

reFRACtIon:

A Performance Piece Exploring the Reflection of the Psyche's Inner Turmoil through Movement
and Poetry

by

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Abstract

Growing up, I was always creative and outgoing. I wanted to be a part of everything. Because of this, I was able to experience and cultivate multiple passions. When it was time to create my Honors Thesis, I was excited to combine my learned loves of writing, movement, music, and learning. During my college career, I've learned more about how my brain works and where motivation and work ethic stems from. I love being involved in a myriad of things at once, but this did create internal stress and conflict. In order to create this piece, I was forced to consider all the aspects of my thinking and metacognition, which is from where the concept for this piece ultimately stems.

Artist Statement

Everything that goes into creating- the tears, the midnight phone calls, the pride, is why artists exist. Incorporating experiences that exhibit extreme emotion is all part of that process. Experiencing debilitating depression or inconceivable joy provides a spectrum in which comparisons can be made. It's hard to know joy without pain and vice versa. It's the same with movement. We can't distinguish sharp from fluid or bound from free until we see the extremes explored in order to give the audience and performers reference.

Each person interrogates human nature in their own unique way. Because humanity is so complex, it allows for infinite exploration into the things that make us human and separate us from other aspects of nature. Each individual's mind is different in the way they think, perceive, and create, which is an astounding concept. This means what one person sees could be explicitly different from what someone else sees and each person may not ever know what the other is experiencing. The concept of perception is fascinating, terrifying, and beautiful all

simultaneously. The difference of perception is what makes each artist unique, as well as each audience member's experience personalized. The ability to generate something with multiple interpretations is exciting and difficult, as it makes the creator question their own perspective every time. I've learned to never look at the first thing that surfaces from a piece; there is often greater exploration to be discovered.

I create work to provoke thought and push my mind to the limits of understanding. Often this results in internal conflict, yet this only pushes my level of artistry and humanity to progress. When I struggle with myself, my work becomes more vulnerable, thus allowing a more genuine experience for the audience and dancers. My own intrinsic battle becomes the source for my movement.

I often like to collaborate with my dancers. The process of my work is a process for them as well, and their feedback is valuable in making me question my own artistic choices. In the end, the decision rests on me, but by asking my dancers questions, especially when I'm either stuck or satisfied with my work, helps to reframe my perspective and question my work in an entirely new light. The piece grows and changes throughout the process and it needs the freedom to do so.

Background and Audience Context

reFRACtIon is a piece that reflects a stagnant journey. Although the piece progresses physically forward in time, the central character only goes deeper into her inner turmoil and we realize at the end she is still stuck in the same place. Every dancer surrounding the main dancer is a part of the central character. While the main dancer represents the central character

physically in the space, the remaining dancers represent different psychological obstacles or metaphorical oppressors the character experiences. In the end, it is shown once again that the central character is the only tangible person existing in the piece, showing both chaos and isolation. The title reFRACtIon is meant to be a play on words. Obviously, the central character is reflecting on different parts of her human experience and thoughts while she is also “reflecting” in the mirror (which is the prop used in the piece). The fracture or fragmented emphasis in the title focuses on the division in the characters mind. Her overwhelming emotions eventually fracture from their collective psyche (the central character) and come “alive” as represented by the other dancers in the piece. Refraction is defined by Meriam-Webster as “the action of distorting an image by viewing through a medium” (“Refraction”). In my piece, once the dancers step through the mirror, all of reality for the central character becomes distorted and unrecognizable.

Conceptual Research

When I first started on the journey of my thesis, I was a freshman in college and filled with ideas and excitement towards my final thesis project. I was especially excited because, since one of the areas I was studying was Dance Performance and Choreography, my project was going to be a work of movement and other performance elements that I was able to create myself. I had an abundance of directions I considered focusing on, and I needed to narrow down my selection. My original Honors Mentor, David Ingram, would constantly pull me aside and provide me with articles and insight on how to centralize my focus. Through various improvisation and mental activities, I was able to push back some of the more cliché or overdone choices and dig deeper into my own individualized artistic voice. It was, at times, an incredibly

frustrating process, but it put my brain into overdrive and allowed me to create a product I am extremely proud of. He was able to provide resources that helped inspire my process.

I am an extremely metacognitive person, meaning I not only overthink, but I am *aware* that I am doing so. During the researching element of the process, I went through various essays and articles provided by Mr. Ingram and highlighted different passages or concepts that stuck with me and I would use to inspire movement or ideas. I started by thinking about, well, thinking. I had to pause during my research when I came across the idea that “many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they had been named, have never been described” (Sontag 1). This reminded me of the brain and how we still know only a fragment about this organ that helps us do so many amazing things. Besides analyzing functions and chemicals within the brain, we also know there is disruption occurring and interfering (or inspiring, depending on your outlook) with the research. Mental illnesses and chemical balances are under the radar, misdiagnosed, and both overtreated and exaggerated while simultaneously skipped over and brushed aside. Just because we can name anxiety, depression, body dysmorphia, suicidal tendencies, obsessive compulsive habits, etc., does not mean that we understand, depict, accept, or support those suffering. This is where my concept started to emerge.

I then had to think how I would go about this concept and how I could make it something new to an audience, as well as myself. As described by T. S. Eliot, “novelty is better than repetition” and I needed my piece to establish itself as unique from those that came before it (Eliot). In order to do this, I had to look at both previous choreographers who had completed this project before me, as well as established dancers who allowed me grow from the paths they

pioneered. Basically, I had to recognize that creating art “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” in the current time (Eliot). That being said, there is a critical element which separates creation in this time as opposed to other historical periods: “[the piece’s] presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 3). Some choreographed through wars, others created during times of political and economic struggle. We created during a pandemic, and that came with restrictions and drive all on its own.

Another influential line I discovered while reading the articles Mr. Ingram gave me was “young artists of today need no longer say ‘I am a painter’ or ‘a poet’ or ‘a dancer’. They are simply ‘artists’” (Rosenthal et al.). This especially resonated with me because I am someone with numerous artistic interests and inquisitions. As someone who has always been thrown into the category of “academic” (which is used insultingly) or known strictly as a “ballet dancer,” I no longer wanted to feel constricted in this piece. My choreography project was going to be my final footprint that I would leave on East Carolina University’s campus, and I wanted it to be as versatile and diverse as my interests were, even if my experiences weren’t.

Because of Mr. Ingram, I was able to establish a concept based on articles and essays he gave me to encourage my research and questioning. He continuously told me to question everything and push past my comfort zone. Unfortunately, I did not get to finish my research process with David Ingram, as he left East Carolina University for another opportunity, but I have kept in touch in order to share the product he helped inspire.

Another major contributor to my conceptual research was the dance curriculum I was required to take. Starting my freshman year, I was enrolled in not only technique classes, but

also classes such as improvisation, composition, dance kinesiology, and dance educator courses. These classes all taught me new ways of considering movement and how the body can connect to the mind and, ultimately, to an audience. I was taught the many ways movement could act as communication and demonstrate multiple perceptions of the human condition. Through the turmoil and challenge within these courses, I was able to grow as a dancer, a choreographer, and a learner.

Casting

The casting process is something that I have experienced most of my life. It was new, however, to be on the other side of the casting table. In order to find dancers who were able to capture what I wanted my piece to embody, I created a short phrase that was supposed to be fun and show me who can put themselves into the movement. After a long audition process, my fellow choreographers and I sat down and negotiated for a cast we felt would work well for our vision. We had picked our dancers and sent out the cast list and excitement was in the air. Unfortunately, we never got to start rehearsals before the Covid-19 pandemic shut down the university and we did not return to campus.

Because I am a double major/dual degree seeking student, I was already planning to stay a fifth year to complete all of my degrees. I was incredibly grateful for this, especially after the closing of campus due to the virus, because I was able to have a second chance at my choreography project. I went through the casting process once again, but this time it was a little different. Cast numbers had to be drastically reduced and the process became a little more difficult than the first round. After much discussion, I was able to create a cast that I would finally be able to work with on my choreography.

Rehearsal Process

The rehearsal process was both exciting and terrifying. I believe I picked a really amazing group of dancers, but creating choreography beforehand has never been a part of my process. I decided I needed to come into the space with a concept and open mind and from there I was able to create movement phrases. I also wanted certain moments to be representative of my dancers, and so I would watch their movements and pull-out aspects that I felt gave them a character within the piece. From the beginning, I wanted to this to be a collaborative environment, and often asked for my dancers' thoughts on different variables during the process. Ultimately, all final decisions were mine to make, but it was nice to hear the input not only from faculty (who watched excerpts and gave feedback during designated showings), but the performers as well.

One of the first elements I introduced into the rehearsal process was the mask I had them wear for the filming. I wanted to make sure my dancers had the opportunity to practice dancing in the mask so that we could solve any issues early on. The next element I added into the process was the costume. I had my dancers in long flowing skirts that they took on and off in order to create different visual effects. These skirts need to be modified specifically for each dancer. Some had to hem their skirts while others had to add snaps onto the band so that they could reattach their skirts within the given time frame. The skirts provided a challenge that my dancers really needed practice to overcome.

The final major element I brought into the rehearsal process was a mirror with the reflective surface taken out. This mirror frame acted as a boundary to differentiate between reality and intrinsic perception. Eventually, the two realms became blurred and the distortion

created a complex mood. Not every moment was intense, but the dancers had to learn to balance introspection with tension in order to create a personified version of anxiety. In order for my dancers to really understand the concept, there were a few times within the process I had them sit and write. I had them write freely and just “word-vomit” onto the page in order to inspire movement, as well as looking at notes and reflecting on the character they were innately developing within the piece. I think this reflective part of the rehearsal process really helped my dancers develop a connection to the piece and allowed them to become invested in the character and the movement.

Writing and Music Editing

An important element to any performance piece is, of course, the sound to which the movement is being done. Even pieces that are performed in silence intentionally do so. In order to create a sound score that was unique and fit the piece, I decided to combine and layer different songs. In the end, I used a total of eight songs and one spoken word piece (which I also wrote and recorded) to create the sound to my piece. I spent many hours and went through multiple drafts before finally creating the music heard during my piece. Blending, cutting, layering was very difficult and something I’ve dabbled in before, but never to this caliber. I was working with the Audacity program to create my music, and the process came with a lot of trial and error, as well as frustration and late nights.

The spoken word piece, which I later titled “Isolation,” is a process I’m more familiar with. I have been writing since elementary school and have often been told it was something I had potential for. When I needed to release energy, I often turned to writing, especially during particular low points I experienced. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a

trying time for everyone and, paired with some health issues and a grieving for the loss of my Senior year, I felt myself drifting back into a dark place. I turned once again to writing, as artists do when they are struggling to comprehend emotions and thoughts. The result was the poem “Isolation.” This was not written specifically for my dance piece, but it fit with my concept and I ended up revising it and recording the spoken word to include in my sound score.

Filming

The filming process was quick and stressful. Everything was so fast-paced and new; it was overwhelming at times. As someone who can be perfectionistic at times, it was a challenge to let small mistakes go and work with what I was able to capture within my allotted time. Dancers were able to space and I was able to tech it on the stage. This meant I was able to walk through my piece to determine the type of lighting I wanted and when these cues should happen in the piece. I looked at various angles to film from, as well as how filming would be broken up to make what I wanted possible. I had a little experience with dance on film, but never this way. It was a challenging way to create a performance piece, and it involved a lot of elements (cameras, lighting, soundboard, cues, props, costumes, angles, etc.), but it allowed us to continue moving and creating when the performing arts and the world in general were at a stand-still.

Video Editing

Editing the video was another trying task. Technology always comes with its own set of problems and, as someone who isn't accustomed to these editing programs, it was a fast-learning process within a short timeframe. There was a lot to consider that I didn't realize until I got to this step. I had to go through all of the footage and decide what was the best, what angle I

preferred, and where different cuts needed to be made. Then I had to work on layering the music overtop of the film so that every movement and lighting cue aligned with the proper sections of sound. From having trouble transferring the footage onto my computer to the quick-approaching deadline, there were a lot of challenges to work with, but the end product was worth it.

URCA Collaboration

In addition to my project being affected due to the challenges of the pandemic, my URCA Grant project was affected as well. The project was based on research started by Teal Darkenwald (a dance and Honors professor) and in collaboration with a group of capstone students from the engineering department and their professor. Originally, we were set to analyze current technology that tracks muscle activation within dancers in order to create a prototype of a newer and potentially more effective model. Due to constraints of having classes move virtually and students stuck in quarantine, collaboration became difficult and the project had to adapt in the process. Instead of using my cast of dancers to test prototypes and provide data and feedback to the engineering students, we had to instead slow down and reconsider what we were able to do within the constrictions. I was able to help test different adhesives, provide feedback and suggestions on current models, and collaborate with all parties involved (although sometimes contacting everyone and receiving responses proved to be difficult). At the end of the project, I had created my piece and, while doing so, creating different types of movement that allowed us to test the prototype. Although we weren't able to go as far as we originally hoped with the project, we were able to use various movement and combination from my choreography piece to determine sensor placement and adhesive options. The research is now ready to be continued

through a new set of creative individuals, which have been in contact with me in order to get the information needed to progress with the project.

Overcoming Challenges Due to the Pandemic

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic affected everyone in many ways. For me personally, it affected how I was able to continue my education, my choices in a future career, as well as my mental health. The pandemic took a toll on everyone and, as someone involved with multiple large projects at the time, many things had to change. Protocols were adjusted and the ability to continue with everything was questioned. No one was able to get comfortable with the new rules because they were constantly changed to reflect the most recent recommendations by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The way this project was conducted in the past had to change completely.

I was fortunate enough to participate in my senior thesis, although in a new way. My dancers and I worked in collaboration to overcome the new obstacles set in place for the safety of everyone. No one could be within six feet of another person and all surfaces must be sanitized constantly. There could be no contact or partnering within the piece. Masks must be worn at all times. It was a different and scary change to a process that was once so familiar to us all. By adhering to these restrictions, my dancers and I were forced to work with the design and production team of the show to make sure everyone was safe and we were still able to create our art. Because of the dedication, talent, and determination of everyone involved in the production we were able to create beautiful pieces, and even streamed the show virtually for two public shows, as well as a private showing for seniors and their families.

Reflection and Growth

Having 2020-2021 as my final year of college taught me a lot. I learned to be patient and thankful for what I have. I learned how to grieve for traditions and rites of passages that had been yearned for and then lost. I learned how to cope through perseverance in order to reach goals I had set for myself. Because of this project, I was able to grow significantly as a dancer and a thinker. I learned how to handle unforeseen problems, use creativity throughout the choreographic process, organize and communicate my vision to my dancers and the rest of the production team. This was definitely not the vision I had originally planned for, nor was it the piece I imagined when I started my research as a freshman in college, but this piece proved willing to fight. Through pandemics and the constant struggle of never knowing what was going to happen, reFRACTION was able to come to fruition and the pride that I feel because of this piece is immense.

Closing

This was a both a nightmare and a joy to work on. The added stressors and challenges due to unforeseen circumstances brought about by the pandemic made this experience difficult and trying, but the dedication of my dancers and everyone else involved made it all worth it. My final product is something that I am extremely proud of, which is something I can rarely say about the things I create. As artists, we often provided the harshest critiques on our own work. I am no exception and, while there are things I would tweak, I feel nothing but pride for what I was able to create during such an unprecedented time. My research, movement exploration, and concept development helped me to improve my artistry, promote critical thinking, and practice

the inquiry process. Working on the piece itself helped me to recharge my mind and spirit during a period where I felt most drained. And for that, I couldn't be happier.

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