

An Exploration of Self-Empowerment through Movement and Rudolf Laban's Theory of Effort

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Abstract

Movement is the most powerful and genuine medium of expression. Historically, choreographers have used movement to convey specific intentions as well as find harmony and beauty between the mind and body. To do so, however, choreographers have discovered that they must take risks, expose their souls, and become self-empowered, meaning free of doubt when expressing their inner lives. I also hope to make this discovery, through scholarly research and movement-oriented experimentation conducted from the perspective of Rudolf Laban's theory of Effort. In its simplest form, Laban's Effort theory is defined as expressive movement dynamics that are classified by the factors of Weight, Time, Space and Flow. Although my choreography will be based on personal exploration of my own Effort life, it will have universal meaning for other dancers, audiences and society as a whole by permitting them to access truthful expression and inspiring them to find unity within themselves.

Significance of Project

The most powerful choreography is that which leaves its overall meaning open to interpretation for both the viewer and the dancer. From the perspective of the dancer, a choreographer with this gift is essential to the manifestation of an honest performance because movement is the most basic and truthful universal language. How then, can a choreographer create something that allows for such interpretation? This is the overarching goal of my project.

A choreographer must have a specific intention, in other words, a meaning behind his movement choices. This does not simply mean adding a pirouette here or a jump there because it looks “pretty” or because those movements are a dancer’s forte. In this case, choreography provides little inspiration for the dancers and as a result, the dancers have little material to translate to the audience. Intention is about the theme, message or emotion, for example, which a choreographer wishes to convey through movement. August Bournonville and Marius Petipa made this very clear in their work with story ballets. Intention is also about making choices, perhaps ones that are not necessarily comfortable but ones that help a choreographer enhance his work and grow as an artist and a person. However, intention is not about using a choreographer’s own emotional state as a source of movement; instead, as Martha Graham stated, “movement should inspire moods” (Reynolds 9). One of the early ballet choreographers, Jean-Georges Noverre, most definitely pushed the limits of expressionism through movement to the point of making audiences’ emotions run high with discomfort.

The key to giving meaning to movement as a choreographer, then, is to take risks that honor and validate vulnerability of mind and body, allowing one to translate such exposure into movement reflective of one’s inner life. Taking these risks will eventually help one to become self-empowered. Self-empowerment, in this case, is the ultimate release of one’s insecurities and subsequent development of a more secure connection between one’s mind and body. Although well-known choreographers such as Bournonville, Petipa and Noverre have been successful in realizing self-empowerment, achieving this goal is not simple. This has certainly been a major challenge for me throughout my journey as an aspiring choreographer, student and young adult. Fortunately, the work of Rudolf Laban, specifically his concept of Effort, can provide such a context for coming to this realization. Laban’s theory of Effort is the foundation for the execution of my project.

Laban’s work, formally known as Laban Movement Analysis (LMA), is a system for describing, executing and creating movement. The major principle of LMA is the way in which one’s inner life influences his outer forms of motion. The concepts of “inner” and “outer” complement and work off of each other, thus giving meaning to movement. An important aspect of LMA is Laban’s theory of Effort.

Effort, in its simplest form, is expressive movement dynamics. The four Effort factors known as Weight, Time, Space and Flow each consist of two opposing Effort elements which describe the physical appearance of a movement dynamic. The Effort theory involves the whole body and forces individuals to become self-aware. This means that they are conscious of their personal movement tendencies as well as how those tendencies are reflective of their personalities and in the case of choreographers, reflected in their works. It is such self-knowledge which ultimately leads to self-empowerment.

All people tend to gravitate towards Effort factors that feel comfortable in their natural vocabularies of movement and reveal who they are as people. A tendency towards "Quick time" in someone's movement profile, for example, could suggest that he is a generally happy and energetic person. A tendency towards "Bound flow," on the other hand, could suggest that someone is more uptight and reserved. However, it is important not to stereotype the inner life of an individual according to his outer forms of movement; a single Effort element could reveal completely contrasting information about two people's personalities. Instead, it is critical that one accept and have an awareness of the variances in his Effort life.

I am interested in exploring my own Effort life as part of the central objective of my project. I believe this will allow me to evaluate how comfortable I am expressing myself and how far I am on the road to becoming self-empowered. In order to do so, though, I will need to find a balance between being uncomfortable and being exposed, so that harmony and unity of my mind and body is achieved. My job as a choreographer, then, is to be an ambassador for the realization of self-empowerment, to take what people individually discover through becoming aware of Effort life and transform it into something that can be understood on a universal level.

My project is not only relevant to my choreography but to the potential dancers with whom I will work as well as audiences who will view my choreography. In addition to promoting the realization of self-empowerment, my job as a choreographer is to communicate honesty. My genuine forms of expression will hopefully give audiences permission to find vulnerability in themselves and take risks to discover and develop their own voices. I would like to encourage them to interpret my work from individual viewpoints. Thus, my choreography will have a much greater purpose than simply a medium for personal discovery. Dancers, though, will also find my project relevant because they are the ones interpreting my choreography. As I have experienced for myself, it is difficult to be a dancer because my natural forms of motion do not always coincide with those of the choreographer. However, if dancers have an understanding of their own Effort life, they will have more control over their movements and choreographers will be able to communicate their intentions and styles of movement on a more specific

level. As a result of this understanding, dancers will also have a greater awareness of their inner lives and be able to feel empowered within the framework of someone else's choreographic expression. Martha Graham was a master at teaching her dancers how to use Effort life in order to become the type of human being that could convey the intention of her work; strong, vibrantly active, independent, and disciplined with a deep sense of physicality. She believed that "this 'becoming self' of the body was also a becoming self of the embodied subject, who would be empowered by this process of self-realization since power means to 'become what one is'" (Reynolds 6).

In addition to focusing on the individual, Laban's work concentrates on the "healthy, effective human functioning" (Brooks 30) of society as a whole. As mentioned previously, choreography has the ability to birth a community that is built upon the principle of truthful expression. However, individuals in society are like strings on a guitar; each person has his own "tone" which colors his personality and makes him unique. When one string is out of tune, however, the striking of a chord is disharmonious. The same principle applies to society. When even just one individual is "out of tune", the overall balance of society is thrown off. Because one functions better when he is genuine, the honesty revealed in a person's movements, from the perspective of Laban's theory of Effort, will help reinstate harmony and unity of mind and body within an individual. This restoration within multiple people will help quiet the cacophony of society.

Statement of Central Objective

The central objective of my project is to create a "work-in-progress" choreography piece that utilizes Rudolf Laban's theory of Effort to explore, through movement, how understanding my "inner" and "outer" Effort life can lead to becoming self-empowered.

Methods

In order to complete my project, I plan on using both scholarly and movement-based research methods. To establish a solid vocabulary and theoretical understanding of Laban's theory of Effort, I will be studying books and journal articles. References I will be using include specific works written by Laban and other resources from the Laban Institute of Movement Studies. I also plan on using references which analyze how Effort theory, the idea of self-empowerment, and choreography work in unison. Articles such as *A Technique for Power* by Dee Reynolds will address this relationship. Furthermore, I will watch the video, *Laban's Legacy*. This reference discusses the value of meaning behind movement and Laban's Effort theory to the work of a dancer and a choreographer.

However, the majority of my research will be movement based. Thus, I plan on spending most of my time in the dance studios located in Lilly Hall. I will use this space to create movement phrases utilizing Laban's Effort theory, explore and push past the boundaries of my movement vocabulary, and ultimately become more comfortable taking risks. With input from my mentor, Cynthia Pratt, I will be able to determine whether or not my choices were successful, and if not, what changes should be made.

Progression of Project

Pre BSI: Before the start of BSI, I will gather all of the resources I plan on using to complete my project and begin to make my way through each of them. I will also meet with my mentor on a weekly basis to determine how each of my resources can be utilized to their fullest potential and discuss specifically how the movement-based portion of my project will take shape.

Week 1: I will continue to make my way through all of my resources. I will also create guidelines for the movement-based portion of my project.

Week 2-4: I will use these three weeks to explore the Weight and Time Effort factors through movement. In the studio, I will focus on creating several substantial movement phrases and recording them using Labanotation. I also plan on journaling in regards to what I have discovered about my "inner" and "outer" Effort life, as well as my progress in becoming self-empowered.

Week 5-7: I will use these three weeks to explore the Space and Flow Effort factors through movement. I will focus on creating several substantial movement phrases and recording them using Labanotation. I also plan on journaling in regards to what I have discovered about my "inner" and "outer" Effort life, as well as my progress in becoming self-empowered.

Week 8: I will use this week to analyze excerpts of well-known choreography from several dance genres. Having already experimented on my own over the past six weeks, this exercise will enhance my observation skills and allow me to view works with which I am familiar from an alternative perspective.

Week 9: Combining the movement phrases I created between weeks two and seven, I will fashion a "work-in-progress" piece and presentation. I will also add music to complement my movement.

Furthermore, I will write a "self-assessment" detailing my progress in becoming self-empowered.

Post BSI: At the completion of BSI, I will present my project to the rest of the BSI participants via a discussion and performance-based presentation. I will also present my project as part of the 2013 Undergraduate Research Conference. Furthermore, I am hoping to use BSI as a starting point for my Honors Thesis and Senior Production Project. I plan on expanding upon the work I completed during BSI and ultimately creating a full-length choreographic piece using a larger group of dancers.

Feasibility

Because this project is mostly movement based, I will need to use the dance studios located in Lilly Hall. As a dance major, though, I can easily gain access to these facilities. However, this project does require some reading material. I feel confident that I can gain access to all of the necessary resources through Irwin Library and Butler's Interlibrary Loan System. Furthermore, I plan on visiting the Resource Center at the Laban Institute of Movement Studies, located in New York City, before BSI begins. Because I live in New Jersey, it is very easy for me to travel to the Institute over Spring Break or after the spring semester is over. The small fee required for this visit would be covered by the BSI stipend.

Working on Campus

Because this project requires a significant amount of time spent in the studio, I plan on staying on the Butler campus to take advantage of the studio space in Lilly Hall. If for some reason I am unable to secure some of my reading materials through Irwin Library or the Interlibrary Loan System, I may need to visit a library close to Butler's campus. However, this would not require me to stay away from Butler overnight. Additionally, I am confident that I will be able to acquire resources from the Laban Institute of Movement Studies in New York City prior to the start of BSI.

Personal

I am very interested in this topic because in addition to my work as a dance major, I have a passion for choreography and hope to partake in the art as a career sometime in the future. I strongly believe that movement is the truest expression of one's self. Throughout my time at Butler, I have begun to discover its power; it is motivational, dynamic, expressive, challenging and never lies. Movement has become my closest friend, someone with whom I can share my inner life. Opening up to such a friend, though, can sometimes be quite difficult. I am at the point in my college career where my future is no longer beyond the horizon and intangible. I have realized that in order to be comfortable expressing my inner life and using my own "voice," in any medium but particularly through movement, I need to gain a better understanding of the connection between my mind and body. Ultimately, I need to be one step closer to or perhaps even at the point of becoming self-empowered. Fortunately, the works I have completed in my Choreography classes, Laban Movement Analysis class, and through participating in the Student Choreography Showcase have given me the tools and the potential to reach this goal. I have become more thoughtful, innovative and assertive as a person and as a dancer, and have certainly discovered aspects of myself I did not know existed.

As a result of this project, I believe that I will be able to expand my movement vocabulary and hopefully begin to create a style that I can call my own. I will also gain more insight into the power of movement, which will be helpful in both my explorations as a choreographer and as a dancer. The progress of my project during the nine week period of BSI is ultimately dependent on my personal research and experimentation in the studio. However, I hope to transform of my research into a full choreographic work, using dancers other than myself, at a later date.

Presentation

Because of the nature of choreographic works, the professional mediums through which they are presented tend to take on the form of a festival or showing. Thus, I would be able to present my project through The Young Choreographer's Festival as well as the Works in Process Program part of Dance New Amsterdam. These would be appropriate ways of displaying my work because they give up and coming choreographers the chance to work on and present their work in a more professional setting. They are also located in New York City, one of the most exciting and opportunity-filled cities for dance in the United States.

Research Approvals

This project does not require the use of any human subjects or animals.

References

- Brooks, Lynn M. "Harmony in Space: A Perspective on the Work of Rudolf Laban." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 27.2 (1993): 29-41. Print.
- Reynolds, Dee. "A Technique for Power: Reconfiguring Economies of Energy in Martha Graham's Early Work." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 20.1 (2002): 3-31. Print.