Choreographic exploration of physical duress: motivation for and responses to exhaustion (a project in performance)

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A CHOREOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF PHYSICAL DURESS:
MOTIVATION FOR AND RESPONSES TO EXHAUSTION
(A PROJECT IN PERFORMANCE)

by

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INTRODUCTION

After much deliberation, last year I decided that "A Choreographic Exploration of Physical Duress: Motivation for and Responses to Exhaustion (A Project in Performance)" was to be the undertaking of my Senior Scholars' Project. I had previously been tossing around the idea of creating a cynical, macabre, grotesque dance piece dealing with prejudice and the order of social hierarchies in our culture. However, upon realizing the limits to the resources (bodies) available at Colby College for creating this piece, I reconsidered. Having studied dance for the major part of my life, and having been opened up to many new techniques during my time at Colby, I wanted to use skilled dancers for my final undergrad dance piece. I decided to make use of the techniques I have been learning and thus needed trained bodies, as opposed to making a piece that required dancers of little experience. The main pool of trained dancers here consists of white, coming-from-the-middle-class women, which would obviously be rather restricting to the ideals of creating prejudicial relationships on stage.

Then an incredibly simple question came to mind. "What motivates someone to dance until they are exhausted, sweaty, boiling hot and out of breath?" I myself, recalling experiences when I have danced so hard I've nearly fainted, remember how exhilarating that motivation can be. But why? Why is that at all pleasant? Of course, I had several of my own explanations, but I was also interested in doing some scientific research on exhaustion. This question was of ample depth to become the basis of my project.
The process of creating the piece took on some wild changes once I had cast the dancers and began rehearsal. Working individually on readings and creating improvisational structures had set me on what I thought would be a direct route to the final performance product, but I was quite mistaken. At the first rehearsal it struck me that, of course, my dancers were not on the same track as I was, even after I had described my intent in introductory meetings. At first, their fresh, new perspectives and ideas threw me off base. I would start them in on, for instance, an improv concerning repetitive phrasing with varying rhythms. When I gave the “go,” all of a sudden I had a bunch of crazy women bolting around the studio like horses fresh out of the gate. The improv would end and I, dumbfounded, almost wanted to tell them, “Well, um...that’s not exactly what I had in mind.”

But, this being my collegiate choreographic culmination, I had sworn to myself to make use of everything my dancers had to offer me - to involve their styles and their personalities, not just their muscles. I decided that perhaps I had actually become too confined by my individual work and needed to use my ideas about exhaustion in a more liberating manner. After all, this wasn't a math problem; I had to accept the frightening fact that since choreography is a creative and collaborative process, the end result - the performance - cannot be predetermined and is ever-changing. I finally realized that the best way to get at the dancers' fatigue was not simply a structural and technical method - "Do it again. Again! I said JUMP!" - but also to take risks and allow them the freedom to go wacko.

In order to turn what the dancers were dancing into usable material, I had them write journals and discuss their thoughts and impulses after
working any new material. My drummer, Justin Brown, also became involved in this process at the beginning of second semester. My weekly meetings with Tina Wentzel were also of great importance, for Tina, as a more objective (and experienced) participant, pushed me through all my quandaries, and was a tremendous aid in structuring the piece for an audience.

This paper, as a compliment to the performance of the dance entitled, "Clean it Up for Justin!" will describe the process of its construction.
"We're such dancing fools."

-Ned Brown

Ned told me this after we had accidentally bashed heads while dancing around. I cursed him briefly for causing me injury, then we continued our dancemania. In retrospect, this incident is strangely relevant to two major physiological subjects I had been concentrating on reading about at the time; one being the body-mind connection, the other concerning the impulse to use effort. In this case, the body-mind connection of main concern was simply our bruised craniums which resulted from physically reckless behavior; literature such as the cover story of the August issue of U.S. News had discussed the relationship a bit further.

In studies on Olympic athletes, scientists have found that physical performance is associated with profound changes in the brain's electrical activity. When movements involving strength and precision are executed, the left side of the brain was found to release bursts of alpha waves, indicative of a relaxed, trancelike concentration. This "relaxation" of the left side, which is the analytical, language and symbol-oriented hemisphere of the brain, allows the right side to control the body, as the right hemisphere functions more in spatial relations and pattern recognition. "The result is the trancelike "flow" state that many athletes, musicians and other people report experiencing when they are intensely engaged in an activity" (Allman 1992). (First off, Mr. Allman's "other people" includes dancers. I have never been monitored with electrodes by
scientists, but the "flow state" he describes seems to parallel dancing
experiences of mine which I choose to call religious and/or euphoric.)

Another fascinating mind modification resulting from exercise is the
postulated improvement in mood, or "runners' high," as mediated by
endogenous opioids in the brain following regular and prolonged physical
exercise (most commonly marathon running) (Mahler, 1989). In elite
levels of athletes/performers, biofeedback training is sometimes used to
enable the individual to control his/her brain waves, resulting in superior
performance. Part of this training is supported by the use of specific
mental and physical routines; repetition "can help improve concentration
and performance." These concepts led me to construct some of our
introductory improvs concerning repetition. As is true to any sport or
performance, one motivation for moving to the point of exhaustion is
practicing, for practice will bring one closer to the (perhaps unreachable)
goal of perfection.

PATTERN 1: One dancer enters the space, performing a structured
phrase of 8 repeatedly. Dancer 2 enters when ready, performing the same
phrase; when dancer 2 begins, dancer 1 takes the phrase double-time.
Dancer 3 enters, 2 takes it double-time, 1 then slows to half-time. 1
repeats the whole cycle upon 4's entrance. Continue until all the dancers
have completed the half-time phrase; the group finishes in unison with the
original phrase. This pattern should be done several times with different
combinations of movement and of dancers, seeing as dancer 1 has the
longest role. Tuning in to what one's follower is performing is crucial.

Variations: 1) Experiment with silence and several different types of
music - note affectations in movement qualities. 2) Have each dancer
develop their own personal phrasing (still in 8's). 3) Make use of several
different facings, providing the dancers can see the followers.

PATTERN 2: Place the dancers in a wide circle, facing inward so they
can see one another. One dancer passes along a short movement to be
repeated and augmented by 2, then 3, etc. This is essentially the same
idea as the memory game, "I went on a picnic and I brought..." Once a
pattern of substantial length has been developed, have the group perform it in unison, then in rounds.

Variation: Instead of the traditional “hold 2” or “hold 4” type of round, experiment with odd counts. Once the group has the steps under control, try using music, or speeding it up to their fastest ability (and likewise slowing it down; slow may take more stamina). Note changes in the shape and size of the movements according to the speed at which they are executed.

Describing these concepts simultaneously with how they were utilized in the rehearsal process will be more effective in demonstrating their importance than adhering to chronology. So, I began putting improvs such as these to work in October after having cast eight dancers - Anabel, Annie, Danielle, Holly, Jen, Katie, Myriam, and Nicole. Expectedly, I immediately encountered problems.

First of all, I discovered that there were, of course, limits to my dancers’ bodies. Having read primarily about highly trained athletes and long-distance runners in relation to endurance, I had rather subconsciously envisioned eight Mikhail Baryshnikovs dancing my improvs. The reality of choreographing on real bodies hit me; I realized that I was going to have to work more from the dancers-outward, as opposed to pasting my personal movement preferences all over them. However, I was getting them tired and sweaty. After finishing a repetitive sequence of jumping combinations, they would fall to the floor and I’d yell, “GREAT! You’re all sweaty and panting! This is the juice, guys! How do you FEEL?!" I thought they would be ready to ask me how much longer rehearsal was, but to my surprise, they said they felt energized and happy to be getting a workout. On separate occasions:

“I’m so hot; I wish I could breathe - but that last part is full of cool moves. I like throwing my body into the different positions.” -Danielle.
"I'm hot and sweaty! But I'm happy with the fast pace; we're really moving along." - Annie.

"I'm hot and sweaty! My feet are throbbing! I love it!" - Katie.

So, I knew the technical phrasing problems that needed to be reworked, yet I had captured the "exhausted excitement I had been looking for. I now needed to create that sense of relaxed yet intense flow - the limbo between total concentration and total release. I knew this had to, in part, be created through the theme of repetition we had been working on; the challenge at hand was to make use of repetition while kicking out monotony.

As I was thinking about this problem before falling asleep one night, I started mulling over a tangent conversation about Bach I had earlier in the day. Bach composed pieces called "fugues" which utilize repetition of music themes; relatively short phrases, or rifs, are given texture by being repeated while the sounds of different instruments playing these phrases are layered over each other. Gradually, variations enter the themes and the instruments weave their way into a richly complex piece. As applied to theater, contemporary playwright Tina Howe frequently uses the fugue as a language structure in dialogues and large group scenes (incidentally, making reference to and/or use of Bach's compositions in several different plays). The fugue was my answer. I jumped out of bed immediately and began listening to different albums, searching for music. I knew that choreographing with the music would be absolutely essential; I needed to find it before making the fugue.

Nothing. Out of all the music within my reach, I could not find one single piece of music - not even a fugue itself - which would inspire
repetitive and exhausting, yet exhilarating, dancing. I listened to classical, new age, folk, hardcore, jazz, and on and on; I couldn't even make use of works by minimalist artists such as Philip Glass, who constantly make use of repeating themes. I decided to put the fugue on the back burner and work on the rest of the scene breakdown while I continued my search for music.

The issue of effort impulse had been circling around in my readings concerning the mind-body connection. I intended to tackle this issue in various scenes of solos, duets, trios, etc., for I wanted to illustrate the impulse to create movement on a more personal level as well.

Upon investigating impulse itself, I found (to no surprise) that the mind-body correlation has been deemed a "problem" in our society, rather than a relationship. "Members of Western cultures tend to be conditioned to think in terms of mental versus physical events and to experience themselves as being distinct, separated, or even alienated from their bodies" (Laughlin, 1990). In the world of science, mind and spirit have been described as "noncausal." I jokingly told Tina in one of our meetings that I had to drop the whole project because half my subject was in fact completely noncausal. Deane Juhan states in his book Job's Body that our society all too frequently ignores the body-mind connection, treating psychology and physiology as separate sciences, whilst their incorporation could be doubly powerful. After all, our brain is sitting right on top of our spinal cord. "Okay, but why do we move?" I would cry into my books.

Juhan, in relation to effort, says that one of the main features distinguishing the human central nervous system is our ability to produce an extremely wide, and seemingly infinite, range of voluntary movements. Therefore, one (rather primitive and egotistical) motivation for
moving/dancing is a basic desire to distinguish oneself as an individual - to demonstrate one's ability to make choices through movement. Another interesting point follows that we have no gauge of conscious doing unless we have a "sense of effort," which is provided by voluntary movement. This suggests that we move as a constant proof that we exist. Rounding back to the human ego, I deduced that if we can simply twitch a finger "to be," then the function of dancing is to be awesome.

Dance, as well as bodywork (which includes massage and other physical therapies), yoga, meditation, etc., is a direct mind-body connection; the imagined/created art, its communication, and human musculature are all one.

I decided to take these ideas back to the whole group, seeing as I planned to choreograph for the entire group beyond the fugue, and the rehearsal time was available. Having two seniors and two international students in the group, I anticipated scheduling conflicts to arise more frequently during second semester - hence getting most of the group sections polished by January became my first semester's goal.

In setting a section concerning the theme of reaching, I stuck to my ideals of using the dancers' strengths and inherent qualities. Keeping in line with the concept of dancing for the sole sake of individual expression, I freed up the improv structure for them (not without worry). For example, one evening I taught the dancers a short combination I had been considering using, and allowed them an entire piece of loud, percussive, and driving music to mutate the combination as they pleased. I saw some wonderful material developing in front of me, but some was quite unexpected. In contrast to the music (or so I was biased), Katie took off twirling and free-flowing around the studio, swinging up and down like a
freshly fallen leaf. When we stopped, I told her, "Katie, I noticed you took on a rather different interpretation of the music than what I had expected," after which we all proceeded to laugh, knowing Katie and her overriding tendencies to be light, fluid, and a general spaceshot. She replied, "Sara, it's totally the ocean."

"Okay, Katie." There I was, in the midst of a laborious interlibrary loan search about alpha-wave and endorphin release, and Katie started throwing metaphysics at me. But, as it turned out, when I went back to the studio to modify the combinations having watched the dancers, thinking of Katie's movement freed the whole section through space. I had been far too static in creating the sequence; Katie gave it locomotion. The anecdotes could go on for every dancer; they basically brought me out of my shell and into deeper process.

I finished the "reaching" section by December, and it was presented with several other short pieces at the Performing Arts Spotlight Lecture on December 3. As the audience was walking into the Chapel, the dancers ran from various outdoor radii to the spacious center of the lawn and began the piece. The audience and passer-by response was great to watch; everyone was so surprised to see eight people dancing together out in the snow.

The dancers then ran up the hill into the chapel and collapsed on the floor in front of the altar, panting. I gave a short exposition about the piece and the general process of developing a performance, as the dancers got up and performed the piece again inside. I moved the dancers from the outdoors to inside for purposes of comparing the smallness of the dancers running around outside, almost like small children playing, to the seemingly larger, more dominating effect the dancers seem to have when
they return to a more traditional performance space indoors. Running around outside and performing something indoors can have very different visual effects though they may stem from similar motivations. I enjoyed experimenting with the difference in space; the actual movement outdoors was allowed to take on a much larger form although the dancers' size was belittled by trees and buildings. Conversely, though the dancers themselves had a much larger presence indoors, the movement was greatly restricted by spatial limitations. Also, the fact that the dancers were out of breath by the time they reached the altar was quite advantageous to the theme of exhaustion I was illustrating.

In the few rehearsals left before Christmas break, I extended the group section into a pattern of turns and jumps; four dancers on each side (stage left and stage right) constantly cross each other and trade off phrases alternately. I videotaped all the work for future reference, and as a visual aid for the dancers to improve their technique. Over Christmas, I searched through more music. Browsing through a record store in Boston, I came across a compilation by the Penguin Cafe Orchestra. I recalled a dance piece I had seen at Bates two years ago which was performed to one of their compositions and remembered the music to be a fugue of sorts - five themes constantly weaving in and out of each other. I immediately bought the disc and listened to it intensely, praying for a piece to smack me in the guts. But, I was let down once again. I started to wonder if I was going to have to compromise my musical ideals and go with something less than perfect.

During my JanPlan, the intensive biology study in the Mojave Desert, I focused on structuring the whole piece (when I wasn't eating, sleeping, data analyzing, or on an inspirational hike up Mojave mountains). Having
watched and learned from everyone for a semester, I was confident in my partnering/solo choices for the shorter scenes, as follows: Holly & Jen - duet. Nicole & Katie - duet. Anabel - solo. Myriam - solo. Annie - solo moving into a duet with Danielle. I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to make use of the international styles Anabel and Myriam had to offer: Anabel being remarkably articulate in a derivative of Spanish Flamenco, and Myriam in African dance. Evenings, exhausted from our days, I experimented with possible fugue phrases in the middle of old Route 66 as the red desert sun set behind the vast horizon. I wanted to move the whole project to California - instead of performing the piece in Strider's Spring Concert, making a dance film in the middle of the Mojave. Seeing as this was circumstantially impossible, I vowed to make it my next major undertaking.

At the end of January, I ended up in Berkeley for a weekend, and stopped into yet another record store on Telegraph Ave. Flipping through the classical section, I stumbled over a different Penguin Cafe disc. I decided to risk strike two with these guys and shelled out another $15. After hearing the first song, I needed not listen to the rest of the album; I HAD FINALLY FOUND MUSIC! IN BERKELEY! The title of the song - *Music for a Found Harmonium*.

Second semester began and I immediately began rehearsals, setting the fugue. Anabel had extreme difficulty picking up the steps, as well as Nicole, and Myriam began missing the rehearsals with no excuse. I scheduled individual rehearsals with each of them to go through the combinations slowly and thoroughly. Anabel was still completely frustrated, and Myriam continued to either show up late or simply not show. Nicole, to my relief, wrote everything down after our meetings and
diligently practiced on her own. She showed up to group rehearsals with everything solid. I resolved to go with six dancers for the fugue - extracting Anabel and Myriam. This choice was easier on the three of us; the two dancers were actually glad to be freed from group rehearsals, being involved in the production of the International Extravaganza as well.

Working with my six "fuguers" was incredibly productive; I had finished choreographing the fugue after four rehearsals. Reading the dancers' journals confirmed that I was getting the total effect I was aiming for; I was not only tapping the dancers' abilities, but their energies as well. Also, Danielle and Jen evidently tried to work through the combinations by making use of the "flow" mode between climax and absence of concentration. I was thrilled with both their performance and their overall response.

"I started to feel winded and sweaty during the fugue. Okay, so my blood is pulsing and my feet & hands are red and swollen and the junk in my lungs is spitting up every time I cough. Sweat is dripping down my forehead and covering my upper lip. Oh my God I feel awesome. I'm getting an actual workout - like a real company should. You know, the whole happy exhausted trip."

- Katie.

"Exhaustion! Listening to the Penguin Cafe song, I felt great energy and excitement. I wanted to jump to it even before Sara even started setting the moves. All the jumping brought so much life into the dancers. I mainly sensed a group energy, rather than just individual energy. I felt like we were throwing energy all over the room. The movement is so fast that once I start, I have to put myself on autopilot to remember everything, but kind of not remembering anything. Know what I mean?"

- Danielle.

"This is definitely fun! It gives me real energy - and when I catch glimpses of us in the mirror we look so cool together. I'm getting a workout! Rehearsals are so productive."

- Annie.
"Fun combinations; it’ll be no problem getting exhausted! I’m amazed at how all the little repeating parts come together and make one cool package. The fugue kind of reminds me of the big Franco-American festival where everyone dances and dances to Cajun music all happy until they can’t go on anymore."

- Holly

"Fun! Breathless! The combinations are so fast that I don’t have time to think! We jump so much, probably because the cool music seems to demand it. It reminds Holly of the Franco-American festival."

- Jen

"PARCHED! The fugue is making me very HOT! But I don’t really want to study so maybe I’ll just stay in the studio and dance all night."

- Nicole

Watching them dance, I rediscovered something incredibly simple which I had temporarily overlooked. Dancers greatly enjoy taking on the challenge of performing difficult or fast movement, especially when they perform it well together. Their vivacity was pure inspiration.

To further my excitement, Justin Brown accepted my offer to perform as a live percussionist for the piece. He needed little direction, having served as a dance accompanist before, aside from being incredibly talented and flexible. He was even willing to use a full (drum) set from the first rehearsal.

All my musical problems had been solved by involving Justin. For example, in the "reaching" section, I had choreographed a shift from duple to triple meter, then back again, right in the middle of it. Seeing as I definitely did not want the piece to be performed in silence, without a live musician I could have spent infinite, unsuccessful hours in the music library searching for a recorded composition to suit my needs. Justin picked up on the shift in a matter of seconds.
The dancers were elated to perform with Justin. In the first rehearsal with him, I watched the traveling expand, the combinations sharpen, and the jumps rise. Everyone’s energy multiplied.

“Justin’s drumming adds an amazing new dimension to the movement; it seems so much more alive and... at risk. We become totally dependent on another human being’s rhythm.”

- Holly.

“...It’s so cool; Justin just swingin’ and jammin’ while we go crazy. Pretty wild!”

- Annie. (Annie is from California.)

“Justin is awesome.”

- Katie.

Justin’s journal responses to the rehearsals indicated that I was getting my ideas across effectively to him as well, though his language was a bit more cosmic than the dancers’:

“Up and down and up and down, trains barreling through the countryside - horizontal movements & syncopation everywhere...”

Justin not only helped me musically; he also forced me to solidify some of the dancing. He needed to know where I wanted the climaxes and the dips, so he could match them with the music. Consequently, the dancers and I had to work through every section several times, determining and emphasizing the build in energy.

However, I was still unsure how to begin the piece and work up to the group sections. How was I going to justify Anabel and Myriam being absent from the fugue? How was I going to make the transitions from section to section? In one of my meetings with Tina, she forced me to give her the general plot of the piece in one sentence. “Okay, Tina. First, I need to illustrate the motivations for dancing in the duets and solos, then move
through a gradual build in energy, excitement, and hence exhaustion, into the reaching section and, lastly, the fugue.

"What are the specific motivations for dancing?"

"The desire to express feelings and/or energy through a direct mind-body connection, the joy of dancing well in an ensemble, reaching perfection, and generally being awesome."

"Well then, why don't you try setting the up performance itself as a rehearsal?"

"Oh my God, Tina." My head fell into my hands. Somehow I knew she was right; every element of this project was more inherent to the rehearsal process itself than the sometimes one-dimensional illusion of "performance." "I don't know Tina. This is my Senior Scholar project, and I'm supposed to just shatter all the magic of a traditional performance?"

"You tell me."

So, I began work on structuring the piece as a rehearsal. When I brought this to my dancers, some of them were shocked. "You mean we have to talk and stuff?!" I told them to trust me.

I decided that the piece would begin at the very end of the fugue, as if we had just rehearsed it, and come full circle by the end. The duets and solos were to be seen as "off-time" for the dancers to practice on their own; I would give them ten minutes to get a drink and work out any personal kinks with Justin's help, leave, and return to rehearse the group sections. However, I didn't want them to end up "giving away" all the group work by rehearsing every move over ten minutes; I only wanted them to foreshadow it. As I had planned during January, Holly & Jen would have a duet, followed by Nicole & Katie, then Anabel, Myriam, Annie, and Danielle (with Annie).
I gave Holly and Jen a variation on part of the fugue to rehearse several times, so the same general pattern was evident, but not the identical combination. Nicole and Katie were to practice a part of the reaching section, which was safe since their particular segment was only half of the larger pattern created by juxtaposition with the other dancers. While Nicole and Katie were wrapping up, Anabel would come in with her own Spanish music and begin practicing a Flamenco routine (as she often did in reality, preparing for the International Extravaganza), followed by Myriam practicing an African section. Annie would begin marking the fugue by herself ("marking" meaning to run through a combination in a half-baked manner, more for memory's sake), then ask Danielle for help with a partnering segment.

I held rehearsals for each duet and solo (except for Annie's solo, for it was silent and already choreographed), setting the movement, the dialogue, and some of the blunders. Often, these blunders were direct imitations of actual mistakes. Group rehearsals began again when all the small sections were finished, aside from Myriam's, as she was busy during our scheduled meeting times. (I later discovered that her idea of busy was not congruent with mine.)

Then I really started running into some scheduling conflicts. Anabel sadly told me in March that she would be unable to attend one of the nights of the Concert; she had an extremely important German presentation in Boston at the same time which she could not reschedule or miss. Obviously, she had to withdraw from my piece.

After Myriam was considerably late for the first new group rehearsal, then missed another entire three hour rehearsal (which was, as always, held at 4:00 on Sunday) because "she forgot." I was not simply
disappointed, but near livid. I met with her privately and calmly told her that nobody can perform without knowing any of the material, and dropped her from the piece. This may have been more difficult for me than it was for her; I can barely stand cutting someone from a simple audition.

At this point I was quite upset, having lost two dancers, and with them, their exciting cultural influences. I wondered how I was possibly going to replace their solos. Luckily, restructuring the reaching section was simply a matter of spacing, for Anabel and Myriam had been on opposite sides (in other words, the number of dancers was still even on both sides, so there was no need for anyone to switch sides and learn a whole different set of combinations), and I no longer needed to justify their omission from the fugue.

Danielle, Holly, Katie and Jen had been pestering me through several rehearsals to choreograph some tap dancing for them. "NO, you guys. This is not a tap piece," I would say. During one rehearsal, when I was completely baffled as to how to repair Anabel and Myriam’s absence, they really got on my case. "Come on Sara; we always fool around tap dancing in real life, and so do you." I suddenly realized that a tap section was the perfect replacement for Anabel’s complex stomping and Myriam’s contagious rhythms. "All right, I’ll do it. But you will still be in bare feet!"

It was awesome. Danielle started by herself stage right doing time steps (while Annie was marking the fugue stage left), and Holly jumped in with her. Once they had a distinct pattern going (2 time steps/break/6 time steps/break/4 buffaloes), Katie and Jen linked in as well. My only regret was that I couldn’t perform it with them because it was so fun.
Finally, when the whole structure was choreographed, we worked on refining the "rehearsal." In reality, a typical rehearsal would have been a bit slower, with more pauses and silences that I had set for the dancers. However, I was equally concerned with capturing the reality of a rehearsal as well as tackling the ironic reality of our performance in the Concert. My new challenge was taking out all the boring lulls of rehearsal, while keeping the piece uncontrived, believable, and not-so-"hammy". In order to do this, I gave the dancers certain guidelines:

1) Thou shalt not count more than "5,6,7,8" when giving Justin a tempo to run through a combination, and no more than "7,8" if Justin is already drumming at a suitable rate; i.e. do not make the audience watch as you drone for eight counts, "One, two, three, four..." etc.

2) Thou shalt not sit or stand motionless for more than seven seconds. If thou art lost, find a lost neighbor and either tell jokes, stories, or goof around as thou normally does anyway (and SPEAK UP).

3) Thou shalt never acknowledge there is an audience; pretend the house is empty.

4) Do as I say.

To keep an element of unexpectedness, for all of us, I set up the reaching section as a practice run, whereupon I randomly stopped the dancers for various appropriate criticisms. I told Justin he could make mistakes as he pleased - botching up the meter, playing too fast or too slow, etc.

Tina had challenged me with the question, "How much 'performance' are you actually going to give the audience;" how well was everything going to be allowed to pull together in the end? "Oh my God, Tina." Should I make the entire piece a disjointed rehearsal? Should I have them
perform all the group sections together, without stopping? After becoming thoroughly irritated with the sound of my own voice asking me these questions, I resolved that the fugue, as the final segment of the piece, be executed as a section the dancers knew readily and needed no further direction, just practice.

After watching a run-through, Tina also suggested that I stay on stage while the dancers have their ten minute off-time, to take questions and make minor adjustments, rather than leaving the stage. Leaving was actually senseless; I had just been so conditioned to watching that section objectively I had overlooked the fact that I probably wouldn't leave for an entire ten minutes.

By this time, we had the stage available for rehearsal, and when my lighting designers, Dave Morgan and Rob Isaacson became involved, excitement was bouncing off every wall. In our first meeting, before they had seen the piece, they were worried that their function was merely to turn on a light or two since it was mainly a rehearsal. "Nooo way. You guys are in for it," I told them. As soon as they could get their hands on the lighting board, I had Dave and Rob in rehearsal with us. I suggested that, during the off-time section, they run around the stage hanging lighting units, changing colors, asking me questions, etc., as any exemplary lighting designers would. During the broken-up reaching section, they could go nuts and start running cues randomly, much like a tech rehearsal. The fugue - total unification between the recorded music, Justin, and the dancing - would be the opportunity to show their we-are-such-incredible-light-designers-stuff as well.

I chose the costumes carefully, for I needed Justin and the dancers in clothes which looked good on stage and worked with the lighting colors
while also appearing rehearsal-like. It was also important to me that the dancers enjoyed wearing their clothes, for an audience can almost invariably detect a performer's discomfort and/or self-consciousness due to costume disfavor. I instructed everyone to bring any and every solid color, matte finish, and danceable article of clothing they owned to the studio, whereupon we rummaged through the enormous pile, trying to coordinate a balance between art and life. Finally, after all the trading and dyeing and mixing and matching, I had a vivid yet natural - and most importantly, individually distinct costume ensemble that everyone was comfortable in. The broad spectrum of color was incredibly magnetic to the eye; together they looked beautiful with the lighting colors Rob and Dave chose.

The piece was finally converging. During every rehearsal new dialogue evolved and hilarious mishaps occurred accidentally which I then included. Once, when I was smack in the middle of videotaping the piece, two of my naive friends walked across the stage and began talking to me, thinking that the off-time was exactly that. Immediately, I asked them if they could be in the Concert. Katie got a splinter, so she has one in the show. By tech week, we had Dave sawing wood in the shop and Adam Brown yelling down from the sound booth; we even got Jim Thurston to make a cameo, running around stage with a clipboard and crescent wrench.

I had to set some of the originally unexpected mishaps and breaks specifically, so Rob and Dave could set lighting cues in an organized, functional manner in order to hand them over to the stage manager. Nevertheless, there was so much variety transpiring between and around the planned events that setting those particular moments in no way detracted from the piece.
Communication became humorously difficult among the cast and I, for it was frequently puzzling as to whether I was Sara-the-choreographer or Sara-playing-herself-the-choreographer. We had to develop a code language which signified either reality or piece-reality in order to get anything accomplished. If I actually wanted someone to make even the slightest adjustment, without using our codes, they couldn’t tell if they were actually supposed to make the adjustment, or if they were supposed to screw up on purpose. I’d tell Justin to pick up the pace a bit, and all of a sudden he was drumming at a million miles an hour. “STOP! Justin, why did you do that?” He’d reply, laughing. “I’m sorry, I thought that you were you-in-the-piece and that meant you really wanted me to speed it up way too fast!” Then we’d all bust a rib laughing because the same misunderstandings kept constantly happening with everyone.

During those last few weeks of rehearsal, I realized that the cast and I had captured the very life of dancing and creating a collaborative dance piece; everyone was having a blast, and everyone was exhausted. The impact of it all hit me suddenly one night as I watched the cast let all their unfocused yet animated energy run wild in the beginning, then little by little, channel everything right into the fugue. They were awesome. I didn’t even care if anyone was watching; for a moment I felt like I had created a new life and was content to enjoy it by myself.

The theme of repetition which I had used as a base for our improvis early on - the concept of pushing oneself through practice to exhaustion for the purpose of nearing perfection, is obviously demonstrated in the beginning of the piece, as the dancers rehearse small bits of the group sections. Though sometimes frustrated, they are clearly intent on “getting it right.” Since the dancers are free to show, and even exaggerate, their
personalities and ways of moving, the viewer gets a clear sense of each one's individuality and desire to express one's energy as movement. The delight of dancing with others sparks at the end of the off-time, when four of my gigglers join in the flamboyant and contagious barefooted tap section, accented, of course, by Justin.

At this point I stop their "fooling around," thank the other two for practicing the fugue sections, and head them all in unison with the reaching segment. This section, as well as mediating a transition in focus from the off-time to the fugue, illustrates the level of effort and organization involved in creating a performance and catalyzes the dancers' fatigue. With frequent interruptions to stop and work out the (occasionally humorous) "bugs" with the dancers, Justin, Rob and Dave's raw lighting cues, or the sound operator's new familiarity with handling the recorded music, the unanimous desire to work toward a clean, polished final product is communicated to the viewer.

Finally, the dancers, having been warmed up and eager to explode into a dance without being stopped, take the fugue out of my hands and into theirs. I sit in the house and revel in watching as they spin and alight in harmony with the music, lights, and each other; they smile with triumph as sweat streams down their faces. When they finish, they deservedly collapse, for their exhaustion is physical proof of their accomplishment. I jump onto the stage, cheering and truly ecstatic, and reward them with dismissal until "next week."

The piece ends true to its form. The chattering dancers exit up the theater aisles on their way to dinner, wiping their faces with extra clothes and water bottles, except Nicole, who stays a minute to ask me questions and confirm steps, as usual. Justin puts his drums back in the shop, and I
thank Rob and Adam for their help as Dave and Jim clean up the stage. Rob shuts off the lights with a “goodnight.”

Performing the piece was unexpectedly rewarding. I had virtually no idea how an audience would respond, seeing as the only viewers previous to the Concert’s opening had been my friends and colleagues. They all gave me positive input, but one can’t place too much trust in the feedback of potentially biased spectators. Quite possibly, they either liked the piece only because I had choreographed it, or they were simply humoring me.

However, judging from the audience response, I had made a solid and enjoyable dance. Every night of the show, the audience started hubbubing right off the bat. The dancers enter in darkness, running around and giggling, vocally urging Justin to give the drum cue to start the end of the fugue so they can stop and get a drink. The house quietly chattered in subtle confusion. When the lights come up, their pose (the last step of the fugue) suggests they are actually about to begin dancing, but instead, everyone drops out of the pose and Katie grabs her foot, yelping a splinter-spurred “Ouch!” I pop up from the audience, asking if she’s alright and further confusing the audience. Finally, the murmuring turned to laughter once I made it clear that the cast was on a brief break and Dave started dragging out tools upstage.

The audience absolutely ate up everything we had originally thought mildly humorous. Many moments were met with a wave of laughter, i.e. when my friends Scott Cole and Bruce Villineau walk in from the lobby onto the stage and attempt to dance with Holly and Jen, or when Justin suddenly becomes inspired to leave the drum set and join in with the whole group of dancers, or when Rob completely blacks out the lights in
the middle of a run-thru. Yet all these moments had simply been
preserved from actual rehearsals. "I almost wet myself," said my friend
Beth. Adam, the sound operator, nearly stole the show when, at my
request to start the music, he jokingly slapped on the Beastie Boys instead
of Penguin Cafe, and the unknowing dancers spontaneously broke out of
form and began to jam out.

During the last night of the show, I actually had a complication with
the nature of the piece. About five minutes before the piece was to go on,
Scott asked, "Did Warren Kelly tell you what he's doing in the piece
tonight?"

"Well, I haven't told Warren that he's in the piece, so I assume he's
not doing anything. What does he have in mind?"

"I'm not telling."
I was furious. Of course, I had encouraged a spontaneous atmosphere
within the piece, but I had worked to keep the spontaneity in balance with
a definite structure to recreate reality. I sensed that Warren was about to
crash that frail realism. I didn't mind being kept on my toes with some
ad-libbing, but I certainly hadn't planned on an unexpected cast member.

"EXCUSE ME SCOTT? I AM DIRECTING THIS PIECE! We are about to go
on in three minutes!"

"Okay, okay. He's going to run in with a pizza for Holly."
With nerves on fire, I ran up to the control booth and told the stage
manager to put me on the intercom to the dressing room. Calmly, I
announced to Warren that coming into the middle of a rehearsal with a
pizza order was completely non-realistic: "no pizza on stage, got it?" He got
it.
At the end of performing the piece each night, we knew the audience had understood all the work involved. The bursts of applause at the end of the fugue and the end of the piece were intensely gratifying. Opening night, I was so ecstatic that I inadvertently started to change into my regular clothes instead of my costume for Tina's following piece.

After the shows, I wrote down various comments I received from audience members, and interviewed several more. The first night, a music student approached me and said, "That was really intense. I've never seen a fugue used as a dance form before. Have you ever studied Bach's structures?" I accused him of talking to Tina or my dancers, but he said, "No, I've just recently been studying fugues and immediately picked up on the form of your dance." From another stranger, "I could really sense the dancers' drive to push through their exhaustion for the sake of performing well."

From interviews:

*How did you perceive the overall progression of the piece?*

Because we saw part of the actual process, the culmination was incredibly rewarding to witness. I was in touch with the everyone's goals and felt at ease with their presence, so the last section was more of a real accomplishment than simply a good performance. I related to the dancer's obvious desire to express both their personalities and abilities through movement; I was even kind of envious. It looked so hard, but so fun. (Brown)

It showed us all the work and frustration of learning and performing dance, and therefore their total excitement about getting it right. Getting familiar with the individual dancers before they danced made you want to cheer for them even more. (Biersach)

*Did the piece seem contrived at all?*
No. I may not know much about dancing, but it seemed totally true-to-life to me. (Biersach)

(From a former Colby Dancer:) No, it was just like old times! I want to be in tech week again! (Goldstein)

*How did you sense the dancers felt at the piece's end?*

Exhausted but energized. (Fialko)

The dancing was taking its toll physically - they were all sweaty and out of breath - but they looked so excited and happy to be doing it. Dancing well looks like so much fun, and they seemed to enjoy being with each other. (Bucha)

They did. The dancers had all expressed to me how much they enjoyed performing the piece, especially with an audience. I sensed that the freedom and encouragement to be themselves, the hard-working dancers and *individuals* they really are, in front of the audience was far more gratifying than becoming an otherwise silent and nameless performer. And the same applies to the non-dancers in the piece; actually seeing and hearing Dave and Rob working, debating about colors and experimenting with units, gave people a deeper understanding about the effort they put in as designers. People cheered for Justin when he was seen as his talented and humorous self, and not just the musician-stuck-in-the-corner-being-ordered-around, and Adam, the invisible man in the sound booth who actually has control of the piece at his fingertips. While discussing the piece with Justin he informed me, "I get so nervous right before we go on, but then once we start and the audience gets into it, it's a blast."

In a rather selfish way, I was also glad to communicate that I was the one who had to create and organize the whole thing. One of my most
difficult challenges had been separating my directorial self from the schoolmate who also wants to joke around. All year I was critical of and yelling at almost ten of my good friends on a regular basis, telling them to shut up, work, jump higher and do it again, for the sake of the dance. Of course, it all paid off.

This dance piece, entitled "Clean it Up for Justin!" has been the most challenging choreography I've ever worked on, and (in retrospect) the most enjoyable. It has been an eclectic process of cooperation and collaboration, and I thank everyone involved in its production.
Works Cited


Other Sources for the Project


