

Arden R. Lapin

DANC 4800

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Graduating Presentation

*An Intimate Death Sentence*

Conceptual Development

Throughout my time as an undergraduate student at Western Michigan University, my primary interests have revolved around the studies of dance and gender. As it became time to approach my graduating presentation, I found that the integration of these two areas would most accurately represent what I have developed a passion for during my collegiate career. Another integral aspect of my college experience has been my identity as a member of the LGBT+ community. This has been greatly influential in developing my sense of self, and consequently my creative process. Taking each of these factors into account, I determined that my graduating presentation would pay tribute to the LGBT+ community, as it was affected by the United States AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.

My interest in HIV awareness first began when I met one of my mother's close friends, Matt Sharp. Matt was a dancer himself and has been living with AIDS since the early 1980s. When I decided to create my graduating presentation about the AIDS epidemic, I began my research by calling Matt. After listening to him speak and collecting notes, I realized that this was a multidimensional area of history that could be approached in a number of ways. This led me to the idea of creating several individual scenes within my choreography- each of which representing a different aspect of the AIDS epidemic. To supplement the information I gained from Matt, I immersed myself into the culture of the LGBT+ scene during the 1980s. This

included watching documentaries such as *We Were Here* and *Paris is Burning*, as well as listening to a related story, “You Couldn’t Say It Was Wrong,” from the podcast *Nancy*.

In my original concept, I began my piece with a mugging scene that represented violence against the LGBT+ community. Although as my work progressed, I did not ultimately pursue this idea. While this is a major component of LGBT+ history, it did not feel specific enough to the time period or topic of the AIDS epidemic. Another scene that was in my original thought process, but did not ultimately make it into the piece, was the idea of a school dance. I was interested by the reality of LGBT+ teenagers feeling isolated and left out of certain milestones because of their heteronormative nature; however, I again felt that I was straying away from the main focus.

As I found difficulty in narrowing down my approach to the AIDS epidemic, I revisited the notes from my conversation with Matt. One of the most striking pieces of information that he shared with me was his intense desperation for treatment. Not only was AIDS physically debilitating, but it was also an incurable mystery at the time. Like many others, Matt described taking part in every clinical trial he could find and risked worsening his condition with experimental drugs. Rather than addressing the physical torment that HIV+ people endured directly, I felt compelled to dive into the mental and emotional impact of the AIDS crisis. This approach led me to generate my story from the perspective of a waiting room.

### Choreographic Generation

Utilizing the waiting room as the focal point of my piece, I revisited the idea of making multiple sections within the work. Although I decided against a “mugging scene,” I was drawn to the harsh environment that it provided. In order to convey this atmosphere, I began generating base phrases with a jarring and direct movement vocabulary. Throughout the beginning of the

creation process, I played with the idea of dominance and submission. Because AIDS is a degenerating disease, I thought a lot about how men who were infected struggled to feel powerful. The opposition of strength and weakness created a movement structure that was dynamically interesting and fed into the developing power dynamic among my dancers.

While I had the advantage of gaining two strong dancers early on in the process due to a shift in the 2019 BFA class, I did lose one dancer due to injury about three weeks into the process. This left me with a cast of eight dancers, which turned out to be the perfect amount of bodies to fulfill the various environments that I aimed to achieve. As the work developed, I structured the cast so that Michael was often removed from the others, creating a strong corps of seven.

I worked relatively chronologically- beginning in the world of the first section and ultimately ending in the third. In order to find consistency in the three sections and keep the story in the perspective of a waiting room, I utilized five chairs as a medium of symbolism. While they came to directly represent a waiting room, this was not established until the second section. The first chair was introduced from the opening image of the piece. When crafting this section, I decided to have only one dancer, Michael Arellano, interact with it directly. This developed a connection between him and the chair, which alienated him from the group and differentiated his experience on stage. Although the constant changing of placement abstracted the symbolic submission of the chair, it directed the eye to Michael, who became the epicenter of the piece.

In order to create cohesion within the work's three sections, I shaped the choreography in a way that forced the audience into an experience through Michael's lens. To further develop this idea, I structured my work in an A-B-A format. Within this construction, I created movement that centralized Michael while isolating him as an individual. To further differentiate him, I

created a solo that I later manipulated into gestural work with the chair. I also established a motif of circling the dancers and constantly invading his space. This progressed into the direct manipulation and lifting of Michael.

Section two of the piece began as a duet between Darion Mayrand and Alyssa Brutlag. My initial thought was to dramatically decline the number of dancers in the space to symbolize the widespread loss that occurred during the AIDS crisis. However, I developed this section into a trio including Michael so that his perspective was not lost. I decided to fluctuate Michael's role in section two from a spectator of Darion and Alyssa to an active participant. This was used to communicate to the audience that everything occurring on stage was a reflection of his own identity. This section also became a concrete representation of a waiting room setting through the placement of all five chairs around the border of the upstage left corner. The establishment of this space served to further differentiate Michael from the group and created a clear division in the space.

In order to develop the piece into a new environment from which it began, I created an exaggerated juxtaposition between Michael and the group by developing section three into a disco scene. At this point, I almost entirely abandoned the phrases and motifs I had developed throughout the earlier sections of the piece. The dancers were in a radically different world, so it was necessary to develop movement that supported the atmospheric change. This being said, Michael was the one piece of the beginning world that was not drastically altered. While the realization of his condition developed, Michael's role remained stuck in a state of desperation that was unacknowledged by the group.

When speaking with Matt, he described the disco scene as a safe haven for HIV+ men. This led me to the idea that instead of allowing Michael's character the sensation of relief in this

space, I would use irony within the environment to create his personal Hell instead. I initially made this section aggressive and directly interactive between Michael and the surrounding group, but decided to take out most of the physical contact so that it displayed an oblivion instead of an attack. I reintroduced motifs, such as circling around and closing in on Michael, which were established earlier in the work to create a bond among the seven dancers in which he was not welcome.

### Lighting Design

A major factor in the differentiation between the three movement sections was the lighting design. The ominous atmosphere of the first section inspired me to create a dark and eerie space. In order to accomplish this look, I used high-side and shin lighting to create a shadowy effect. I also used LED lighting from overhead to create wide washes of light, which I could then decrease in value to centralize areas of the stage space. The LEDs also produced a bright and stark atmosphere which made the first world more unsettling.

Section two introduced the special that I hung specifically for the duet between Darion and Alyssa. Using two lamps at low intensity, a pool of light defined the space of five chairs in the upstage left corner. This perimeter of light was crucial to the impact of the second section of the piece because it enclosed the duet, therefore isolating Michael who was standing on the outskirts of the special. As Michael watched the duet from the upstage left corner, I intentionally placed him in pool of light that was both extremely dim and centralized on just his upper-body. This lighting design was the result of a head light on the upstage right boom that Michael had his back to, causing only the outline of his body to be visible from the audience. Throughout the entire section, I mainly utilized shin lighting to supplement the special around the chairs because

of the way that it made the dancers appear to be floating. This sensation delivered the sense of the dancers being lost in space and time, especially as Michael joined Alyssa's movement.

In the third section, I reintroduced the LED lighting that I designed throughout the opening of the piece, this time utilizing more color. To depict a nightclub scene, I used a deep, yet vibrant, alternating blue and pink pattern. As the music amplified in the beginning, I utilized the pulsation of the LEDs to simulate the driving beat of the song. This assisted in the drastic turn of events that were happening choreographically in this moment, adding to the chaos of the final section. The lighting greatly helped me pull the audience back into Michael's experience in a moment where he suddenly ran through the group alone. As this happened, the lighting shifted, removing all colorful LEDs and leaving him only in the shin light of section two. This jarring effect served as a flashback into Michael's previous experience, reminding the viewer that he was trapped in a world that differed from the rest of the group.

In coming out of this cue, I immediately brought back the original nightclub atmosphere of the third section. This gave the illusion that Michael was snapping out of a vision or nightmare of some sort. In the final moments of the piece, I structured the LEDs so that they only lit a diagonal from upstage right to downstage left. This exemplified the pathway that the corps group of dancers passed through as Michael fell back into the chairs. I chose to finish the piece with a fast cue, bringing back the special which focalized the chairs. This served as a way to fully pull Michael back into the atmosphere in which he came from in section two.

### Musical Choices

Through the craft of differentiating the three sections of choreography, I carefully selected one piece of music for each world. This created a clear beginning and end, defining the choreography in three entities. In the first section, I used "A Strange Day" by The Cure. This

song immediately takes listeners into the era of the 1980s and uses the genre of rock to exemplify a harsh and heavy sound. While I felt that the melody alone suited my choreography, I also found inspiration in the lyrics and the vocabulary that they contain. I took advantage of the rich words that reoccurred throughout the song by creating a choreographic task for my dancers that allowed them to create movement that reflected their own inspiration.

The second piece of music I selected was “Einstein on the Beach: Knee Play No. 4” by Philip Glass. I struggled to commit to this piece initially because it is very well known. I worried that the audience would be distracted from the choreography of the second section because they may have had their own preconceived association with the music. However, I kept coming back to this piece because of its honesty and beauty. The version that I selected used only a violin and bass to create a minimalist sound that I felt amplified the sparse feeling emoted from the duet. Although I risked using a common piece of music, I felt justified in this situation because of the way that it complimented both the scene and the movement quality of the dancers.

In the third section, I again used a common piece of music for strikingly different reasons. I intentionally used “Last Dance” by Donna Summer to spark a sense of recognition in the audience. In order to create the effect of irony that I strived for, I felt that I had to approach the disco setting in a literal sense. Because “Last Dance” is a song that most people are familiar with, I found that it almost tricked the audience into becoming caught up in the environment, temporarily letting go of Michael’s experience. This allowed the return into Michael’s world to be more unpredictable and unsettling, using music that is immediately associated as happy and joyous to convey a sense of despair.

## Design Elements

Within the structure of my work, each cast member represented an individual. In costuming the dancers, I created a look that was cohesive but not explicitly uniform. Using the color pallet of black, white, blue, and denim on garments such as ripped jeans and collared shirts, I experimented with a variety of looks that were feminine, masculine, and androgynous. I found that this best suited the representation of both the 1980s and LGBT+ culture without distracting from the choreography.

The same sense of individuality applied when I approached the casts' hair and makeup. While I wanted the dancers' hair tightly out of their faces, I allowed flexibility when it came to the styling of ponytails and braids. For some dancers, their hair further explored their representation of the gender identity represented in their costume. For instance, I gave Jasmine double braids to further the girl-like attitude that her denim dress gave. On the other hand, I had Kennedy in a low ponytail without a part to play up the masculinity of her dark collared shirt. The main focus of the makeup design was to keep the dancers from becoming washed out in the stage lighting, but not to make a specific statement or uniformity.

## Individual Responsibilities

In developing the graduating presentations concert *Labyrinth*, my main responsibility was the creation of the program. To maintain a sense of cohesion, I used the black composition photo taken by Ashley Deran that was in the publicity poster Layla McKissack created. I structured the cover of the program so that each BFA senior was pictured in a grid-like formation. While I enjoyed the graphic design aspect of my duties, I ran into the issue of miscommunication when placing the program's order at FedEx. Ultimately, I was able to negotiate a price that allowed the dance department to purchase a sufficient amount of programs in a timely manner.

### Performance Reflection

Watching my cast develop throughout the process from creation to performance was truly remarkable. I found that with every element added- costumes, lighting, etc.- the dancers became more immersed in their roles and committed to portraying the world of the piece. Having a live audience changed the way that the dancers approached their movement. Especially during the frontal and performative moments in the third section of the piece, the dancers thrived from the outward reaction of the audience. In my observation of the piece, I found that this connection to the audience also heightened the dancers' connection to one another.

Although the creation of this work was challenging, I was able to use it as a medium to represent the areas in which I am most passionate. Generating material that was thought-provoking for my audience and represented an underprivileged group is something that I would like to further explore in the future. This experience gave me a sense of how I can use dance to make a statement about social justice and has inspired me to dive deeper into areas such as protest in my next work. While my graduating presentation is complete, I would like to deepen my creative research of the AIDS epidemic before moving on to the next subject.

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