording that appears first on the tape is strict documentation of the dance. All the dancers are in view of the camera at all times, so that the viewer may get a complete picture of the use of space and the basic shapes the dance
takes as a whole. The second episode includes more close-up shots of specific dancers, and offers more clarity with regard to detail and facial expression. I felt it was important to include this tape in the final report because the close-ups give a better idea of the internal process involved in performing "Ch'i." Furthermore, this version was recorded by Paul Gregoire (AV Department), and the quality of the equipment, and therefore the recording, is superior to that of the version which appears first on the videocassette.
The following lists include materials used during research:

RESOURCES


The following videos were viewed:

Trisha Brown, "Accumulation"
Lucinda Childs, "Einstein on the Beach"
Eiko and Koma, "Trilogy"
Simone Forti and Troupe, "Waterville Roadcut"
David Gordon, "Aileen and Dorothy"
   "Close-up"
Martha Graham, "Errand into the Maze"
   "Care of the Heart"
   "Acts of Light"
"Japan's Grand Kabuki in America"
Agnes de Mille, "Conversations About the Dance"
Mark Morris, "Prelude"
   "Love, You Have Won"
   "Dogtown"
   "Jealousy"
   "The Tamil Film Songs in Stereo Pas de Deux"
   "Gloria"
David Parsons, "Caught"
Sankai Juku, "Sankai Juku at Battersea Power Station"

The following workshops were attended:

--Workshop in Alexander Technique, with Anne Waxman Holmes, ACAT, November, 1986.

--Workshop in Contact Improvisation, with Simone Forti and Troupe, October, 1986.