

## **Investigating ‘the gap’ in the choreographic process between generating initial material and presenting a final piece, with reference to student experience at undergraduate level.**

### Introduction.

My premise is to explore my personal, student experience of the choreographic process. As a student my expanding knowledge of choreography has involved being introduced to tools and methods via participation in choreographic tasks. The essay is written alongside my undergraduate course, outlining and exploring approaches that can be applied to the choreographic process in order to solve a particular problem. I attempt to recognize and define a specific part of the choreographic process where my knowledge is blurred and to replace this with something more tangible. I define this part of the process as a stage that sits between movement-generation and forming. It is the place where choices are made as to how material is altered, developed and made into something greater than the sum of its parts. My exploration looks at structures that aid me as a student choreographer to develop and assimilate material beyond the movement-generation stage. I refer to this stage as ‘the gap’ in my choreographic process. This is the gap in my knowledge, the gap between craft and art, the gap between a good and bad piece. My choreographic experience as a first year undergraduate has been an introduction to a process broken down into various stages. Beginning with experimental tasks and exercises involving play and improvisation, moving on to motif development, and finally forming and structuring the piece as a whole. In my own choreographic experience there has been a tendency to skip from material generation to forming, without a clear process of development and refinement in between. The exploration of possible components that could constitute or contribute to this undefined part of my choreographic process draws upon choreographer Twyla Tharp’s creative methods, and Larry Lavender’s theories of criticism and evaluation in the teaching of choreography, which can be applied to the process within a professional context. I seek to outline ways in which to evaluate work and make selections drawing on Lavender and use Tharp’s creative methods as a guide to creating a specification from which to select and evaluate to avoid an ‘anything goes’ approach.

### Defining the gap within existing theoretical writing on the choreographic process.

Larry Lavender (2009) discusses four areas in which choreographer’s actions can be categorised during the choreographic process. They are “*Improvisation, Development, Evaluation, and Assimilation*” (72), and occur repeatedly, and in varying orders, throughout

the creative process. The role of criticism is integral to each category, in particular at the stage where initial material has been generated and needs shaping and transforming into a work of art. Lavender observes that;

while process intentions easily launch improvisation, they may do little else; one may sail easily with movement generation but struggle to perform the evaluations needed to develop and assimilate steadily accumulating material. (Lavender 2009,74)

Lavender refers to the stage after movement-generation where evaluation is applied to the development of material which parallels my reference to the gap. In looking at interpretations of the staged process of choreography, I have also located my reference to the gap within Twyla Tharp's process of 'scratching', the habitual routine for accumulating ideas outlined in *The Creative Habit: Learn It And Use It For Life*, (2006). Having placed the gap at a point within existing processes I draw on the evaluations outlined by Lavender, and Tharp's creative process, in particular the 'spine', a thesis that the work must adhere to that is different from the theme and is not necessarily divulged to an audience. These can be used in conjunction with criticism and evaluation to act as methods that can be used within the gap.

Tharp (2006) drawing on the work of psychologist Stephen Kosslyn, identifies four ways in which ideas can be acted upon. First, an idea must be 'generated' from experience, memory or activity. The idea is then 'retained', embodying it, becoming familiar with it. It can then be 'inspected' and studied. 'Transformation' of the idea is the final act where it is altered to suit a higher purpose (101). Tharp applies Kosslyn's four aspects to her technique of "Scratching" for ideas (92). Tharp sees improvising as a method of generating ideas and videoing it in order to retain the ideas. Re-watching and reflecting on improvisations correlate to inspecting ideas, and using them in dance is the final transformation (101). 'Scratching' is a significant part of the initial material-generating process, but it can also be applied to the process as a whole, the gap falling somewhere between, and including, 'inspecting' and 'transforming'. After reflecting on an idea or movement motif, how the choreographer transforms it into dance, developing it from an idea into something new, something greater than the sum of its parts is a key question and this is rarely explicitly articulated by choreographers.

### Locating the gap within my personal choreographic experience.

The first student-led choreographic task that I embarked upon, drew on my chosen theme of the moments between movement and stillness, relating to one theme from performance art company Fevered Sleep's installation *Stilled* (2011). The initial movement-generation phase consisted of the application of exercises and structures from various sources. Improvisation based on Laban's Effort Actions (Newlove 2001, ch.10), a grid floor-pattern determining movement qualities, and micro solos adapted from exercises devised by Jonathan Burrows (2010). The micro solos became a core strand of the work allowing for experimentation with speed, slowing down to the point of stillness and influencing the movement motifs. My remaining content related little to the initial phases of movement-generation, because the level to which a selection process was employed, and how much this related to the goal or theme of the piece, was diluted by elements of intuition, luck and practical reasoning. My practical reasoning was governed by conditions such as time allotted to each dancer for assessment, rehearsal time and peer's strengths and abilities; decisions that are made according to factors outside the theme of the piece. My experience of intuition whilst choreographing has been recognised upon reflection of my work. When creating, there is an element of the subconscious at work, but once the mind begins to consider how it is working, reasoning has already been applied. This moves the choreographer away from intuition towards an approach where the mind is ready to engage in an analysis or evaluation. The intuitive part of my process involved movement-generating tasks, first imagining, and then enacting movements. The selection process was based on what 'felt right'. I then skipped to the forming stage without fully developing and manipulating my material any further. Rationalising how decisions are made after generating material can give the choreographer more control and awareness over the process, re-visiting and underpinning what 'felt right' with reasoning. Actively applying this awareness during the process after the movement-generating stage could prevent the problem I experienced of focusing on the end result during initial play, which inhibited the material from 'growing into itself'. The journey of choreographing has the potential to lead the choreographer in directions that could not necessarily be planned from the start. Deciding on what the end product should be prematurely could inhibit the developments and new discoveries made in intuitive play and the gap. Jacqueline M. Smith-Autard (2010) talks about the tensions between spontaneous intuition and the application of knowledge (125-6). The objective application of skills and knowledge allow reflection to take place and the subjective feeling responses allow for new ideas to occur. In my choreographic process in future, attempting

to separate the intuitive movement-generation from objective strategies applied to the gap should allow for greater clarity and awareness of the decision making process. Murray Louis (1980), also attempts to separate creativity from choreography, when exploring what works on the stage and why (117-126). Attention is drawn to the necessity of skill in creating a piece suitable for the stage rather than solely relying on the intuitive creative response that worked in the studio. Describing choreography as a skill that can be learned and improvisation as a creative expression, parallels the methods that I place in the gap. Staging improvisation and creativity as the early movement-generation phase that occurs in the studio and the methods applied to the gap as skills, aid the choreographer to form something that contributes to the “furtherance of his art” (126).

The second choreographic task used the images of Remy Charlip’s *Air Mail Dance* in which the drawings themselves formed the concept of the choreography (Hodes 1998, 41). Five shapes were chosen as a stimulus in pairs and recreated, which then became the basis for a duet. This was more problematic in working through the gap than the previous task. I created a motif and experimented with it, but after generating this material a barrier prevented its development into something more than a few phrases. Separating the process from additional circumstantial factors, such as time and music, enables a fundamental flaw in the process to be discerned. The theme of this work was unclear and changeable and meant different things to different collaborators. Without a clear intent for the piece, any selection or development process was vague and without purpose. In highlighting this difference between the two personal choreographic experiences, the first having a clearer theme and purpose, that was lacking in the second, attention can be drawn to the importance of a backbone of intent for a piece, an aspect that Twyla Tharp defines as “The Spine” (2006, chp8).

#### Methods within the gap: The Spine.

Tharp’s ‘spine’, is defined as a strong idea that emerges early and outlines the intentions of the work, it is integral to the process but is not necessarily communicated directly to the audience. “The spine is my little secret. It keeps me on message, but is not the message itself” (Tharp 2006, 146). The ‘spine’ is hidden and is not always an overt theme. One could speculate how this might work in practice for example, Lea Anderson’s *The Featherstonehaughs draw on the sketch books of Egon Schiele* (2011) conveys overt themes of sex, death and mental anguish. However, her ‘spine’ could be the formal elements of the

paintings that became for Anderson, a form of dance notation that was to be followed exactly. Anderson creates a rigorous set of rules to follow before entering the studio that are created from the stimulus, one could consider these to be the 'spine' (Anderson, 2011 [pre-show talk]). Cunningham's description of his choreographic process for *Walkaround Time* (1968), includes the stimulus for the piece, Marcel Duchamp's painting, *Large Glass* (1915-23), which was to form the backdrop for the dance. Cunningham describes elements relating to Duchamp that he inserted into the choreography but did not inform anyone about. For example, movements that appear over and over again, being used in a way that mimics the use of Duchamp's ready-mades. These aspects that relate to the theme of the piece and keep it on track for the choreographer but are not essential to the viewer, can be interpreted as a form of Tharp's 'spine' in Cunningham's process (Foster 1976, 39). By having a strong grasp of the 'spine' of a work, the choreographer has a constant reference point from which to reflect and criticise. It can provide the choreographer with a specification that can be applied to the selection and editing of material and a reason as to why a piece is or isn't working. Closer study and attention of the themes in my own choreographic practice and forming an underlying 'spine' is emerging as an increasingly important aspect in the process. This would contribute to solving the problem of not knowing what to do next after I generated material from initial play. At the point of losing direction during the process of my second choreographic task, it would have been possible to create a 'spine' based on a theme that was agreed by each collaborator. A shared sense of mission would have helped to prevent disagreements regarding the selection process and could have provided a stimulus from which to continue developing work and creating further tasks and experiments to carry out in the studio.

#### The choreographer's awareness of intuitive judgements.

In order to make informed choices about material selection, Tharp introduces the "creative DNA" of the choreographer (2006 chp3). Every choreographer has their own individual identity, including a "creative personality", that influences the way they work and make judgments and selections (37).

If one set of polarities defines my creative DNA, it is the way I find myself pulled between *involvement* and *detachment*.

I shuttle back and forth from one extreme to the other, with no rest in between. And I apply it to everything. (Tharp 2006, 40)

Discovering a personal creative identity can provide the choreographer with an additional tool to apply to the gap. The 'creative DNA' can not only highlight preferred methods or habits of working but can also bring the choreographer's awareness towards identifying their intuitive judgements and the reasons behind them. This information arms the choreographer with the choice to change those habits in line with the 'spine'. Tharp suggests the exercise, "You Can Observe a Lot by Watching" (2006, 50), which identifies the selection choices made by the choreographer, allowing for observations to be made on what forms their personal creative identity. The exercise consists of observing a couple and listing twenty movements they make. The task is then repeated, only making note of the actions they make that are interesting. The second task will take much longer and involves a selection process. The comparison of the two lists, can provide information on what was selected and why.

What you included and what you left out speaks volumes about how you see the world. If you do this exercise enough times, patterns will emerge. The world will not be revealed to you. *You* will be revealed. (Tharp 2006, 50)

The choreographer's personal process of selection is applied throughout the choreographic process. Learning what influences choices enables those boundaries to be broken if necessary in order to fully commit to the 'spine' in each choice made during the gap.

#### Recognizing meaning and its application to choreography in line with the spine.

Tharp (2006) defines the choreographer's "metaphor quotient" ("MQ") (157), as a way of interpreting meanings that adhere to it. The 'MQ' is explored through exercises as a way for the choreographer to train themselves to notice metaphor.

The process by which we transform the meaning of one thing into something different is an essential part of human intelligence. (Tharp, 2006 p157)

This is a way of observing and thinking that can be applied to material in order to relate it to the 'spine' and move away from mere movement-generation towards a reflection on a meaning or a theme. Recognizing metaphor in everyday life and particularly in works of art from other disciplines provides a reference and examples of layers of meaning. Through

uncovering them, the choreographer can learn how to restructure them and apply their own layers to the piece with reference to the 'spine'. The 'MQ' could be developed in conjunction with the introduction to the notion of semiotics in my first year studies. For example, dance allows meaning to be communicated or subverted through using recognizable signs, actions or symbols within the choreography that represent known codes. Playing with Tharp's mind games allows choreographers to apply the theory of semiotics to their everyday life. For example, "Find two works of art you can connect to each other. What is the connection? Is this what the creators intended, or are you seeing something they didn't or perhaps couldn't see?" (Tharp 2006, 159). This awareness can then be transposed to the dance studio aiding the choreographer to become fluent in recognising and creating sign systems through dance. This can form a method by which material is related to the 'spine' through the expression of relevant meanings. In order to make decisions upon material selection and development, forms of evaluation can be applied to Tharp's creative processes already discussed. At this point, Larry Lavender's forms of critical evaluation become pertinent.

#### Methods within the gap: Prompts and Provocations within the creative process.

Lavender acknowledges the choreographer's need for tools and methods to address every aspect of the choreographic process from initial idea to performance. He draws on "creative cognition" (2009, 72), to give choreographers the role and skills of a problem-solver. Lavender discusses three practices; "Creative Process Mentoring", "Rehearsal Criticism" and "Choreographic Provocation" (72) involving forms of evaluation and observation of the practice by someone other than the choreographer.

The use of "prompts" and evaluation in Rehearsal Criticism, can in particular be applied to the gap (Lavender 2009, 77). Prompts that involve changing, adapting, correcting and polishing content are integral to the gap but it is necessary that choreographers "grasp the connections between prompts and artistic consequences" (78). The use of the 'spine' and the 'creative DNA' can be applied in order to form a criteria for selection that is relevant to the piece.

[Choreographers] may accumulate massive amounts of spontaneously fashioned material, all of which may seem worthy of inclusion because no particular artistic principle is in place on the basis of which 'development' and 'assimilation' evaluations might be made (Lavender 2009, 80).

Lavender's form of evaluation, Choreographic Provocation, addresses the dance as it is emerging, not the process that is happening at that time. It suggests alternatives, not as improvements but for exploration. The provocations are not value judgments but ways of breaking habits and taking the piece in unexpected directions that can be evaluated and assimilated afterwards.

Provocations are put forth not because they are already believed to possess artistic value but only to find out if they do. (Lavender 2009, 84)

Provocations build on the choreographer's intentions, including the 'spine', and the material already generated. They suggest that there are multiple ways of interpreting the aims of the piece and allows the evaluation and comparison of the alternatives. This can be useful in the gap in terms of methods of evaluation and generating 'spine-specific' material if needed.

#### Methods within the gap: Critical Evaluation and the outside eye.

Where Lavender's three practices of "Creative Process Mentoring", "Rehearsal Criticism" and "Choreographic Provocation" (2009, 72), focus on the process and methods used in the studio, the application of "critical evaluation" (Lavender 1992, 33), to the material is essential to the part of the choreographic process I have identified as the gap. Lavender, drawing on David Ecker, outlines three phases of evaluation; Observation, Reflection and Discussion, adding Revisions and Assessment of Implemented Revisions (1992, 34). The revisions stage in particular is relevant to the evaluation of material in the gap and to discovering problems and how to solve them. Lavender bases this on peer evaluation within the choreography class. Implementing a regular show and tell with my peers in the choreography class and drawing on Lavender's breakdown of each evaluation section, could provoke beneficial critical - evaluative responses and discussion. When making use of this practice in the profession, outside eyes become that of mentors or a dramaturge. Scratch nights with a facilitated feedback process from the audience and works-in-progress showings are valuable evaluative opportunities where Lavender's revisions and critical evaluations can be applied through facilitation. Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process provides a four-stage structure for facilitation that aids participants in providing feedback. This may allow for revisions and critical evaluations to be identified by the choreographer in a positive way (Harper, n.d). Exploring in more detail the different forms of evaluation that

can be drawn from these examples would provide more specific tools that can be applied to specific moments within the gap dependant on the choreographer's need.

### The notion of the gap

In order to create a piece that is greater than the sum of its parts, other methods need to be applied to the choreographic process. Choreographic tasks and experiments outlined in practical choreography guides by leading artists such as *The Intimate Act Of Choreography* (Blom and Chaplin 1989), *A Choreographer's Handbook* (Burrows 2010), and *A Map Of Making Dances* (Hodes 1998), are successful tools for generating initial material. However they do not aid the choreographer with tools and methods to be used specifically in the gap, which is an area that I hope I have demonstrated to be worthy of consideration within our own processes. During the gap, evaluations need to be based on the individual nature of the piece, which cannot be predicted by writers looking at the choreographic process.

Developing an identity for the piece that is individual and specific to meaning or intent can rely on methodologies such as the 'Spine', 'MQ' and 'Creative DNA', and can be combined with critical evaluation. These can be applied to the choreographic process between initial movement-generation and forming a final piece. As "artistic solutions from one dance rarely satisfy the needs of the next" (Lavender 2009, 71), Tharp's and Lavender's methods are open enough to be adjusted to fulfill the choreographer's aims in accordance with individual pieces. They can be used to adapt material generation tasks from the initial phase, to be explored within the gap. The significance of evaluation processes that can be applied to the gap are highlighted by Lavender:

Assimilative evaluation is careful and reflective, for the explorations and choices that determine precisely where in a dance a particular image, pattern, transition or something else will be placed, repeated, embellished or echoed are the evaluations that mark the difference between run-of-the-mill dance craft and sophisticated choreographic art. (Lavender 2009, 80)

Having identified the gap in my choreographic process, I located it within stages defined by Lavender and Tharp. Drawing on the difficulties encountered in my choreographic endeavours, I established problems and researched skills appropriate to the gap. Tharp's 'Spine' and 'Creative DNA' can be used to aid the choreographer in the refining and selecting process and Lavender's Prompts, Rehearsal Criticism, Provocations and Revisions form the

evaluative process that can be used with regular reference to the 'Spine'. The notion of the gap has value in allowing choreographers to define their methods and therefore apply a critical approach to their work more easily. Several possible interpretations can also be given time and space to emerge within this stage and evaluated critically, rather than working with the first and only response. This awareness can enlighten student choreographers as to what contributes towards a successful piece, uncovering methods that are rarely divulged by choreographers. Time spent on developing and refining ideas within a structure can replace doubt and anxiety with the confidence that each task, evaluation or decision is working towards the same goal. Creating a personal choreographic process that incorporates these tools within the gap will have a fundamental effect on the work that I produce. A careful analysis and evaluation of how I apply them to future projects and how they affect the final piece will allow me to assess the practicality and success of the notions put forward.

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