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Graduating Presentation Essay

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The Lights Have Vanished

Throughout my time here at Western, I have been challenged physically and mentally overcoming obstacles and reaching goals. This final Graduating Presentation project has been the hardest and most rewarding project and process, as it is my first full piece I have choreographed. My project, *The Lights Have Vanished*, has pushed me as an artist to create movement from my personal aesthetic, implementing choreographic techniques I have learned throughout my four years in the department. I also believe my Graduating Presentation process has provided me with valuable learning experiences such as working with my fellow BFA class to produce a successful show, working with other dancers to be a leader and role model, and challenging myself artistically as a choreographer.

When I begin the creative process, I am inspired by physical and emotional experiences. My work typically reflects my personal life through an abstract lens, however, my Graduating Presentation project honors an event in history that I did not experience first-hand. My goal was to challenge myself by creating a piece about a specific event in history that is still relevant today. I wanted to develop a timeline of events within my choreography to tell a story I did not experience personally, but could still relate to the overall theme of the concept. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, communities around the United States come together each year to honor and remember the tragic event of 9/11. My concept was inspired by the community support that was created worldwide after the attacks. I was first motivated when I

went to New York City last summer, attended the 9/11 memorial and walked around Ground Zero. Although, I was not personally affected by the terrorist attacks, I was extremely emotional and touched by the 9/11 memorial park. I felt hopeful and peaceful walking around the memorial, watching hundreds of people come together to remember the lives lost on September 11, 2001. I am in awe every year on the 9/11 anniversary when cities and communities worldwide honor the event and the lives lost. An event that took place in one city affected the entire country creating a vast community that unites for the same reason each year.

I decided to break my concept up into three sections. The first section resembled city life before the attacks where everybody goes about their daily lives commuting in a big city, ignoring one another. The second section was when the attacks occurred causing chaos and trauma. The piece concluded with the third section where the dancers overcame a tragic event through the power of community. I believe this concept was important to address today because although I was too young to remember the attacks, my audience of parents and middle-aged people would have a very personal connection to the concept, allowing them to have their own thoughts and associations. 9/11 is also an event that kids currently learn in history classes today because most kids now were not alive or are too young to remember. Overall, my concept has three themes—the mindless idea of feeling stuck in a routine, experiencing a tragedy, and uniting together as a community. People of all ages can relate to these concepts on their own personal level, regardless of how they experienced 9/11.

After writing my proposal, I went through the audition process to choose my cast of nine dancers. I was looking for a variety of dancers with different strengths to create an encompassing cast that would succeed at both large kinespheric free-flow movement and bound choreography—to show strength, power and control. I chose nine talented, genuine, and

hardworking dancers that I would enjoy working with. Unfortunately, my cast of nine dropped to eight after spring break due to a dancer missing five out of ten rehearsals. The lack of communication and attendance was unfair to both my dancers and I, therefore, I had to make the decision that was best for my process overall. This was a huge learning experience for me as a developing choreographer because I had to confront her in a one-on-one meeting to discuss my concerns and furthermore dismiss her from my piece. After the negativity was removed from the environment, my piece came alive—my dancers were connecting to the concept of the piece and one another. I learned a lot through this situation because I had to confront an individual and stand up for myself, my dancers, and my piece to create the best finished product. In the future I will be clear about the responsibilities and requirements my dancers are making when committing to my work.

My next step was to find three different pieces of music that fit with each section of my piece. From the start, I knew I wanted ambient city sounds such as car horns, busses, wind, etc. in my first section which is why I decided to use “Manhattan Traffic 2” by Sounds Visual Pro Sound Effects Collection. I aspired my second section to be chaotic with random sounds and textures to represent madness that occurred after the first plane crash. The original song I found for this section was consistent with little changes, therefore, I kept looking until I found the song “Ritual” by Memotone. I chose this song because of the dissonance sounds, the energy build-up, and unpredictable changes throughout the score. The music changes frequently but the disordered feeling remains the same throughout the score. This music helped create the scene of “the attacks” I wanted to portray. My third section resembled community, hope, growth, and remembrance. I found the song “Part II (Bonus Track)” by Memotone and Soosh which fit my final section description perfectly. The song had similarities of rustling, howling, and drum

echoes from the previous piece of music by Memotone which helped generate a through-line to the piece. The third song felt uplifting because of the piano notes, water droplets, and guitar strums. The vocals created a full circle effect from the muffled talking in the ambient city sound music from the first section. All three scores of music were vastly different to provide contrast between each section, while also maintaining similarities to provide a connection and story between each of the music scores.

My choreographic process began before rehearsals started through solo improvisation sessions to create phrases. These phrases were then manipulated with elements of time, space, and energy to form dynamic range. To develop movement qualities, I improvised with different emotional concepts. For example, I crafted a base phrase for my second section with ideas of fear and loss of control. The phrase was grounded, low to the floor and incorporated slashing, flicking, and running through space. I wanted the quality of movement to be hectic, therefore, I told my dancers to fling and throw their bodies around to portray the effect of feeling out of control. Often, the dancers would accidentally fall during a run because they were taking risks and pushing themselves to move out of control. The base phrase I choreographed for the third section was developed through feelings of ambition, community, and hope. The phrase included large kinespheric movement that allowed dancers to take in the space with indirect space effort. The movement was derived from the core, initiated through breath, and included intentional gathering of the space. I used these two contrasting phrases to create motifs, duets/trios, and transitions throughout my dance.

The first few weeks of my rehearsals were used as “play time” which I spent generating movement through choreographic tasks and manipulating the two original base phrases I created. To get my first section started, I gave each dancer a character to embody to help them construct a

short solo. Once they developed movement, I structured each solo into the walking patterns of the piece. For example, Jasmine was a tourist, Cailey was a homeless person, and Allie was waiting for the subway. These solos helped the dancers and I create simple pedestrian movement that fit in with the purpose and story of my first section. I drew spatial patterns out on a piece of paper to design the opening walking scene, and one-by-one, walked each dancer through their path in the space. This produced the image of New York City streets I wanted to portray to the audience.

I continued to compose movement in the studio with my dancers and played a manipulation game to develop the duo and trios in my third section. I took the phrase I created through improvisation for my third section and told two dancers to be the “manipulators” and one dancer to be the “manipulated.” The manipulators had to physically move the manipulated dancer through the movement to develop a new partnered phrase. I told the dancers to avoid using their hands to spark creativity. The goal was to move smoothly through the phrase using a variety of body parts, guiding the manipulated dancer, and filling up negative space. Once a rough draft of these small groups were created, I worked closely with the dancers to smooth out transitions and eliminate stuttered movements. As we kept rehearsing, the dancers felt comfortable with the duo and trios allowing me focus on the authentic connections between one another.

When it was time to structure the layout of my piece, I brainstormed images and concepts relating to 9/11 to help tie the story together. For example, in my first section I created what I called, “the subway line.” This was a horizontal line formed upstage after the dancers ran on from off stage, running into each other, grabbing the railing, as if the subway suddenly stopped. This idea was inspired by research I did about what happened in New York City on that

September morning. I discovered most of the subway systems shut down, inspiring me to incorporate that image into my piece. The subway phrase was pretty gestural with motifs of grabbing the subway railing, sitting down into the seats, and rushing out of the subway through the small door openings. A graphic moment I incorporated into my piece was the transition into the second section, “the attacks.” This section begins with one of my dancers, Darion, falling out of the wings into a clump of people and then tossed back up into the air. This picture was created to symbolize a tower falling or people falling out of a skyscraper or plane. I chose to include a few literal images into my work to keep a through-line to my piece which the audience could visualize and understand.

The second section of my piece had small groupings that represented different emotions people go through when experiencing trauma. For example, confusion, shock, sadness, and fear were the few emotions I experimented with my dancers. The beginning and ending group phrases of this section signify chaos and confusion. The purpose of this movement was to fall, slash, fling, and flick—while staying grounded. These phrases were strong, finding a balance between control and chaos to show the confusion people felt experiencing the attacks firsthand. Both Allie and Cailey had solos that resembled shock. They engaged all their muscles as if they were moving through thick, wet cement to show clear intention and reaction of shock. In the middle of Allie’s “shock solo,” a group of four dancers entered the space to embody sadness. This phrase was choreographed with gestures focused around the eyes. For example, I created gestures where the eyes were covered, closed, and “wiping tears away” with hand motions. Darion embodied fear in her solo. She performed movement that was later repeated in the third section, but with a strong, weighted intention in the “attacks” section. She expressed panic through performance by reacting to the dancers sprinting next to her in the space. The different

emotions helped my dancers relate to the piece on a personal level because they have all experienced those sensations at some point throughout their lives. The dancers were then able to genuinely perform the material with a strong purpose.

The final section of my work demonstrated growth and community within a group of people after experiencing a tragedy. This was where I fit in the manipulated trios and duet, merging in and out of the space. This was also the first time in the piece where connections were made through physical touch and partnering. This contrasted the first section where dancers were isolated and trapped in their individual routines. The final section included a group unison phrase to show the communal aspect of the situation. The movement was breathy and light-weighted with audible claps and breaths so the dancers could physically feel connected in the space. This movement was pretty circular and focused on gathering the space. For example, dancers jumped in the air and circled their arms around the space with an upward initiation in the sternum and focus to portray hopefulness. The piece concluded with the dancers facing inward in a circle and which was inspired by the 9/11 memorial waterfalls at Ground Zero.

As a choreographer, I like to spit out all my choreography at once, splice it together and then go back to clean and make changes. I completed my dance with three rehearsals left so I could spend a lot of time working on the quality and intention of the movement. Each section included similar phrases, but required a different quality. I had to talk this through with my dancers and remind them of the concept and what they were aiming to portray. I also had to discuss the meaning of the piece and how they could relate it to their own lives. I shared a few 9/11 poems and memorial speeches from the book “September Morning” from the 9/11 museum, with my cast to help them understand the event. Overall, the walking and running transitions needed the most work. Since my piece opened the show and began with pedestrian actions, the

movement was too predictable and needed to be less “dancer” and more “human.” We spent almost an entire rehearsal walking in the space, working on being direct with each step and directional change. Once the dancers applied and understood these changes, my piece looked completely different. The dancers dance with maturity, professionalism, and strength, transforming my piece into a stage ready work.

Choreographing and structuring the piece was the easiest part of my process, however, design choices were much more of a struggle. I was torn with a few costume ideas such as wearing different blue clothing to resemble the mural, “Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning” at the 9/11 memorial museum by Spencer Finch. This mural is a collage of blue squares referencing the crisp, blue sky on the morning of September 11, 2001. I felt shades of blue did not fit well with my concept and the world that my choreography lived in. I wanted something uniformed to show the daily life of busy New Yorkers. Finally, I chose grey pants and a black collared shirt because it was clean, professional, simple, and fit the aesthetic of my piece. I did not want the costume to take away from the choreography. The black and grey color scale resembled the colors of skyscraper buildings and smoke from the attacks. My make-up design was fairly simple with neutral tones to create a natural look for my dancers that would still highlight their features under the lights. I tend to design simple looks for costuming and makeup to allow the audience to focus on the movement and choreography.

My lighting design seemed to be the biggest challenge for me. I learned a lot about how the lights can enhance my choreography. Originally, I wanted to use the black curtain to simply avoid lighting the cyc. Lighting is difficult for me so eliminating the cyc would give me one less element to worry about. I also felt that having the black curtain for my dark, chaotic second section would enhance the tragic mood. However, after discussing with Whitney and Laura, we

decided the cyc was important to help create the three different worlds my piece lived in. I needed the cyc to produce a “crisp, blue sky” that occurred on the September morning of the attacks. I felt that was important because everyone in New York City that morning remembers the blue sky. The cyc was also important for my third section because color helps create a unified, hopeful, community feeling. I continued to brainstorm lighting ideas before dry tech so I could be prepared and efficient during my forty-five-minute tech time. Unfortunately, my dry tech did not go as planned. I became frustrated and confused while creating my cues and ran out of time with only half of my dance lit. After talking with Laura, I decided to leave the theater and come back at the end of the day to finish up. This gave me time to think about my lighting design, which helped. I got back into the space and played with the light board a bit more, and came back at the end of the day with a clear plan. This process taught me to take things one at a time rather than looking at the big picture. I needed to focus on the three major atmospheres I wanted to create and then could add in more specific lights to highlight the dancers in the space.

My first world was the “city scene” of busy New Yorkers commuting to work. I isolated the dancers in the space throughout this whole section. For example, the dancers formed a “subway line” in which the upstage booms are the only sidelight lit to distinguish the subway car image. The dancers rushed out of the line downstage where front light and downstage LEDS were lit to create a frontal image when the dancers are looked around the space, noticing a change in their surroundings. The focus of this entire section was to build a bright, daylight setting where the dancers felt naïve of what was about to come.

The second world I created was when the plane attacks occurred. I envisioned no color to this section so I used a no color cyc template to produce a blurry, cloudy, foggy pattern on the cyc. I also used a gobo that formed jagged lines and patterns onto the floor which added to the

chaos of the event. The moment after Darion's solo I created scattered flickering/pulsing with my lights. The dancers rolled around on the floor during this moment. The pulsing and flickering symbolized confusion and fear which occurred during the 9/11 attacks. The pulsing lights were also used to show how lights actually flickered in the towers during the attacks.

My third and final section was a drastic lighting change from the second section. This was challenging to smoothly merge the two sections together to prevent a jarring change in the atmosphere of the piece. In order to do this, I increased the time of the previous lighting cue so the lights changed much slower than originally planned. When I think of community, I think of the color orange which was why I decided on a light salmon color for the cyc. Warm colors also resemble heat and fire from the attacks creating a full circle concept. Orange is hopeful and encompassing which created the unified world my third section lived in. I used the LED's to isolate the circle at the very end of my piece while all the other lights faded to black quicker than the LED's did so the dancer's faces were seen right before the blackout. This image leaves the audience feeling hopeful and touched.

My role in the 2019 Graduating Presentation concert was fundraising chair. My job was to work closely with the budget coordinator, Katherine Kennedy, to raise enough funds to offset the costs of our costumes, programs, our guest choreographer, Joshua Manculich, and professional photography by Ashley Deran. I had prior experience as a fundraiser coordinator through Movement Exchange where I was the organizations fundraising chair for two years. Because of this prior experience, I had great fundraising ideas and I was confident I would succeed in the role. I began fundraising in January at the beginning of the Spring semester. I created a Facebook fundraiser with a goal of \$1,750—where a majority of our funding was raised after reaching our complete goal. I set up a few smaller fundraisers with Blaze Pizza, a

workshop with Quivey Dance Company, and a Bake Sale throughout the WMU Winter Gala to raise extra funds. We also decided to write a letter of ask to Partners in Dance in which they gratefully donated \$500 to our group. For the future, if I were put in a fundraising chair position again, I would use better communication with the people I am working with to make sure all parties are involved in fundraising decisions and on the same page. This includes talking to my fellow Graduating Presentations class, our faculty advisor and production manager. Overall, I believe I did an excellent job as fundraising chair because not only did we reach our fundraising goal, but we raised more money than we budgeted leaving us with extra money to donate back to the department.

Come performance time, I was excited and nervous to show my work because choreography is not my strongest suit. *The Lights Have Vanished* was my first group dance that was performed outside of choreography classes with full production elements. Besides one rough run at our last dress rehearsal, the piece improved every night giving me no reason to feel nervous. The new fog machine came in on the day of our last dress rehearsal and I had expressed to Laura a few weeks ago that I wanted fog to enhance my second section adding another layer of chaos. I also felt that fog would resemble smoke and fire of the “attacks.” The fog worked great during dress rehearsal, however, one machine stopped working on opening night and the last show. This did not ruin the piece at all, but for the future, if I were to use another element of production such as fog, I would be sure that it is reliable and ready to use throughout all of the dress rehearsals and performances to avoid complications come show time.

Looking back on my process, I believe that I was extremely successful in completing this project. I used my rehearsal time wisely showing up to my rehearsals with a clear plan of action. Often I would record my work and watch it at home to take time to reflect and make notes on my

own time. This was beneficial because I was able to jump right into giving corrections and making changes during rehearsals rather than wasting time thinking in the studio. This is something I definitely want to keep in mind for future projects. My final graduating presentation project was a huge, artistic learning experience for me. As a choreographer I have learned how to imagine the stage as a canvas and paint the dancers, lights, and sound across the space to demonstrate a complete masterpiece. Choreography is more than just movement—it includes transitions, partnerships, and design elements. All components must work together equally to produce the completed outcome. I am very pleased with the outcome of my work and I can confidently say that I created a piece that I am proud of. I feel that I have matured as an artist through this process and look forward to future projects as an emerging choreographer. On the night of the final performance, my dancers left me in tears on the side of the stage because of the artistry they performed and growth I witnessed throughout the semester. I was proud of myself for completing a strenuous project and my dancers for committing their hearts and souls into my final culminating project, *The Lights Have Vanished*.