ORDER THROUGH IMPROVISATION: ENGAGING THE CHOREOGRAPHIC ENVIRONMENT

By

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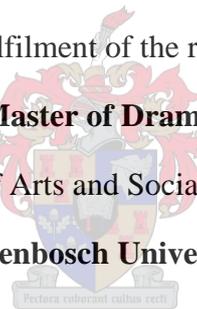
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DECLARATION

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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ABSTRACT:

In the field of choreography, there are many different emerging theories and methodologies. One such theory uses the individual and unique performers to create and generate movement vocabulary. For the student-choreographer, who is still developing their artistic voice, certain markers need to be put in place in order to evaluate a creative process.

The aim of this study is to critically reflect on a particular practical process, develop a language with which to structure improvisations, create the appropriate environment in which effective exploration can take place and finally deliver criticism on the process.

This research study has a strong empirical component, focusing on my personal practice as a choreographer.

This study also makes use of secondary source material that discusses the choreographic process in general, and more specifically the use of improvisation in choreography, with particular reference to the he theories and definitions of Michael Klien (2007) and Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001), as and the choreographic innovations and methods of Merce Cunningham.

Finally, this study makes use of primary source material, in the form of first-hand observations and personal interviews with a modern Physical Theatre Company, PUSH Physical Theatre Company in Rochester, NY, USA.

Through the combination of the theories of Michael Klien (2007) and Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001) both a philosophical and practical methodology develops and emerges.

The results will show how the choreographic environment is engaged to not only simplify and shorten the choreographic process, but also to enhance it. The intangible energetic rapport between people, space and ideas can be harnessed as part of the process of choreography.

OPSOMMING:

Verskeie teorieë en metodologieë word tans binne die veld van choreografie ontwikkel. Onder andere gebruik een so 'n teorie die individu en unieke deelnemers om beweging en bewegingsfrases te genereer. Vir die studente-choreograaf, wie tans nog in die proses is om 'n kunstige stem te ontwikkel, is sekere merkers nodig om 'n kreatiewe proses ten einde te evalueer.

Die doel van hierdie studie is om krities oor 'n spesifieke praktiese proses te reflekteer. Die proses behels die ontwikkeling van 'n taal waarmee improvisasies gestruktureer kan word; om die gepaste omgewing te skep waarin effektiewe eksplorasie kan plaasvind en eindelik om kritiek oor die proses te lewer.

Die navorsingstuk het 'n sterk empiriese komponent wat meestal op 'n persoonlike praktyk as choreograaf fokus.

Hierdie studie maak van sekondêre material gebruik wat die choreografiese proses in die algemeen, en meer spesifiek, die gebruik van improvisasie in choreografie, bespreek. Daar word van die teorieë en definisies van Michael Klien (2007) en Lavender en Predock-Linnel (2001), sowel as die choreografiese inovasies en metodes van Merce Cunningham, melding gemaak.

Derdens maak hierdie studie gebruik van primêre bronne in die vorm van eerste-handse observasies en persoonlike onderhoude met 'n moderne Fisiese Teater geselskap, PUSH Physical Theatre Company" in Rochester, New York, VSA.

Deur die kombinasie van die teorieë van Klien en Predock-Linnell, word beide 'n filosofiese en praktiese metodologie ontwikkel.

Die resultate wys hoe die choreografiese omgewing aangewend word om beide die choreografiese proses te verkort en te versterk. Die verweefde energieke dinamiek tussen mense, spasie en idees kan gebruik word as deel van die proses van choreografie.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTENTS:

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1.1 Preliminary Study and Rationale:

My choreographic explorations, embarked on while completing a specialized choreography module as part of my HonsBDram course in 2010, revealed the foundational role of improvisation, with its associated methods and terminology, in my practice.

In my initial choreographic processes, I worked according to a limited understanding of choreography, including a belief that a choreographer requires formal training, and formally trained dancers to work with, in order to create a meaningful and refined performance. I have no formal dance training myself, but my on-going practical and theoretical explorations have revealed that there are strategies and methods (some already tried and tested by other practitioners) that can be used to circumvent these perceived constraints and limitations.

For example, it was during the creation of a solo, entitled *mem-Re:*, that I started exploring a process of connecting a quality of movement that I was observing in a performer to a specific word, for example: 'dig', 'burden' and 'wash'. This allowed me to ask a performer to 'dig a movement in' so that the quality of movement became heavier and required more effort as opposed to when the performer simply executed the movement without the word connected to it. This process took a significant amount of time, but when I started refining or editing movement phrases I could easily explain to my performer what specific quality I was looking for by utilizing the terminology we had developed.

Other challenges that I have faced in my choreographic processes include: finding a way of articulating movement, through giving the right instructions, signals or cues to performers; rearranging, refining and composing the movement material generated through improvisation; working effectively with individual performers and/or group dynamics and critically reflecting on one's own work.

1.2 Literature Review:

Klien (2007: 1082) defines choreography as:

> [The] creative act of setting the conditions for things to happen, the choreographer as the navigator, negotiator and architect of a fluid environment that he/she himself/herself is part of.

As a young choreographer and researcher this concept of the choreographer as the "navigator, negotiator and architect" (Klien, 2007: 1082) of an environment seems intriguing and relevant, and is reflected in my own practice. I have found that invoking Klien's combination of structure and non-deterministic methods is necessary and effective, but not without challenges. Although Klien offers a philosophical context for contemporary choreography he does not necessarily offer practical methods by which the choreographer may achieve this.

In their article *From Improvisation to Choreography: the Critical Bridge*, Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001: 196) propose a more practical method for effectively teaching 'good' choreography (regardless of the style or context in which the student-choreographer is being educated) which includes developing the following capabilities: "improvising […] composing […] and criticism".

Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001: 205) thus highlight a general challenge facing student-choreographers that I experienced in my own practice: "first to make specific aesthetic choices and then to gain consciousness both of the particular choices […] and the reason why". Their discussion is useful as it offers young choreographers, as well as their lecturers or class facilitators, the practical tools to consider the use of improvisation within choreography.

Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001:195) mention that they "believe that students learn to become choreographers through the development of critical consciousness; the ability to describe, analyse, interpret, evaluate and […] implement revisions to their own and others' dances", thereby placing emphasis, for educational purposes, on the evaluation of a creative process. They further reiterate that improvisation alone does not develop the young choreographer's ability, but that "what students need to complement their improvisation experiences is training in identifying and exploiting the full aesthetic and expressive potential of the movement material they invent and explore during the improvisational process" (Lavender & Predock-Linnell, 2001: 195).

Research into the origins and development of improvisation as a choreographic tool has led me to critical analyses and reviews on the choreographic innovations of Merce Cunningham. Although many of Cunningham's ideas have already been applied by contemporary choreographers, an analysis of his approach still offers a useful historical reference. This has

enabled me to locate my practice within a wider context of choreographic practices, and to take note of contemporary developments.

In general, limited literature exists on the approaches and methods used by *contemporary* Physical Theatre companies, and in the specific case of American-based PUSH Physical Theatre Company, whose theories and methodologies are discussed in Chapter 4. For this reason I will need to refer to personal interviews, an observation and workshop process, online videos of performances as well as online articles released by PUSH Physical Theatre Company.

While information is available on the subject of Physical theatre, and specifically the use of improvisation within it, for this study it seemed necessary to obtain sources from personal experiences, discussions and observations to enhance my understanding of the study.

1.3 Theoretical Hypothesis:

In *Choreography: a pattern language*, choreographer, academic and artistic consultant Michael Klien (2007: 1081) states that "choreography [is an] art form that not only deals with the creation and manipulation of systems of rules, but [that it] does so in a non-deterministic, open way", thus affording the choreographer a certain latitude to invoke new structures, expressive methods and terminology.

Klien (section 1.2) suggests that the choreographer's role is to create the environment, or circumstances, within which movement, action, exploration or improvisation will take place, and that the choreographer is not rigid and restricted in approach or method, but rather flexible and open to changes in their immediate environment. In Klien's context, "environment" does not only refer to space but must include the performers, choreographer and other collaborators who make up the "fluid environment". In other words, *environment* here refers to a network of interactions between people, space and ideas. The environment, therefore, unfolds as a result of the choreographer's ability to negotiate all of these elements.

The act of constructing movement phrases for performance, according to Klien, is reliant on a flexible environment and fixed parameters, which appear to be divergent forces. Klien (2007: 1084) reiterates that "the choreographer is no longer concerned with the creation of particular patterns or instances, but is providing [the] conditions for *things* to happen" consequently imbuing the role of the choreographer with additional dynamism.

Klien is further suggesting that the socially conscious role of the choreographer does not end - or even begin - with setting simple movements, but includes establishing a context in which performers may access their specific language. This means setting parameters, which may include both physical and verbal cues and referents, as tasks for performers. Klien's use of the word "things" (Klien, 2001: 1084), the meaning of which is not precisely constrained, also suggests the allowance for a diversity of outcome-orientated movement forms to emerge. The choreographer is then responsible for composing or arranging this individual language that has been accessed.

> The challenge in such work is to work [sic] with the individuals as an artist, to bring their memories, experiences, physical knowledge, moods etc. into the creative process, giving space for such processes to be recalled and developed within the work. The choreographic framing has to happen for the whole individual - including their thoughts and memories.

<div align="right">(Klien, 2007: 1084)</div>

This suggests that the choreographer is not solely interested in a performer's technical precision or capability, but also in the *experience* that the performer has gained throughout his/her own life and how that contributes to the shape, quality, rhythm and sequencing of movements and gestures, as well as the subject matter of the performance.

1.4 Problem Statement:

According to Klien (2007), the choreographer can shape the environment in which movement exploration, expression and performance takes place, relying on the performers' personal style to become evident. The challenge of this method is determining to what extent the movement material as well as the conceptual framing and work ethic should reflect the performer's personal talents and goals, in comparison to what could be defined by the choreographer's vision.

The choreographer in such a process is faced with two potentially contradictory and opposing aspects, namely: wanting creative ownership over a process; and needing to elicit creative input from performers.

1.5 Research question and aims:

The research question in this study can be formulated as follows: how can the choreographer, who chooses to work with improvisation as a tool for generating vocabulary, create the necessary *environment* in which to evoke *qualities* of movement that can be linked to, or

inspired by, a performer's inner landscape whilst at the same time adhere to an accurate reflection of, and be a vehicle for, the choreographer's vision?

The study has the following aims:

1. To critically reflect on a particular practical process (entitled *mem-Re:*) to find a resolution for the contradiction, for both choreographer and performer, between improvisation and structure.
2. To develop a language with which to structure improvisations, compose movement material, and then to deliver criticism (in accordance with the theories proposed by Lavender and Predock-Linnell, 2001).
3. In accordance with the definitions of choreography offered by Klien (2007), create the appropriate environment in which effective exploration, improvisation and performance can take place.

1.6 Research Design and Methods:

The study will be completed in three stages. Firstly, this research will have a strong empirical component, focusing on my personal practice as a choreographer, with specific reference to the creation and presentation of an original full-length work, *mem-Re:*, which was presented at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 2011.

Practice-as-Research will be the primary methodology by which I will document and evaluate the practical component of the production. In this respect practical and theoretical components of research and investigation will be integrated in the creation, documentation and critical reflection of a Physical Theatre production.

Documentation of the choreographic process will take place by means of a creative journal in which I will record improvisations set, their effectiveness, compositional choices, and the evolving terminology and its impact on the process. This journal will be supplemented with photographs, video footage and critical reviews, which will offer further material for critical reflection and evaluation.

Secondly, this study will make use of secondary source material that discusses the choreographic process in general, but more specifically the use of improvisation in choreography, to offer a qualitative interpretation of this process of the production. This will

be done with particular reference to the he theories and definitions of Michael Klien (2007) and Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001), as and the choreographic innovations and methods of Merce Cunningham.

Thirdly, this study will make use of primary source material, in the form of first-hand observations and personal interviews with directors and members of PUSH Physical Theatre Company. I will examine their work, specifically their *way* of working in order to both situate my work to theirs, and also to gain new insights into choreographic possibilities. This will serve as both a theoretical and practical basis for the study.

1.7 Chapter Outline:

1. Introduction
2. Chapter 2 is a discussion of *mem-Re:*, documenting the process of improvisation, production and post-production and highlighting the way in which two opposing forces (collaboration and choreography) may be experienced and/or resolved by a choreographer.
3. Chapter 3 is a contemporary reading of choreography. Within this chapter I formulate a working definition of choreography, with reference to the theoretical work of Klien (2007) and Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001). This will be followed by a brief discussion of the developing role of the choreographer over the last few decades, referring specifically to dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham.
4. Chapter 4 undertakes a detailed analysis of the choreographic methods of PUSH Physical Theatre Company with specific reference to how they use improvisation in their creative process.
5. Conclusion
6. Bibliography

CHAPTER TWO: A reflection on the creation of *mem-Re:*

2.1 The creation of a solo:

At the end of 2010 I completed my Honours Degree in Choreography at the University of Stellenbosch Drama Department. My year of study included several minor tasks, and my final assignment was to conceptualise and produce a 20-minute performance. The number of performers, as well as the approach and style of the production, was left open to interpretation, giving me the opportunity to develop my choreographic process.

I decided to work with a single performer only, on the creation of an extended solo. The inspiration for the solo, entitled *mem-Re:*, was a seminal moment that I experienced during participation in an open improvisation at a Summer Intensive offered by PUSH Physical Theatre Company in Rochester, New York, USA in 2010. I wondered if it might be interesting - for performers, audience members and myself - to depict or express my personal thoughts at this time through the creation of an original Physical Theatre production.

I kept a journal of my experience with PUSH, an experience which I found intensely thought-provoking and mind shifting: I was exposed to many new concepts and was given the opportunity to perform, which I had not been able to do that year, because of the nature of my course. It was then that the concept of using the performer's diary as creative and choreographic inspiration originated.

I had originally asked my solo performer to keep a diary of rehearsals for the purposes of remembering the process of creating the solo, but I had not thought to use the content as a source for generating vocabulary. Her diary entries, as well as some of my own diary entries and musings, subsequently became a significant part of the process.

Another primary source of inspiration was a poem by Alan Ginsberg entitled *Song.* I selected this as the point of thematic departure for the solo, since I had just returned from San Francisco the city in which Ginsberg found his inspiration. The poem was filled with descriptive words (underlined in the extract below) which I felt could be used as inspiration for emotive movements:

The weight of the world

        is love.

Under the burden

        of solitude

under the burden

        of dissatisfaction

        the weight,

      the weight we carry

        is love. . .

The warm bodies

        shine together

In the darkness,

        the hand moves

To the [center]

        of the flesh,

the skin trembles

        in happiness

and the soul comes

        joyful to the eye -

 (Ginsberg, 1959: 50-53)

My aim with using the poem was not to recreate the narrative of the poem, or even the themes, but rather to use the words out of context as abstract signifiers to evoke feelings, moods and sensations.

After a few weeks of rehearsals I started doubting my process, but attributed the difficulties I was having to the physical constraints of a solo performance, for example: lack of partnering work (and therefore the exclusion of weight bearing or elevating movements); setting improvisations for the performer to execute herself (with the choreographer eagerly watching); and striking the right personal balance between performer and choreographer (deciding which feedback from the performer I would choose to use). I thought these

difficulties were the result of creating a solo, but later discovered when I was involved in choreographing for a group, that negotiating individual needs and giving feedback with sensitivity are equally conditions of group choreography.

In its complete form the solo dealt with five distinctive memories that did not overlap and I wanted the staging to reflect this. I decided not to use props or décor, only lighting and flour scattered on the surface of the stage, to create an ethereal quality that reminds me of memories. The distinctively shaped or clearly demarcated areas of light would suggest different psychological and emotional spaces or memories (refer to Fig.2.1).

Fig. 2.1: Examples of distinctively shaped lighting.

As the process unfolded, I realised that the challenges I was facing could not be attributed to the constraints of a solo process, but were rather a result of failing to implement or put into effect my role as choreographer properly. I sensed that I was unable to create the right environment in which improvisations (and as a consequence, composition and arrangement) could satisfactorily take place.

In a research paper written at the end of my Honours year, *Body as a Stage: The aesthetics of the work of Pina Bausch and how aspects of her work can be used in the creation of a solo* (Nel, 2010a), I observed that:

> [t]he task of creating a solo has been a very difficult one. I was not able to rely on two bodies to lift or support one another, but rather try to create that feeling with one body. However, it has allowed me to play with the idea of generating vocabulary on one body and create many fragments of movements which will be strung together in a performance. Essentially, I started the solo three times. The process started early September and by the end of September, we had restarted and then, in the middle of October, again. Each time, we were still using the basis of what we had done before.

> After the third restart, when we identified the five scenes, we were able to connect these words to a scene and the generation of a vocabulary was a faster process than the first time [....] As new vocabulary develops, so does the need to change the order in which it is performed.

(Nel, 2010a)

Although the solo as an *end* product seemed successful – enjoyed and appreciated by audience members and colleagues – I was unable to appreciate the final performances myself. This was because I was, short-sightedly, evaluating the production against the process. I was aware that the final performance was not an *end product* as such, but rather a continuation or component of the process, and so appreciating it in the way that others were able to do (as something complete and successful) was not possible for me. I could still see its further development and the production's unrealised potential. I came to the realisation that, as a choreographer, my primary focus was on the process, development and interaction with my performer and audience, and that the end product was a secondary interest.

2.2 Towards a full length production:

As the process and production of the solo came to an end, I was encouraged to submit a proposal for inclusion in the Student Festival of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival. For me it seemed a logical step to translate the solo, *mem-Re:*, into a full-length production with a larger cast, as a means to improve on the previous process, and refine my choreographic voice. The proposal can now be viewed as clearly revealing my developing choreographic style:

> I will be looking for a diverse range of performers, in styles and gender, who are not afraid to improvise, and who have a unique understanding and willingness to explore their specific way of moving. They will take part in the process of creating vocabulary, drawing on their own way of recollecting and remembering information. Part of the creative process, which has already been explored in the creation of a solo for the Honours Choreography course this year, will be drawing inspiration from personal journals of the performers. These journals might include poetic and symbolic writing (even drawings) that capture and/or reflect their personal experiences and which will hopefully be used to inspire and generate the unique vocabulary of each performer.

(Nel, 2010b)

When my proposal was accepted it granted me the opportunity to revisit the way I had approached the solo and address some lingering questions such as: how can a choreographer

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use improvisation to get the optimal effect from a performer? How could I, as choreographer, create an environment most conducive to improvisation, including generating and maintaining trust between performers and choreographer? And how, after the final performance, can the choreographer most truthfully reflect on their own creative development and the value of the production itself?

2.3 Who was involved: The selection of participant-performers:

Auditions for the full length production of *mem-Re:* were held on 25 January 2011, and they were specifically aimed at performers interested in a participative Physical Theatre process. The first task I set for the auditioning participants was to create a one-minute movement phrase based on a memory. I assumed that this would allow me to assess, firstly, which performers could work creatively on their own, and secondly, who would be capable of interpreting an instruction in a non-presentational way (for example, not pantomiming the actions). Further tasks included contact-based improvisations which allowed me to assess the development of partnerships.

At the call-back session I looked more specifically at how performers worked together, were able to take instructions and how they would engage with me as their choreographer. I asked the participants to perform their one minute solos in groups of four; and I repeated one of the instructions used in rehearsals for the initial solo production (2010) which was to explore the quality of a word in a specific body part. For example, they would depict 'burn' in their arm, or 'shine' in their foot. Finally, I asked them to locomote in groups of four using some of the vocabulary that had been generated during the audition. This was an improvisation that I had previously seen executed by PUSH Physical Theatre Company, as part of non-traditional partnering, and subsequently adapted for my own use.

The combination of individual and partnered showings during the auditions made it clearer for me to see who would work creatively with my parameters, as well as together with other cast members. Unlike the solo process, where I had simply chosen a performer whom I knew, and who I believed could be innovative in the process, this audition process helped me to select performers whom I might not necessarily have noticed before.

One of the participants who was in the final cast[1] relates that "the audition process was a great experience as Dayne knew what she was looking for and this could be seen, she had clear instructions of what we had to do and this helped to create a pleasurable audition as I felt that I could perform to my best ability" (Butler, 2011). In this sense, I felt my approach to casting was validated.

2.4 Methods of Facilitation and Examples of Improvisations:

2.4.1 Introduction to new choreographic methods:

At the first meeting I introduced the five performers to the Ginsberg poem, *Song*, since I saw it as a springboard from which to start the process of originating a non-verbal language.

In collaboration, the cast and I selected words from the poem to use as inspiration for finding physical expressions in different body parts, which I later arranged into a sequence. This was developed as the first section for the final work and was named the *Goodbye* sequence. Ironically, it would eventually *not* be included in the final production because of the development of other sections that the cast and I preferred.

The exclusion of this section did not undermine the significance of its contribution to the process: it represented my first opportunity to implement new choreographic methods, and demonstrate valuable thematic and organisational concepts to the performers, such as repetition and chance occurrences. It also allowed me to observe how the improvisations for an individual work could be translated for group work.

2.4.2 Utilising the journals:

The cast and I spent most of the initial rehearsals in discussion, especially around the concept of memory, as well as specific memories of the performers. In my journal I noted that:

> we […] discussed what thoughts came to mind after the previous rehearsals. [...] We […] narrowed the themes down to 'travel' and 'saying goodbye'. I asked [the performers] not to change their sequences, but add small gestures and keep those themes in mind.

<div align="right">(Nel, 2011)</div>

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[1] The final cast included Néna Butler, Jan-Lodewyk Jansen van Vuuren, Dugin Kock, Lu-Ise Hattingh and Jayne Burden.

This built on my previous experience, not only by looking at the movements that the performers had made, but connecting them to a certain feeling or memory that they might have had, or simply remind them of the memory to which that the gesture is linked. This was useful to certain performers, as those themes might not have been significant to them otherwise. In this case, I was imposing my vision and inspiration onto their movements.

2.4.3 Encouraging collaboration amongst the cast:

A new challenge that emerged for me with a cast of 5 performers was 'getting to know one another'. This seemed especially important since they would not only need to perform together, but also to travel and stay together for a substantial amount of time during the preparation and performances at the Grahamstown National Festival. The cast were varied in age, gender, social background and personal interests, and although I had cast them for their unique qualities, I wanted them to be able to work cohesively as a group.

I had a fear that they would not get along and, for that reason, spent a considerable amount of time outside and during rehearsals allowing them to become familiar with one another. This included arranging a short break-away, and reducing on-the-floor rehearsal times so that we could watch a movie together. One performer recalls feeling that:

> the first few rehearsals were awkward […] as the cast did not really know each other thus the rehearsals were aimed at bringing us together and making us comfortable with one another. The first few rehearsals were filled with playing around and improvisation as well as certain group exercises that Dayne had developed.

(Butler, 2011)

On reflection, I realise that this idea of a collaborative group is what had been modelled to me in my observations and interactions with other Physical Theatre companies, such as PUSH. I had observed what seemed like a pleasant working environment, one in which company members were more productive because they got along with one another.

2.4.4 The 'rough and tumble' improvisation:

Another task-based improvisation that developed quite early on and that the performers mentioned as being significant in their feedback was what I termed the 'rough and tumble' sequence. It evolved from a need to get the performers more dynamically and spatially comfortable with one another, as well as to challenge my observation and interpretation skills by composing a sequence from phrase extracted from a more dynamic improvisation.

The 'rough and tumble' improvisation required the performers to stand in a circle and then, on my command, to all enter the circle and attempt to occupy its centre. They could do this by lifting and dropping one another away from the centre, shuffling their way in-between other bodies, or trying to be the first to arrive and then hold the space by pushing the others away. This improvisation was executed with a lot of enthusiasm by the performers initially, but then they became confused about the aim of the improvisation.

After a feedback session with my supervisor, it became clear that the performers were experiencing difficulties with the task as I had not set sufficient parameters for them to work with. In response to a question that I asked my performers to answer post-production, namely "did you always understand the improvisations or were more explanations needed?", one performer explained that "there was sometimes a bit of confusion, but it always came around". She goes on further to remark that:

> One [improvisation] that I struggled with was the 'rough and tumble' exercise which was about one person in the group trying to get to the centre of the circle. There was sometimes confusion as to where the circle was, but once we asked [Dayne] it was established.

(Butler, 2011)

As soon as I was able to articulate this parameter of the improvisation more clearly, and establish a centre point that everyone understood, there was immediately more structure and clarity to the performers' interpretations of the task.

The challenge then became to set choreography from what had emerged in this particularly dynamic improvisation. I started by giving each performer a number on which to run into the centre of the circle. But as soon as I ordered the improvisation in this way, it lost its original intent and energetic quality. I felt that it was unnecessary to continue working with this improvisation as a means of generating vocabulary as an equally important objective had been met: the cast had become more used to working dynamically with one another or under dynamic conditions and felt more comfortable lifting one another. I subsequently used the improvisation only for focus and warm-up purposes before each rehearsal.

2.4.5 Generating new movement vocabulary:

What I termed the 'carry' improvisation[2], developed very quickly and I was able to almost immediately set and refine choreography through it. Because of the improvisation's success, it would also mark both the beginning and ending of the production.

I asked the performers to carry one another across the space, in any manner that the two bodies (being different shapes and sizes) would allow. Smaller or shorter performers were also expected to lift, pick up or drag taller performers across the space. They executed this parameter a few times, until they were able to settle on a few lifts. I then asked them to reflect on the lifts they had created and hold an image in their imagination which they could connect the movement to, for example, a mother carrying a child, or friends supporting one another.

I made notes of which pairings seemed most effective; and then in collaboration with the performers, we ordered the lifts sequentially. These lifts would eventually be repeated as images throughout the performance, and come to represent flashbacks of the central female protagonist.

I created many improvisations that gave rise to short sequences or phrases that were eventually not used in the final production at all. Some of these, for example, emerged during our weekend away. Again, although they did not serve the purpose of generating vocabulary, they did serve the purpose of developing themes and improving partnering work. One improvisation from the weekend away did translate into an extended duet between two male performers that was used in the final performance. Using the term 'improvisation' in its much more looser sense, the performers did not work with specific parameters in mind, but after 'playing around' devised a sequence of acrobatic lifts and backbends (see Fig. 2.2). The athleticism was made possible by the extreme flexibility of one performer and the height and strength of the other.

I decided to keep and refine the movements they had shown me, and we discussed finding a dramatic intention for the duet that might contribute towards the themes of the production. I wanted the duet to have a menacing and aggressive quality, because they were two males,

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[2] It might be interesting to note the names that were given to the improvisations. It was important to name the improvisations, because it also became a way of streamlining the choreographic process. When I spoke of 'rough and tumble' the performers automatically knew which task I was referring to. This became another example of recapitulation, as I had previously explained the task and its parameters and the performers had to remember the parameters. We had a tendency to refer to the tasks or specific improvisations by an essential quality or parameter.

and because I wanted this sequence to contrast with the more gentle duets, but the performers found it difficult to sustain those qualities; I attribute their difficulty to the fact that they were friends off-stage and because they experienced genuine enjoyment whilst performing the sequence. Perhaps also, my attempts to make the cast feel comfortable with one another had worked against me and that perhaps some 'strangeness' or 'tension' amongst performers is necessary to sustain dramatic tension.

As the performers continued to work on this duet, discussions would invariably break out between them as they tried to recall their movements, or they would anticipate and countdown lifts, or simply forget a movement completely. During one rehearsal their hesitation, continued discussion and attempts to remember were particularly amusing and at this point I made the decision to retain these qualities, keeping the playful intention of the duet (see Fig. 2.3). In final performance, the sequence and rhythm of the movements were choreographed, but the intermittent dialogue was allowed to evolve, dependent on the particular mood of the performers in the moment of performance.

Fig. 2.2: The acrobatic male duet.

(Smith, 2011)
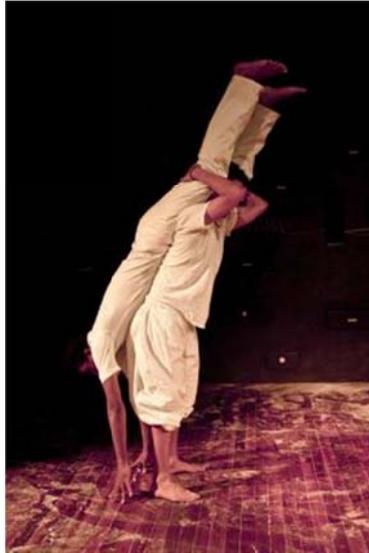
Fig. 2.3: Demonstrating a playful moment in the duet.

(Smith, 2011)

One of the constraints of working with a larger cast, compared to a solo, was arranging rehearsal times and counting on the performers to arrive at the rehearsals. And yet, there is creative potential in such constraints or in the unpredictable nature of performer attendance. This is how the 'hopscotch' trio developed. Two performers were not available to come to rehearsals for a period of time and therefore I could only work with the remaining three. I revisited an improvisation that I had used for the solo, asking the performers to jump. Instructions included asking them to jump as high as they could, as fast as they could, to jump using different body parts and then to travel while jumping. This resulted in a very amusing segment as the natural relationships between the performers started emerging. The male performer was taller than both the female performers, and could jump much higher than them (see Fig. 2.4). During performances, he also became aware of the squeaking sound of the stage while jumping and used that for humorous and comical effect as well.

Fig. 2.4: The 'hopscotch' trio, with the male performer jumping much higher than the females.

A solo for one of the female performers developed quite early on in the process. She had shared with the cast that she had a fascination with German culture. We jointly agreed upon the idea that she should develop movement phrases and gestures to represent travel, and perhaps add in a flower, such as a tulip into the sequence. Despite the association of a tulip with the Netherlands, rather than Germany, we were using her journal entry as a source of inspiration for dramatic imagery rather than a literal narrative. I asked her to imagine holding a tulip, extend it away from her body as she moved. She devised a few short phrases that together we elaborated on. I saw this solo as the perfect opportunity to work with the concept of repetition and, what I more specifically call *layering*.

Layering is a compositional strategy inspired by the work of Anne Bogart (Bogart & Landau, 2009). In her own process of composition, Bogart starts with a skeleton of movement, and builds the scene by including levels, rhythm, speed, gestures and repetition.

At some point in the rehearsal process, this solo felt very sparse to me, perhaps because I was able to make more use of layering and overlapping in this production (unlike in the solo). I set up an improvisation where I asked another performer (who was to become a key character in the narrative) to try and repeat the movements she observed the original soloist doing. I found watching *this* performer watching and memorising the movements of the *other* performer intriguing, so I asked her to never commit the movements to memory (which

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became harder the more she rehearsed and performed) but only copy what the original performer was doing. The solo had suddenly become a duet, and I expanded it further into a group interaction by involving other performers who moved on the margins and in the background (see Fig. 2.5).

Fig. 2.5: The layered solo.

Another solo emerged from a discussion about the journal entries that the performers were continuously making. In one particular instance a family member had recently moved away, and the idea of experiencing a longing across distance was very strong. Once again travel had emerged as a theme. I tried arranging the movement material of two females together based on their common theme, but soon realised that despite the similarity in theme, the movement qualities and emotional experiences emerging from these themes were very different. Although contrast can also be used for compositional effect, I felt that the duet could rather be utilised as two separate solos, thereby including the theme throughout the production.

There were only two female performers who used props during the rehearsal and performance stage, firstly, to keep props to a minimal and secondly to place emphasis on the props that were utilised (such as the journals, photos and suitcases). We decided early on that there would be suitcases on stage, after discussing the theme of 'travel'.

The vocabulary for one solo materialized from the idea that the performer was trying to get into the suitcase. The first instruction I gave the performer, to find different ways of placing

herself into the suitcase, was unclear, and the movements generated were repetitive. I then instructed her to get into the suitcase with a different body part leading the movement each time. By refining my instructions (offering more constraints) I realized that I had opened up new ideas and possibilities, for both myself and the performer (see Fig. 2.6).

During the final phase of rehearsals, I realised that some of the performer's movements, especially the transitions *out* of the suitcase, were limited by the physical dimensions of the suitcase. As a possible solution I asked a male performer to help her out of the suitcase, specifically by lifting her, which proved to be effective. I also increased the tempo of this section, because the movements became laboured when they were executed slowly, and I had envisioned a lighter quality for this section.

Fig. 2.6: A performer behind one of the suitcases.

(Smith, 2011)

The journals that I asked the performers to keep throughout the process had become an integral part of the production, and I was eager to include elements of this in the production. I never read the journals myself, and the performers were allowed to use their own discretion about sharing any extracts.

One night, while we were waiting for a member of the cast to arrive for a rehearsal, two performers asked me whether they could create and perform a duet together. I told them to work something out (without giving any specific instructions or parameters), with the idea that we would decide later whether it should be included, based on what they were able to generate. They worked out a short movement phrase, and when I saw it decided to add a journal as a prop, representing the significance of the journal in our creative process. The

movement was not generated from a specific theme, but was emergent from the physical capabilities and expressive range of the performers, who decided to only use Contact Improvisation to generate movement vocabulary. The duet became another example of using chance (an unintended situation of the other performers not arriving on time for a rehearsal) as a choreographic strategy. I subsequently added thematic elements such as props and text, and refined the rhythm and quality of the duet to contextualise it for myself and the audience.

Another way in which I incorporated the diaries in the final performance was to ask the performers to read extracts from them. My motivation was to present an abundance of words with very little movement in this section, in contrast with the rest of the work. The performers read their extracts simultaneously, so that the content of what they were saying became less significant than their tone of voice, posture and gestures.

At this point one of the performers read a medicinal wrapper, which he had spontaneously included in his diary (see Fig. 2.7). Audience members seemed to find this juxtaposition of 'types of text' humorous, but this wrapper had sufficient significance for a performer to paste it in his journal. One performer observed that "the journal helped keep the intention behind the movement fresh as I could read it over and over again and remember how I felt when I came up with it as it was written down" (Butler, 2011).
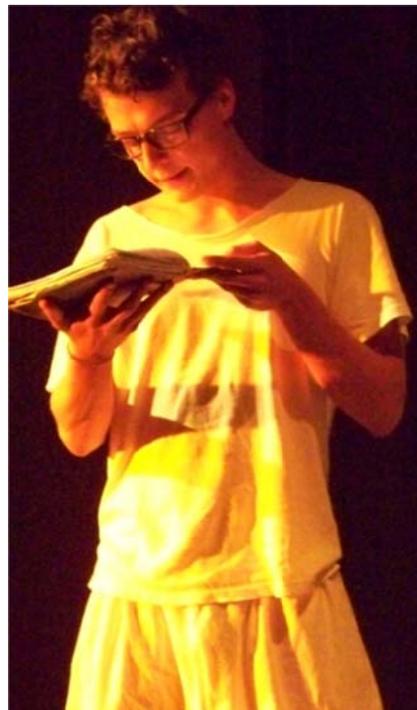
Fig. 2.7: A performer reading a medicinal wrapper as a journal entry

Six weeks after rehearsals commenced, I started arranging all of the solos, duets and group sequences into a final order; it is at this the point that the annotations in my journal transform from personal ideas and reflections, to a record of notes specifically for the performers. I listed notes such as "open bodies up [...] soft on floor [...] eye focus lift a bit" (Nel, 2011). The process suddenly became more structured and ordered, and what I had viewed as 'improvisational meetings' (with no definite script or narrative) now felt like rehearsals, spending as there was a definite order in which to perform the different sequences.

In this case my understanding of rehearsals refers specifically to the repetition, and refinement through repetition, of gestures or phrases that have been arrived at and agreed upon from previous 'improvisational' sessions. More importantly, this process requires a different technique or method of observation and criticism from the choreographer - one that places emphasis on rhythm, dynamic, relationship of part, gestures and phrases, to the whole production.

My journal entries reflect several different possibilities for ordering sequences, and shows clearly, for instance, where the 'rough and tumble' sequence was choreographically edited out on the 7th of June 2011.

At this stage, the production started coming together and my focus was divided between facilitating rehearsals, arranging and refining movement material, and making choices about other production elements, such as costume, set, lighting and sound design. I decided to use a similar approach with the technical crew as I had used with the performers, and gave them equivalent freedom to contribute feedback. I explained the concept of the production to them and the overall quality I envisioned, but I had no real idea of possible technical interpretations. I also felt that it might be better to trust their expertise, as my technical experience was limited; I accepted that what I might imagine aesthetically would not necessarily be as practical and functional as what the technical crew might produce.

The cast were instructed to design their own costumes, with the single parameter that the primary colour would be white. These designs were then adapted by me and the wardrobe assistant. I was interested to see how the performers might interpret their role in the production through their costume designs, and how they envisioned themselves looking on stage (see Fig. 2.8 and 2.9). There was plenty of editing of their designs, and the costumes took shape within the additional constraints of a budget, availability of materials and time. I

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was very satisfied with the end product and felt that the costumes represented the uniqueness of each performer and their role in the production.
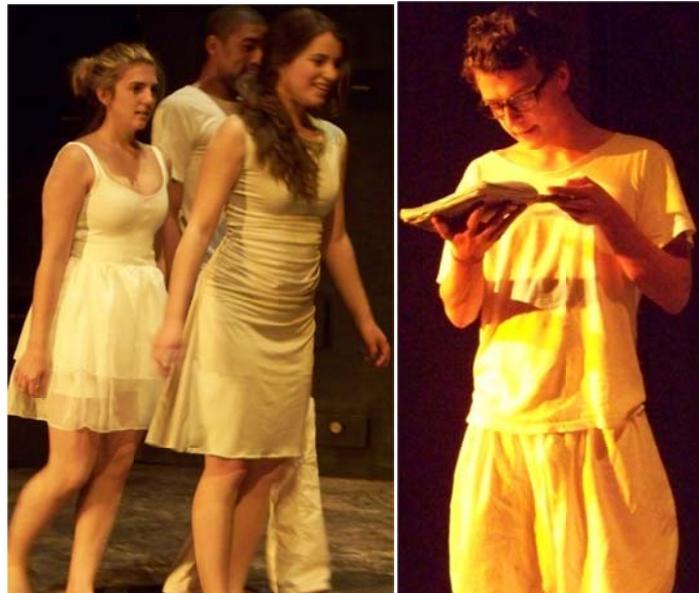
Fig. 2.8 & 2.9: The distinctive features of the girls' dresses (left); this male performer's pants were adapted from a pair of his own (right).

The set[3] consisted of four flats with drawers in, which meant it was lightweight and simple enough to transport to different locations for performances. The set was painted with chalkboard paint, allowing it to transform during the performance as the performers wrote on it (see Fig. 2.10). Similar to the theatrical effect used in the solo (section 2.1), the surface of the stage was covered in flour, allowing performers to leave footprints and skid marks as they moved around. These effects all contributed to the theme of memory, of a changing landscape, of how certain images are longer lasting than others, and how some images can be deliberately wiped away. It was symbolic for me of the transient nature of the choreographic process that after each performance the stage would be swept clean of flour and skid marks, and the writing on the chalkboards wiped clean, in preparation for the next performance.

Fig. 2.10: A performer writing on the chalk boards.

2.5. Progress through Performance:

mem-Re: debuted in Grahamstown at the National Arts Festival with three performances scheduled over three days. Although daunting the experience of presenting an original work to an unknown audience proved beneficial for myself and the performers.

The process of designing the posters reflects my continued focus on collaboration and exploration. Three different posters were designed (see Fig. 2.11-2.13), each one attempting to include a view of as many of the performers as possible, and to capture the image I liked best.

Fig. 2.11, 2.12 & 2.13: Three different posters for one production.

The first performance went well, but I could see that the performers were struggling with an unusually slippery floor. The flour scattered on it made matters worse. Certain members in

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the cast were begging me to cut the element of flour from the production, and this was a particularly difficult moment to have to deal with. Despite their struggle, I felt strongly that the flour had to stay for artistic, thematic and visual significance and that they would ultimately benefit from learning to deal with the added challenge. The performer's difficulty, as well as the symbolic significance of the flour, did not go unnoticed: reviewer for the *Cue*, Lyschelle Linderboom (Linderboom, 2011) commented that "the powder on the floor was like the dust of the past, in which we leave our marks. A big congratulations to the performers for being able to dance on a polished floor with flour scattered all over it".

For the first time throughout the entire creative process, this moment felt as though I had single-handedly made a decision that was contrary to what the performers felt was best and it left me feeling hesitant about my approach even though I knew that I had painstakingly considered their contributions throughout the process. This was my first glimpse of a major contradiction in my understanding of the approach to choreography: even though the process had been participative and I had worked determinedly to acquaint the cast with one another and set up a collaborative and democratic environment, there were times that I was still going to have to take on the final responsibility of choreographer. This might mean making decisions that the performers would not particularly like, but that, as Linderboom's positive response suggests, could be perceived as most beneficial to the production.

Fig. 2.14: The set in the performance venue at Grahamstown. The wooden floor was more slippery than what the performers were used to.

After the Grahamstown Festival, six performances of *mem-Re:* were scheduled for the H.B Thom Theatre in Stellenbosch, where we had partly rehearsed. I was more at ease in this

venue, and I suppose the performers were as well, as they had more space in which to move and a surface with more grip.

In contrast to Grahamstown where the performances were scheduled apart from each other, two performances a night were scheduled in Stellenbosch with only a 45 minute break between performances. This really challenged the endurance of the performers, but as the week progressed their stamina, and the quality of the performances, improved and developed. The intentions that the performers attached to gestures and movements changed from performance to performance, the rhythm was different, and each performance was generally unique. This evolution excited me, and what was even more thrilling was that, in many cases, the performers included additional phrases or interpretations of phrases without instruction from me. I observed that as the performers became more comfortable with performing the vocabulary, they started adding in small details which had not been present during the rehearsal process. They made spontaneous, surprising appearances through gaps in the set, incorporated the flour on the surface of the stage in their interactions, and became acutely aware of the offstage mechanics of the production.

During the run in Stellenbosch, I received feedback from a colleague that the performers should interact even further with the set, using certain elements even more. I decided to respond to this suggestion by extending some images further down-stage and including two additional flats. One performer, for instance, had originally entered on stage by simply walking. After the feedback, she entered by first blowing flour through a gap in the set and then walking onstage.

Fig. 2.15: A male performer in the background interacting with the flour during the solo.

I had a final opportunity to present *mem-Re:* in at a student festival held at the University Of Cape Town School Of Drama. I felt that the Stellenbosch run had proven that the performers felt extremely secure with the vocabulary. At the same time, however, I noticed that some of the phrases and dramatic moments had lost their initial vigour, and the performers seemed worn-out from having performed for two consecutive weeks. I felt that partnering work had become clumsy, and the 'improvised' dialogue in the 'acrobatic' duet seemed rehearsed. This might not have been apparent to the audience and, therefore, cannot be taken as evidence of the performance's lack of success. However, it was apparent to me and because of time constraints I did not do anything to address this aspect. In future I would address this effect of continuous performance by making the performers aware of it, and setting new improvisations to refresh dynamics.

In the rush to pack up the set and move out of the theatre, I suddenly experienced contradictory feelings of exhilaration and melancholy. Whilst I felt proud of what we had collectively achieved, disappointment washed over me as I felt that I did not have an opportunity to recapitulate the process with the cast.

2.6 Post Production Reflection:

Both the solo production and the full length production of *mem-Re:* were based on the same point of departure, but ended up being vastly different. This is a result of each performer being able to contribute uniquely to the process, as well as the effect of my choreographic voice evolving.

The second process, though riddled with perhaps even more challenges than the process for the solo process, did not leave me with as many feelings of trepidation and anxiety. This could be because of my increased experience and subsequent confidence, and perhaps also because I felt as though I had improved on my own creative process. I had learnt to structure improvisations more clearly for the performers, been more open to new ideas (even willing to exclude some of my own), listened to my performers, and also matured in knowing (and accepting) when *not* to listen to them.

I realise that with each new process and with new performers, my practice continues. Evaluating the progression of my practice offers valuable tools and insights for application in

future processes. With sufficient personal experience, my own practice can now also be supported and enriched by analyzing what other theorists and practitioners have to say about improvisation, choreography and performance without feeling as though I should conform to a particular style, approach, methodology.

CHAPTER THREE: A Contemporary Reading of Choreography

3.1 Critical discussion of the theories and definitions of choreography provided by Klien:

In *Choreography: a pattern language*, choreographer, academic and artistic consultant Michael Klien describes choreography as:

> [The] creative act of setting the conditions for things to happen, [so that] the choreographer is the navigator, negotiator and architect of a fluid environment that he/she himself/herself is part of.

(Klien, 2007: 1082)

Klien is suggesting that the choreographer's role is to create the environment, or circumstances, within which movement, action, exploration or improvisation will take place, and that the choreographer is not rigid and restricted in approach or method, but rather flexible and open to changes in their immediate environment. In Klien's context, "environment" does not only refer to space but must include the performers, choreographer and other collaborators who make up the "fluid environment". In other words, *environment* here refers to a network of interactions between people, space and ideas. The environment, therefore, unfolds as a result of the choreographer's ability to negotiate all of these elements.


Fig. 3.1: A representation of the interlinked nature of the choreographic environment.

The act of constructing movement phrases for performance, according to Klien, is reliant on a flexible environment and fixed parameters, which appear to be divergent forces. Klien (2007: 1084) reiterates that "the choreographer is no longer concerned with the creation of particular

patterns or instances, but is providing [the] conditions for *things* to happen" consequently imbuing the role of the choreographer with additional dynamism.

Klien is further suggesting that the socially conscious role of the choreographer does not end - or even begin - with setting simple movements, but includes establishing a context in which performers may access their specific language. This means setting parameters, which may include both physical and verbal cues and referents, as tasks for performers. Klien's use of the word "things" (Klien, 2001: 1084), the meaning of which is not precisely constrained, also suggests the allowance for a diversity of outcome-orientated movement forms to emerge. The choreographer is then responsible for composing or arranging this individual language that has been accessed.

Klien (2007:1081) mentions that this approach to choreography is a "non-deterministic, open way" and adds that:

> The challenge in such work is to work [sic] with the individuals as an artist, to bring their memories, experiences, physical knowledge, moods etc. into the creative process, giving space for such processes to be recalled and developed within the work. The choreographic framing has to happen for the whole individual - including their thoughts and memories.

<div align="right">(Klien, 2007: 1084)</div>

This suggests that the choreographer is not solely interested in a performer's technical precision or capability, but also in the *experience* that the performer has gained throughout his/her own life and how that contributes to the shape, quality, rhythm and sequencing of movements and gestures, as well as the subject matter of the performance.

Interestingly, Klien does not make use of terms such as "dancer" and "actor", but chooses terms such as "individual" (Klien, 2007: 1084) and "whole person" (Klien, 2007: 1084). The shift from the use of terms such as "actor" and "dancer" to "performer" and "performance" by Klien indicates a movement away from representation of form to a more dynamic, energetic embodiment of concepts, ideas and feelings and taking the whole individual into account. The change for Klien, personally, occurred in the 1990's after a production called *Duplex* where his dancers were encouraged to adapt "the movement material to their own needs" (Klien, 2007: 1083). However, the term "choreographer" has not been amended by all practitioners and still holds associations with the roles and responsibilities in classical and traditional contexts; hence the need, by writers such as Klien,

to re-contextualise the term, to widen its scope to suit the requirements of contemporary performance.

The question then arises: how does the process of choreography work and how, specifically, is the choreographer able to harness or use the environment around him/her effectively?

Klien's article offers one response:

> If the world is approached as a reality constructed of interactions, relationships, constellations and proportionalities and choreography is seen as the aesthetic practice of setting those relations – or setting the conditions for those relationships to emerge – choreographic knowledge gained in the field of dance or harvested from perceived patterns in nature should be transferable to other realms of life.

> (Klien, 2007: 1087)

These "relationships", which may emerge as a result of the *things* (a word Klien uses to refer to the unpredictable nature and developments of improvisation and performance) that happen in rehearsal (Klien, 2007:1084), may then be selected, arranged and refined for final performance. A choreographer then attempts to set the conditions – in rehearsal and performance – where the performers may re-present, as accurately as possible, what emerged and was decided upon.

The intangible energetic rapport between performers can be harnessed as one component in the process of choreography, either as a means of setting improvisational parameters in rehearsal for generating vocabulary, or as improvised interactions in performance. As discussed in Chapter 2, this latter aspect became especially significant for me in the choreographic process towards creating the full length production of *mem-Re:,* for example in the humorous male duet (section 2.4.5).

Klien's discussion offers a challenge for young and/or inexperienced choreographers who are still in the process of finding a personalized physical language or effective choreographic method. Some questions that arose in my own practice, and which I am still confronted with, include: how does a young choreographer, such as myself, embrace all the elements mentioned by Klien and harness the use of the environment to its optimal capacity? Furthermore, how does a choreographer determine whether the work was successful? Or more accurately, how does the choreographer evaluate their process to determine which strategies or methods should be repeated in future work?

3.1.1 An educational approach to choreography:

To address these concerns I have found it useful to consult an article by Lavender and Predock-Linnell, *From Improvisation to Choreography: the Critical Bridge* (2001) that proposes a method for effectively teaching choreography. They outline the characteristics of a 'good' choreographer, and propose three aspects that they consider crucial for the development of any choreographer, regardless of the methodology in which the student-choreographer is being educated, namely: "improvising… composing… and criticism" (Lavender & Predock-Linnell, 2001: 196).

Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001:196) distinguish between two types of improvisation: free improvisation and structured improvisation, and emphasise that improvisation should not be taught in isolation, but accompanied by a clear understanding of composition and criticism. They stress that improvisation "has to prepare students to deal with the compositional challenges they will encounter at more advanced levels" (Lavender & Predock-Linnell, 2001:200). This suggests that compositional tools and strategies can be learnt through improvisation; or, more precisely, that structured improvisations might offer the student-choreographer an experience of Klien's (2007:1081) "interactions, relationships, constellations and proportionalities", as well as providing opportunities for them to practise being the "architect and negotiator" of an environment.

Composition is defined by Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001: 196-203) as the act of "shaping and forming material" and "students become artists through the development of a critical consciousness…[which] manifests itself as the ability to make specific decisions about the shaping and forming of dance materials". This means that the compositional skills necessary for the process of choreography, which the student-choreographer has to acquire, include working with bodies in the choreographic space - the creative environment that is determined during the creative process – shaping them to create visually striking images or to convey a set of relationships. These images are created to delineate the relationships more clearly, in effect making them stand out from their surroundings.

Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001:196) propose *criticism,* which they describe as the act of "observing, describing, analysing, interpreting, evaluating and revising both the work in progress and the completed dance", as the third aspect for a student-choreographer to master. It is likely that most performance practitioners involved in choreography would not refer to their work as "complete" with the understanding that Klien's "flexible environment"

continues into the performance event, and that individual performers continue to feed their life experiences, through nuanced variations, into *choreographed* gestures and sequences. In an educational setting, however, it is often necessary for a student to present their work as a 'completed' product to meet the assessment criteria, and as a student-choreographer I was very aware of this pressure. On the other hand, as discussed in Chapter 2, I was also given the opportunity later on in my choreographic experiences to observe this 'flexible environment' when my performers added their own details to the choreography.

In the Honours Choreography course at the University of Stellenbosch Drama Department specifically, an effective learning environment for choreography is set up which allows the student to become aware of the creative tension between 'product' and 'performance', 'order' and 'chaos', and 'form' and 'practice'. A component of the student's Practise-as-Research is designed to introduce them to, and gain acceptance of, the critique they receive during a choreographic process. A student thus learns, hopefully, that although it is the 'completed product' that is critiqued, this product is viewed as the manifestations of choreographic choices in a *process,* and it is these choices that are being critiqued.

The three aspects mentioned above are very useful for a young choreographer to consider but it should be mentioned that Predock-Linnell and Lavender primarily refer to choreography in the context of 'dance' rather than 'performance' which locates them in a very particular context (with different markers of success to Klien, and other choreographers), for example the technical execution of movements, rather than the personal growth of the performers or choreographer. Again this raises the issue of the diverse contexts in which the word 'choreographer' may be applied in the context of theatre and performance.

This final aspect, criticism, is very important to any choreographer, especially the student choreographer, who after setting parameters for improvisations, has the challenging task of selecting which movements to use, either directly or in edited form. The choreographer also has to face criticism from peers, performers and the press post-production which may, and almost inevitably does, influence the nature of their work in the future.

Criticism refers inclusively to self-critique, which is the ability of the choreographer to critically reflect on their own work. The choreographer, as Klien's explanation suggests, is influenced by their personal fluid environment *outside* of the rehearsal room, before and after the performance, and brings this information into the process. According to Predock-Linnell and Lavender (2001: 204) students should be able to reflect on their own work. Fortunately,

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during my academic studies, I have always been given, or asked for, the opportunity to include reflections on my practical components in my theoretical work. This was usually done by means of journaling, and formulating my observations of the process into an academic composition. In some instances, as with the solo process of *mem-Re:*, feedback was given during the improvisational and compositional phases, which was also a useful and effective teaching tool. *Criticism,* therefore *,* makes the 'completed product' anything but 'complete' and engages the choreographer in a continuous process of evolution with their practise.

Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001: 196) state that improvisation, composition and criticism as choreographic skills are "complementary" and "intertwined" and no single element can be effectively understood or applied without the other, establishing an interdependence of these elements.

3.1.2 Klien and Lavender and Predock-Linnell compared:

Klien's theories, therefore, originates from a more philosophical choreographic tradition, in which choreography is viewed as a tool to reflect on performances, specifically how the rehearsal space may become a mirror for society and the individual. Lavender and Predock-Linnell's theories derive from an educational milieu, and seek to educate student choreographers and provide them with choreographic tools, with which students may be able to practically apply and interpret the philosophical ideas that practitioners such as Klien provide.

Klien's approach reminded me of how, in my own process, 'spontaneous' dialogue and gestures that occurred between tasks within the rehearsal environment also became a source of choreography. An example of this is mentioned in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.5), where the dialogue between performers whilst rehearsing movements for a duet was eventually included in the performance. In other instances, it seems that I unwittingly used approaches similar to Lavender and Predock-Linnell's methods of improvisation, composition and criticism: one such example was the 'carry' improvisation mentioned in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.5). The parameters for an improvisation were clearly predetermined and it was within those constraints that the performers improvised. It became my subsequent task to select movements from the generated material to include in a sequence.

Michael Klien is based in a European context, having worked and practiced in Germany, Britain and (currently) Ireland, while Lavender and Predock-Linnell teach at the University of New Mexico in the United States of America. From across two continents practitioners are exploring works that inform one another. The next section will specifically comment on the emergence of theories and methods of improvisational choreography in the United States of America.

3.2 The emergence of new, more flexible theories and methods of choreography:

Historians may yet position the 1960's as a decade as significant as the entire Renaissance era. As Arnold Aronson, author and avant-garde theatre historian opines:

> In the 1960s, the festering dark underside of the American century – racial inequality, poverty in the midst of plenty, the threat of nuclear holocaust, and ultimately political assassinations and the disastrous involvement of Vietnam – bubbled to the surface as the nation faced civil rights demonstrations, race riots, anti-war marches, acts of anti-establishment violence, and the emergence of a so-called 'counterculture,' which was the product of the demographically explosive 'baby-boom' generation.

(Aronson, 2000: 75)

Aronson notes further that "the ability of words to communicate and to convey ideas was compromised in the post-Holocaust, post-atomic age... [and that a] new language had to be found" (Aronson, 2000: 80). Words were no longer trusted as being able to 'honestly' or 'truthfully' capture the experience(s) of people in the world. It was this lack of trust in language that energized American theatre practitioners towards finding a more fitting way of presenting the feelings of individuals, and towards pushing expressive boundaries. And it was into this revolutionary context that choreographer Merce Cunningham emerged.

Cunningham had been a soloist in Martha Graham's company "[and] fused the flexible spine used in modern dance with the crisp footwork of classical ballet in a technique that was precise and articulate" (Banes, 1981: 102). Although Cunningham had been trained in ballet and modern dance, he turned to pedestrian movements as a source of choreographic inspiration for some of his works.

Cunningham is identified by Robertson (2009b) as being the first to initiate an "Event", which initially served practical purposes but later became a means to comment on the social, political and theatrical strictures around him. These performances were innovative because

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they took place in non-theatrical spaces, and the theatrical rules associated with a proscenium arch stage were replaced with more unconventional methods:

> The first *Event* took place in a museum in Vienna, 24 June 1964. Cunningham came up with the idea as a practical necessity: there wasn't a conventional stage with wings, just a platform that had been put up in one of the galleries, so the previously choreographed entrances and exits of the works then in his repertory were not possible.

(Robertson, 2009b)

Most interesting (for me) to note is that Cunningham did not create an *Event* so much as discover one when he was forced to, as Robertson states, by "practical necessity". Cunningham had originally choreographed traditional proscenium arch entrances and exits for a range of works, and then found he could not use them to present the works within a new performance context. He was an artist that was willing to allow, as Klien would say, *things* to happen and view the environment as a fluid entity. He embraced the limitations and turned them into new opportunities.

This shift in staging methods was accompanied by the introduction of other choreographic strategies. Cunningham eventually made use of 'chance' techniques, often basing the final arrangement of a performance on a roll of the dice. Alternatively, he would arrange his movement material according to the *I Ching*. As dance archivist Vaughan explains, in *Retrospect and Prospect*:

> there are sixty-four phrases, as many as there are ideograms in the *I Ching*; the chance process ensures the repetition of these at various points, and thus imposes a kind of formal structure.

(Vaughan, 1979: 9)

This brought an element of randomness into the *Events* - for performers, choreographer and audience members - even though there was a repertory of choreographed movement phrases to be chosen from. By leaving the order random and keeping the movement material predetermined, Cunningham was deliberately experimenting with the context in which the movements gained meaning. Klien (2007: 1084-1085) has stated a belief that "the way we organise our pots and pans has a direct implication on the way we organise our children and our relationships in general". I find it interesting to apply Klien's statement to Cunningham's random arrangement of pre-defined movements as it implies that the re-arrangement of

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elements in the world of choreography might have an impact on the arrangement of elements in life in general.

Copeland's description of Cunningham's earlier methods provides further insight and he notes that:

> fragments from existing works...[are spliced]...together into new combinations. That is: [Cunningham] approaches his older works the way a film or video editor manipulates his daily rushes: cutting, assembling, and reassembling the fragments at will - although in Cunningham's case, it's not "will," but chance operations that often determine the new order of the fragments.

(Copeland, 2002: 18)

Siegel (1985: 293) opines that the way in which his dances could be spontaneously arranged just before and/or during each performance was of great interest to Cunningham. Despite his use of randomness, Cunningham's approach should not be described as haphazard: he rigorously trained and prepared his performers during rehearsals so that they would at least have some control over the quality of their performance, eliciting the same degree of precision required in classical ballet. As Vaughan points out:

> Cunningham's technique is based on the pelvic turn-out, fundamental to his movement even when executed in a parallel position. The Cunningham equivalents of ballet's eight directions of the body (*croisé devant, quatrième devant, effacé, écarté, à la seconde, épaulé, quatrième derrière, croisé derrière*). keep recurring ... but the swift transitions between one and another, and the extreme degree of tilt in the torso ... which Cunningham demands are very different from what one usually finds in ballet nowadays.

(Vaughan, 1979: 9)

Based on these assessments of Cunningham, it would seem that he displayed characteristics of foresight and courage; "courage" here suggests the willingness to take risks by committing to new forms of staging (and thus representation) as evidenced by his *Events*; including and implementing elements of improvisation in his work; but especially by invoking strong theatrical leadership.

As previously mentioned, Klien (2007: 1081) describes choreography as the act of setting the conditions in which things might happen. This also involves setting up the appropriate environment for the choreographer to get the most creative input from his/her dancer.

Cunningham addressed this aspect by noting, as Vaughn (1979: 5) says, that "everyone in the world walks according to the same mechanism, but no two people walk alike, and that is what constitutes *expression*". Vaughan (1979: 5) recognized this focus of interest in Cunningham by stating that "[like] many great choreographers, Cunningham wants to get at that individuality, to draw it out, and draw on it, in the act of creating movement".

The unique nature of Cunningham's choreography, within the context of his time, lies in the way in which he composed, arranged or ordered movement phrases, and he certainly introduced a new perspective into the public arena for spectators, as well as for artists. An elaboration of Klien's abovementioned statement reveals how Cunningham's methodology of composition has impacted on contemporary views of choreography:

> I believe that the way we organise our pots and pans has a direct implication on the way we organise our children and our relationships in general. However, it is hardly the pots that determine the order of our world directly, but a deeper, imprinted unconscious order, which governs humanity, society and the individual. A crude reading of nature (hierarchical, compartmentalised-thinking, etc.) leads to a limited repertoire of patterns from which to create conditions for living, as people are set in, and by one another, in certain relations.

(Klien, 2007: 1084-1085)

Klien is suggesting that contemporary choreographers should not simply treat pots as pots, and pans as pans, but that each individual dancer and the so-called ordering of their world in general, may have a deeper hidden order that can be uncovered in a creative process. Carter (1998: 20) reiterates this in his discussion: "Cunningham is able to work with chance, yet retain a distinct choreographic style. His procedures may appear to be 'play', but the playground is delineated and the rules are strict".

Cunningham previewed his first work in 1953, and just over a decade later Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon and Yvonne Rainer launched an artistic collaboration named the Judson Dance Theatre in New York City (Robertson, 2009b). Their first performance, simply called *A Concert of Dances [#1]*, consisted of a collection of dances that originated from classes presented by Robert Ellis Dunn. Dunn had "presided over a seminal choreography workshop in New York that brought together a group of inventive young choreographers and dancers in the early 1960's" (Carter, 2000: 185). One of the dancers/choreographers to emerge from the group was Steve Paxton, who had previously

trained with Merce Cunningham. Paxton would become the primary originator and key developer of *Contact Improvisation.* Dunn's efforts, along with those of others who participated in his project, led to the formation of the Judson Dance Workshops and later to the founding of the Judson Dance Theatre in New York, "a centre for improvisation in dance" (Carter, 2000: 185).

The experience of the American public of the duplicity of politicians during the Vietnam War era resulted in an expression of their reaction that demonstrated opposition to prevailing societal norms – these being the authority of the state and its organs like the police. Banes (1981: 100) states that the "country's post-war mood of pragmatism was reflected in various arts". Along with the pressure of war, the Kennedy administration of that era was emphasising "youth, art and culture" (Banes, 1981: 100) and, as well as an "expanding economy [...] the fascinations with Zen Buddhism, existentialism, and phenomenology fit well with certain aspects of American art in the late fifties and early sixties" (Banes, 1982: 100-101).

Consequently, trends originated to reflect alternatives to the prevailing referents, the most significant being the Hippie movement with its central thesis being freedom of expression and liberation from authority of any kind.

This revolutionary spirit was the impetus for the Judson Dance Theatre who were striving towards a "democratic spirit of the enterprise; a joyous defiance of rules, both choreographic and social; a refusal to capitulate to the requirements of *communication* and *meaning* that were generally regarded as the intention of even avant-garde theatre; a radical questioning, at times through serious analysis and at times through satire" (Banes, 1982: 174). They did this through:

> chance, collage, free association, co-operative choice-making, slow meditation, repetition, lists, handling objects, playing games, and solving tasks, the dancers and the dances described a world: an innocent American dream pocked with intimations of anxiety; a world of physicality, bold action, free choice, plurality, democracy, spontaneity, imagination, love, and adventure.
>
> (Banes, 1982: 206-207)

Although Cunningham had offered innovative practises in terms of choreographers arranging material, the Judson Dance Theatre "provoked radical questioning of the entire practise of dance" (Carter, 2000: 185). Cunningham might have been seeking to access the unique movements of distinctive performers, but his choreographic practises did not extend to include improvisation in the generation of material. In contrast as an extension of this, as Banes (1982: 167-168) describes, some of the key characteristics of the Judson Dance Theatre included "an attention to choreographic process and the use of methods that metaphorically stood for democracy; the use of language as an integral part of the dance; the use of *natural* or ordinary movements; dances about dance". As academic, dancer and choreographer, Mark Franko (2000: 214) observes, "pedestrian movement acknowledges that dancing comes from the streets, from the way ordinary people move there ... In this sense, found movement reveals the person in the dancer rather than the dancer in the person. What pedestrian movement tells us is that bodies in ordinary motion are dance readymades". It was this ordinary motion of non-dancers that Cunningham was able to take advantage of.

For many practitioners today it might seem obvious for a choreographer to want to draw on the individuality of a performer, but, of course, choreographers like Cunningham and those of the Judson Dance Theatre were precursors to contemporary dance-theatre and physical theatre approaches, such as those of Gary Gordon and the First Physical Theatre Company (SA), Lloyd Newson and DV8 (UK), and Pina Bausch and Tanz Wuppertal (Germany). Chapter 4 extends this discussion on the use of individual and distinctive performers by analyzing the work and methods of American-based PUSH Physical Theatre Company, another company that can be said to have been influenced by these early innovations.

The next section will consider how these explanations and discussions on emerging choreographic practises during the 1960's, a time of dramatic social and artistic change, might impact on my current and future practise.

3.3 The influence of Klien, Lavender and Predock-Linnell and other practitioners on my practices:

Taking these discussions and observations into consideration, I have constructed a working definition of the role of the choreographer for my own purposes:

> The choreographer is responsible for creating the environment in which performers can explore expressions, which includes setting the parameters of individual tasks for interpretation by performers. The choreographer is also responsible for ensuring that the improvisations set are effective or appropriate, by discovering and refining the most effective language; as well as for refining and arranging the physical expressions generated by performers. The choreographer then takes ultimate responsibility for delivering the work and receiving criticism about it.

> (Nel, 2011b)

Reflecting on some of my previous choreographic processes, including a duet, trio and extended solo production, some of my main challenges have been working with less experienced performers (only students) whilst being a student choreographer with limited experience myself. Most of these projects had time constraints that I found difficult to align to a process of discovery and exploration. In addition, given the context of higher education in which these projects took place, I experienced the pressure of feeling reliant on a 'good' outcome for 'good' marks.

Here I have retrospectively found the third aspect of Predock-Linnell and Lavender's (2001: 204) discussion the most challenging and trenchant. As previously discussed, they mention that students need to be able to deliver criticism on their own work, as well as constantly criticise the choices they make. In my case, as a choreographer relying on improvisation, this might include being critical in choosing movement phrases and actions generated during an improvisation, as well as being able to accept criticism, from observers, about a performance.

Another challenge, specific to my process, was a lack of formal training. I have received very little dance training throughout my life, and the performance training I have is limited to three years of drama training (with expressive movement as a component) and one year of specialized Physical Theatre training. In some cases this inexperience seemed to work in my favour, but in other instances I felt limited by my lack of understanding of dance history and

terminology; ultimately I felt deficient in confidence in my role as choreographer, and for my productions.

However, I now realize that I also started my process with a limited view of what choreography could and should be, assuming that it should be restricted to a dance context. My original opinion had been that a choreographer requires formal training and formally trained dancers to work with, of which I am neither, only to discover that there were strategies and methods (already tried out by other choreographers) that could be used to circumvent these constraints.

What I had originally seen as a limitation and challenge to my own, and my dancers', lack of training and experience, forced me into a process that became more democratic than I had anticipated, as I kept hoping that the student-performers I worked with might inspire me. As Carter (2000: 182) suggests, "with improvisation there is the hope that one will discover something that could not be found in a systematic preconceived process" and I experienced this by working interactively and in conjunction with inexperienced students.

In rehearsals for the solo version of *mem-Re:*, I relied heavily on improvisations to generate movement phrases and vocabulary. After each rehearsal I expected to have set movement phrases, and refined concepts. I also relied on the performer's opinions of this process, by asking the performer questions about her experience of the improvisations. But, as I developed and gained confidence and knowledge in the process of choreographing, I also started accommodating her opinions with more of my discretion. I realized that I should not always edit out the movements phrases or concepts which my performer did not like and keep those that she did enjoy, as this might (and in most cases did) prolong discussions with the performer (that were not always productive or creative).

After some struggle, especially during the creation of the solo in 2010, an interesting dynamic emerged between myself and my performer. After having to re-start the conceptualisation and initial improvisation process several times, I realised that the process became shorter and more efficient each time we worked and, more specifically, that the quality of the movements that I was hoping for improved. In a class paper I noted that:

> [It] led to a shared language that developed between me and my performer.
> If I asked her for instance to "dig a move in", she knew exactly what quality

> I was looking for in a certain movement, because our first few rehearsals were about playing with the quality of words that were found in the journals. Some words included "reflect", "burden", "withhold", "shine" and "dig".

(Nel, 2010a)

This method seemed to make the process significantly less taxing and qualitatively more rewarding: re-working the production did not require starting again from nothing, but rather starting with a shared language in mind. An observation offered by Beiswanger (1962: 13) underscores my experience namely that, "choreography, then, is a creative activity fraught with intention and design but fertilized by the spontaneous and uncalculated".

My work has been inspired by the *spirit* of Cunningham, and further developed through the necessity to convey a message to a contemporary performer and/or audience, who are influenced by different socio-political dynamics and cultural contexts. Although the solo process was filled with anxiety and an overall sense of needing to exert more control, on reflection my experience of the production process did improve. I seem to have a better understanding of where I should relinquish control and in other instances where I need to stay true to my artistic belief, as with the discussion about the flour on the surface of the stage in Chapter 2 (section 2.5). Cohen re-iterates:

> The director's role is [...] to help [performers] find what is unique, whole, pointed, surprising, and extraordinary about the production they are to create [and] to create a living monument that can be seen as art, be enjoyed as entertainment, and become a source of pride to all its participants.

(Cohen, 2011: 57)

In my productions, by various means, this has been fundamental to my experience: creating a work of art that is entertaining, and that all the participants – performers, audience and myself – can own with pride. This has meant revisiting conventional concepts of choreography, and reviewing my own limited beliefs about the role of a choreographer. I thus liken my role to that of a director rather than a choreographer, taking into consideration Klien's (2007: 1082) statement that the choreographer is the "navigator, negotiator and architect". In conventional theatre terms, the director is responsible for putting the parts of a whole together, including concept, cast, rehearsals, costumes, venues, lighting plans and more, and in my experience, the choreographer *is* the director.

As will be seen in the next chapter, a contemporary Physical Theatre Company that is also considering many of the questions and concerns that I have raised is PUSH Physical Theatre

Company. They are constantly developing new work, and continually exploring and investigating new choreographic methods, that at the same time also embrace the spirit of past choreographic innovations.

CHAPTER FOUR: A critical analysis of the working methods of PUSH Physical Theatre

4.1 Context and Role-Players:

The previous chapter(s) used secondary source material to discuss artists that have become key historical figures, paving the way for new methods by contemporary performers and choreographers. Taking into consideration the definitions developed in Chapter 3, it seems useful to reflect on the methodology of a contemporary physical theatre company. This chapter will critically discuss the use of improvisation by PUSH Physical Theatre Company[4]. Extracts and visual material of their performances and workshops as well as critical commentary on it, are readily available on the worldwide web. I will make specific reference to two articles authored by company members discussing their practices, namely *A Case for Physical Theatre* by Darren Stevenson (2012) and *Moments in Motion: a Case for Physical Theatre* (Lowery, 2012) by Jonathan Lowery (a follow-up to the previous article). This secondary source material will be supplemented with interviews and first hand observations of their practice during a Summer Intensive Workshop (21 June 2010 to 3 July 2010) and their rehearsal process for performances of *Natural World* and *Grace*.

PUSH Physical Theatre Company is a contemporary Physical Theatre company based in Rochester, New York. Darren and Heather Stevenson founded PUSH Physical Theatre Company in 2000, when they relocated to Rochester from Atlanta, USA. PUSH can be viewed as an extension of the Stevensons' artistic and personal relationship. Darren is the principal director and Heather is the co-artistic director. Darren co-ordinates the PUSH Summer Intensive, while Heather co-ordinates PUSH Pins, a division of the company specifically dedicated to training children and teenagers. Their two teenage sons are also involved in teaching and mentoring young learners.

The city of Rochester, New York, is a vibrant artistic city, from which many acting and dancing companies originate. It is located next to the Erie Canal that helped develop Rochester into a once industrial city, but as larger industrial companies moved to bigger cities, different industries replaced them. Rochester is home to a successful university, which has a long history of supporting the arts and today offers courses in both visual and performing arts. The city is also hosting its first fringe festival in 2012, which seems to demonstrate a need to create new artistic spaces for emerging as well as established artists

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[4] For more information on PUSH Physical Theatre Company visit www.pushtheatre.org

and theatre companies. PUSH thus appears to be located in a receptive, supportive and informed community.

PUSH Physical Theatre Company currently consists of five members, including: Darren and Heather Stevenson (founding directors and company members), Jonathan Lowery (company member), Andrew Salmon and Avi Pryntz-Nadworny (both trainees). The Stevensons are both trained and experienced mimes (in the techniques of Marcel Marceau and Etienne Decroux) and contemporary dancers; Jonathan Lowery has been theatrically trained, having studied classical theatre and the work of Grotowski; Avi Pryntz-Nadworny has performed with the renowned *Cirque du Soleil*, and Andrew Salmon has never received formal training for theatre performance, but he has trained extensively in Parkour,[5] gymnastics and the martial arts.

Fig. 4.1: PUSH Physical Theatre Company 2011(from left to right): Andrew Salmon, Avi Pryntz-Nadworny, Dayne Nel (visiting student-researcher) Heather Stevenson, Darren Stevenson and Jonathan Lowery.

Although company members are constantly changing as trainees become professionals and/or as professionals leave for other projects, the Stevensons provide stability and consistency. Lowery has also been a more permanent member of the company. There is no fixed number of members in the company, and preference is not given to individuals of a particular gender, age or nationality. The company chooses to embrace diversity in its members, many of which are earmarked and recruited through the Summer Intensives and workshops offered by the company.

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[5] "Parkour is a physical cultural lifestyle of athletic performance focusing on uninterrupted and spectacular gymnastics over, under, around, and through obstacles in urban settings" (Atkinson, 2009: 169).

4.2 Methodology: a Spirit of Adaptation

Both Darren and Heather Stevenson share the belief that, as Darren (Stevenson, 2012a) mentions, "rather than relying on their trained movement vocabulary, […] each performer should bring his or her unique life experiences to the stage; […] if the perfect method doesn't exist, they invent it".

This explains why a range of performance experience in members is embraced, even *required,* by the company, who more often than not explore different styles of movement in the creation of new productions. An example of this was observed during a rehearsal process for *Grace,* a work originally created in 2007 that had been recast and was being reworked for a showing. New trainees were being taught existing choreography but rather than simply focusing on what had worked in the past, Darren and Heather encouraged creative input from these new performers. Drawing on his previous experience in acrobatics, Pryntz-Nadworny was able to assist with the existing choreography for a duet, transforming a simple lift into a more dynamic lift with his partner being raised to shoulder height. This movement had not been possible with previous company members, but the inclusion of Pryntz-Nadworny, with his expertise in acrobatics, was allowing new techniques to be explored and applied, demonstrating the company's willingness to adapt repertory to suit, as well as challenge, performers.

The company is constantly adapting existing choreography in consideration of the diverse experiences of new performers. PUSH does not shy away from embracing different techniques: as Lowery (2012) mentions, the company "benefits from the creativity of each performer and is able to find interesting combinations of abilities and sensibilities that enhance the depth of the finished work"; and he adds that "one of the primary considerations in [the process of] acquiring new performers is finding new mixes of performance backgrounds to provide yet more unique movements".

Company members participate in training sessions daily and all rehearsals are preceded by a group training session. The company classes usually take place in the morning, depending on the rehearsal schedule, and usually start with warm-up and conditioning exercises. The exercises are usually facilitated by Darren Stevenson, but my observation is that each member is experienced enough to work on their own during warm-ups by focussing on what their specific physical needs are for that day. At times, I observed company members talking

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to one another during warm-ups, which seemed to suggest an encouragement of collaboration through light-hearted and informal discussion.

It also became clear to me that the company uses warm-up sessions to solidify a sense of ensemble; the way in which exercises are conducted means that members are often unwittingly copying each other, executing the exercises exactly like one another and at the same time. This enforces the idea of cohesion that exists within the company. Although the company embraces a spirit of ingenuity, originality and inventiveness, there is still a strong commitment to teaching classical technique, both in the way that the exercises are taught (such as the performers being equally spaced, facing the front, copying a leader, and following predetermined movements) as well as classical mime and ballet techniques . This aspect of training and preparation is not insignificant, as the company believes that formal technique informs the process of improvisation, as well as contributes to the presence of performers on stage.

Fig. 4.2: PUSH Physical Theatre Company warming up in unison.

PUSH blends and adapts movement techniques borrowed from a diversity of styles and practitioners, including: the Hawkins technique (which was adapted from the work of Erick Hawkins and relayed to them by local choreographer Bill Wade); Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints*, a method of improvisation to create and enhance movement vocabulary (Bogart & Landau, 2009); and corporeal mime (practiced by Etienne Decroux). Intrigued by this blending of techniques, I asked Darren to explain the company's motivation. Darren (Nel, 2011) states that "the technique [of the company] is informed by different people" and that although certain movements and techniques *do* have an *original* intention, they are adapted for PUSH's artistic purpose. Lowery (2012) explains this methodology in detail when he states that:

> What PUSH has done is to take the aspects of each technique that are of
> interest to us (for one reason or another) and combined those into studio

sequences that develop the skills and intuitions that accompany each appropriated exercise. When it was felt that the technique was sufficiently understood and physically absorbed by the company, the Hawkins exercises [for instance] began to be modified and edited to complement or contrast with other studio exercises. Finally, the Hawkins work was fully integrated into the primary training sequences. Since it was felt that the Hawkins technique trained a set of highly desired movement traits more of the technique was incorporated into the sequences than other forms.

(Lowery, 2012)

In some cases this means that PUSH will purposefully and intentionally adapt the movement phrase associated with a particular technique or style. Lowery (2010, pers. comm. 24 November) further explains that "the philosophy behind having so many training influences in our work is to increase the number of movement options in everything we do".

In a particular company class I observed, there was extended discussion around one particular movement of the head. The length and detail of this discussion, and the attempt to find uniformity with a singular movement, left a distinct impression on me of the company's relentless search for precision.

Despite the lengthy discussion, Darren explains that it is important to "get [the performers] beyond the talking, and into the language of the movement. People think that whoever gives the best argument, wins, and that is a bad way to choreograph" (Nel, 2011). It is for this reason that, although the whole company may contribute creative or artistic ideas, it is Darren who makes the final choreographic decisions; he jokingly observes that when he does decide on something "I don't need to be able to tell [the performers] why" (Nel, 2011). It is clear that although there might be an essentially democratic spirit amongst the company, Darren Stevenson is still, unequivocally, the principal artistic director (as his role implies).

The fluid and ever changing nature of roles and responsibilities in the company is further highlighted by the fact that both Darren and Heather Stevenson divide their time and focus between being principle director and co-artistic director respectively, and being performers. In a rehearsal process, Darren often steps out of the action to direct, or offer suggestions, from another vantage point (see Fig. 4.4), or has to glance in the mirror to consider the overall picture (see Fig. 4.5). Stevenson (Nel, 2011) admits that it can be difficult juggling between these roles of training, performing and directing and says that at times he has to "try to turn [his] director light off" to continue with his own training.

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Fig. 4.3: Darren Stevenson stepping outside of the action to direct.

Fig. 4.4: A quick glance in the mirror.

To minimize the challenges created by simultaneously performing and choreographing, as well as to purposefully include their audiences in the process of creating a production, PUSH has implemented interesting contemporary choreographic strategies. They have turned to social media and public showings as a means of generating an 'outside eye' or a second choreographer.

For instance, several videos were posted on *YouTube* by PUSH company members (PUSH staff, 2012) asking viewers to comment on a work in progress called *Natural World*. Before the official opening of *Natural World*, PUSH also invited audiences to attend a preliminary showing and to give feedback. It is evident that PUSH is striving to create relevant, engaging work that is appealing and/or entertaining for their audiences.

In this way PUSH turns to its community for feedback and support at the same time this approach does allow the community to dictate the direction that the company might take. The process of creating a theatrical production becomes a communal event, not only a collaborative effort within the context of a group of company members, but also a collaborative effort within the context of a broader community. PUSH offers equivalent support for the community, not only by creating new productions for their appreciation, but also through offering numerous outreach and mentorship programmes. This creates an

implicit relationship between the company (PUSH) and the wider community, and gives the community a sense of ownership in the work that PUSH Physical Theatre Company creates. Also, and not insignificantly, it serves as a very inventive and effective marketing strategy.

Because PUSH's work at any one time is so closely linked to the individual performers that are part of the company, productions are constantly being adapted and transformed, even those that may have been created years ago. Lowery (2012) explains that:

> As the company has changed personnel over the years, so has the style changed from work to work. Even when new performers take over the roles of previous performers, they are allowed to alter the role to allow for personal style, physicality and unique abilities. This produces a living style that continually morphs to suit the company and seeks to press forward as new techniques and performer are added.

(Lowery, 2012)

This search for a "living style" also means that roles and responsibilities are constantly changing, training techniques are borrowed and adapted. It also has an impact on the way in which material for new or existing productions is generated. This "living style" is thus obtained by constantly changing company members, embracing different movement techniques, being open to changing set choreography to suit company members and their skills sets, and, importantly, using improvisation to discover new choreography.

4.3 The Search for a Living Style - the role of improvisation in the choreography of PUSH:

Lowery (2012) describes the method of choreography applied by the company as "a series of directed improvisational exercises in which movements are [firstly] discovered and then [secondly] isolated and [thirdly] rehearsed". Lowery (2012) adds that "[each] performer is allowed a large amount of freedom to produce their own movements and also to influence which movements are selected to become part of the final work". The use of improvisation as their central method of choreography, rather than the imitation of existing and predetermined movements, is indicative of PUSH's overall philosophy of inclusion.

It is useful to return to Lavender and Predock-Linnell's discussion (Chapter Three, section 3.1) on the three components considered essential for the development of a student choreographer, namely "improvising...composing...criticism" (Lavender & Predock-Linnell, 2001: 196). According to Lowery (2012), a PUSH creative process follows the necessary steps of discovery, isolation and rehearsal. It seems quite viable to add Lavender and

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Predock-Linnell's notion of "criticism" to that list, as PUSH regularly asks for feedback (both from within the company – amongst members – and from the broader community) as part of their rehearsal process. The organisation of these two practices can then be easily compared (see Fig. 4.6).

Lavender and Predock-Linnell	PUSH Physical Theatre Company
Improvising	Discovery (Process of Improvisation)
Composing	Isolation (Editing)
Criticism	Rehearsal
	Criticism

Fig. 4.5: Two Practices Compared

When asked whether a quality[6] of movement is imposed during specific improvisation, Lowery (2010, pers. comm. 24 November) states that "[the performers] find the quality as a part of improvisation". He adds that:

> we will sometimes change the quality as the storyline of a work becomes apparent. For example, some movements in the work *Time* were originally created to be performed slow [sic], but are now performed fast as the theme of time distortion became prevalent in the work".

(Lowery, 2010, pers. comm. 24 November)

This also suggests that when movement phrases are isolated from improvisation, their rhythm, quality and context are not necessarily set, but remain open to the interpretation of the company and choreographer based on the context in which they will be used: "We definitely play with movements for a long time before setting choreography, but not necessarily the *quality* of those movements. […] We [...] try to consciously let the movement dictate its own quality" (Lowery, 2010, pers. comm. 24 November).

4.4 Final Thoughts on PUSH Physical Theatre Company and *mem-Re*:

Having now considered some of PUSH Physical Theatre Company's methodologies, I am able to briefly compare my own practice, taking into consideration that they are an established company, working together throughout the year, whilst my process took place within a three month period.

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[6] 'Quality' refers to a particular emotive feeling, and an intrinsic value.

Within the process of creating *mem-Re:* I made every effort to give the performers a sense of ownership. An approach that I decided to use was – to base choreography on structured improvisations. Darren Stevenson's motivation for this approach in PUSH Physical Theatre Company is based on a similar sense of empowering the performers: "let them improvise - they will understand the feeling better" (Nel, 2011).

After many years of training and experimenting, PUSH Physical Theatre Company makes use of improvisations with different bodies to generate vocabulary for their productions. They choose this, not for lack of knowing movements, but for wanting to discover more. They choose to re-situate the original intention of certain techniques and by doing so they unlock new options and possibilities to give meaning to movement. PUSH Physical Theatre Company strives to utilize every unique body in the company or workshop, and to extract a unique narrative, which is not only significant for the audience watching (or experiencing) a performance, but also to that performer.

Personally, I have been drawn to Physical Theatre because it offered a physical understanding that, with the right guidance and tools could be practiced without years of experience and training. It has allowed me to explore emotive landscapes that traditional dance or a scripted production, would not have been able to. My experience has made me believe that if a performer could feel like that they have some ownership in a production (whether it be within the vocabulary of the choreography, costumes or even choice of soundtrack) they will feel more invested in the production, and possibly work harder. They will also be enthusiastic about the processes of the production and offer possible solutions for difficulties. This, as mentioned in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.3) will enhance the sense of cohesion within the group and minimize conflict.

My interest in using performance as a social and personal tool, as a means of empowering individuals and educating audience members has led me to instinctively and experientially incorporate similar approaches and methods to PUSH Physical Theatre Company.

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

5.1 Summary of research question and aims:

The central discussion of this thesis has hinged on the research question: **how can the choreographer, who chooses to work with improvisation as a tool for generating vocabulary, create the necessary *environment* in which to evoke *qualities* of movement that can be linked to, or inspired by, a performer's inner landscape whilst at the same time adhere to an accurate reflection of, and be a vehicle for, the choreographer's vision?**

The primary aim of this study was to critically investigate a particular choreographic process (*mem-Re:*), as a means of finding a resolution for the contradiction in practice, for both choreographer and performer, between improvisation and composition. The study also aimed to develop and discover strategies for creating the most productive environment for a choreographic process (as inspired by Klien's (2001) theories).

A key consideration in achieving these aims, was to critically reflect on, and develop, an appropriate language with which to: i) structure improvisations; ii) compose and arrange material generated through improvisation; and iii) to deliver criticism on it (in alignment with the three tier educational approach offered by Lavender and Predock-Linnell, 2001: 206).

A critical analysis of the choreographic methods initiated by Merce Cunningham, and carried forward by the Judson Dance Theatre, as well as the methodology of PUSH, a contemporary Physical Theatre company, was used to underpin the practical aims.

At the beginning of this process I was tasked with choreographing a solo which proved more challenging than expected, only to find that the subsequent task, creating a full-length group work, was equally challenging. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I can now state with certainty that I started my process with a limited view of what choreography could and should be, restricting its use and practice solely to dance contexts. My practical and theoretical investigations have led me to discover that there are strategies and methods (many already tried and tested by other practitioners) that can be used to circumvent what I perceived as constraints.

By critically reflecting on my particular choreographic process, I was able to isolate practices which were proving unproductive and ineffective, as well as more importantly highlight

strategies already proven effective and efficient. I have come to realise that my initial struggles with the process of creating a solo were largely the result of my inability, as a choreographer, to establish an appropriate *environment* within which creative, dynamic, disciplined and honest exploration, improvisation and rehearsal could take place. When challenges did arise, instead of dealing with them and using them as possible inspiration for innovative and new solutions, I offered resistance.

In the production phase of *mem-Re:* I once again employed a participative choreographic process, asking my performers to make use of journals. My first undertaking was to cast the performers whom I believed would work well in collaboration with one another. I spent a large amount of time having them get to know one another, as I believed that this will make travelling, staying and working with one another a more enjoyable experience. Tasks were also set to help with this aspect (sections 2.4.3 and 2.4.4).

5.2 Findings:

Generating original and honest movement vocabulary became very important in my practice, but not all of the improvisations that I set for performers proved successful. However, my experience with improvisation in the creation of the solo provided clarity and I knew that spending time on refining the parameters, including the descriptive language of improvisations, would not be a wasted experience.

As observed in Chapter 2.4.4, the 'rough and tumble' sequence was one instance in which the movement material generated through an improvisation was not included in the final production, but I recognized that the improvisation could serve another purpose, as a way for the performers to get to know, and feel more comfortable with, one another.

It was during the performance phase of the choreographic process that I most felt the pressures of being a choreographer. After having assembled and arranged the production - (in my view) painstakingly considering the personal needs of the performers as well as all the other artistic elements - a single decision I made, to scatter flour on the surface of the stage, was vehemently questioned (cf 2.5).

At this point I realized that, although the choreographic process as a whole can be considered collaborative, as the choreographer I am at liberty to make use of, or reject, any suggestions

from participants based on what I see as the 'artistic integrity' of the work. I accept that I may not always be well-liked for this decision, and performers may not always understand my motivations, but it is part of my role and responsibility as choreographer to make these types of decisions.

This realisation is supported by Michael Klien's (cf 3.1) observation of the choreographer as a "navigator, negotiator and architect" (Klien, 2007: 1082). My practice has confirmed that a choreographer should be responsible for the "fluid environment that he/she himself/herself is part of" (Klien, 2007:1082), *environment* clearly referring to a network of interactions between people, space and ideas (cf 3.1).

As I am now aware, this environment unfolds as a result of the choreographer's ability to creatively *negotiate* all of these elements, in this way becoming the 'negotiator' that Klien mentions. This also suggests that the choreographer does not surrender or yield to each confrontation, but find innovative ways to address all (including his/her own) choreographic and creative aspects.

Lavender and Predock-Linnell's (2001) (cf 3.1.1) educational approach to choreography, specifically their focus on three aspects of improvising, composing and criticism have proven beneficial in my practice because the theory offered a point of departure as well as a structure to adhere to when I was unsure of the order in which to approach the production process of *mem-Re:*.

My analysis of Merce Cunningham's innovative practices, specifically his search for new methods of arrangement (cf 3.2), has offered a historical reference for my own practice. I am now able to position myself, as a young choreographer, within a broader context of choreographic practice, and to find similarities, differences and developments in relation to what has come before. Franko comments on Cunningham's methods that:

> The choreographic making of steps and movements is replaced using movement and gesture the dancer might perform outside the activity of dancing, outside the theatre or studio. In this sense, found movement reveals the person in the dancer rather than the dancer in the person.

(Franko, 2000: 214)

It was in researching Cunningham's work that I realized that the unique movements of performers while walking and executing everyday tasks would best express my artistic voice as well as, at the same time, be interesting to, firstly improvise with and secondly, perform.

To further contextualize my practices, I referred to a contemporary company, namely PUSH Physical Theatre Company in Rochester, USA. After having observed a rehearsal process as well as having attended a summer intensive, I recognized that I share similar desires, such as creating a collaborative and enjoyable rehearsal and performance environment for all participants (including technical crew).

I realized that I had, perhaps instinctively, perhaps even from a prior training perspective, already discovered, the path to creating the collaborative and enjoyable environments mentioned. One may even, consequently, consider that it is this imperative that may have drawn me to Physical Theatre in the first place, and may have inspired me to choose PUSH Physical Theatre Company in the first place.

Viewing their processes first-hand, and conducting personal interviews with company members, has allowed me to gain further insight into their methodologies, processes and techniques to circumvent the challenges arising when using improvisation as a system with which to choreograph, such as the use of social media (cf 4.2) and Darren Stevenson, stepping away from the action to direct. Some of the methods by which they attain this "collaborative and enjoyable environment", such as the focus on group warm-up sessions, are more effective than mine, and I hope to implement these in my future work.

One of the means by which PUSH Physical Theatre Company creates the "environment" is by using the uniqueness of individual bodies to create new and innovative choreography, and viewing the distinctive features of each performer as an opportunity to expand on the company's repertory. This demonstrates sensitivity to the individual needs and talents of their performers, which I admire and hope to include in all of my future work.

But there are other methods that I do not resonate with, that would not work for my practice, or elements that I have not yet considered, elements such as the use of a strong dance technique that should be instilled in all of my performers. I consciously avoid the use of dance techniques within my own choreographic processes because of my lack of knowledge and understanding of it. Also, I prefer not to have many conversations during the movement processes, unless I have reached a choreographic barrier.

But, while the conversations that I observed PUSH members engaging in during their rehearsals initially struck me as unusual, I realise that I also engage my performers in many, though limited, conversations. It seems that such discussion was necessary when I had exhausted the threshold of my own choreographic understanding; in consequence, I reached out to my performers for verbal input. Dialogue, therefore, became a way for me to artistically and creatively move forward, and break through whatever choreographic stumbling block I was experiencing.

5.3 Recommendations and Future Research:

In the introduction (Chapter 1, p.1), I offered a quote by Klien suggesting that "choreography [is an] art form that not only deals with the creation and manipulation of systems of rules, but [that it] does so in a non- deterministic, open way" (Klien, 2007:1081), thus affording the choreographer a certain latitude to invoke new structures, expressive methods and terminology.

My explorations and findings suggest that both experienced and inexperienced choreographers can make use of improvisational tasks in a creative process as a means of generating innovative movement material but, additionally, also to address the personal dynamics between choreographer and performer(s). The effectiveness of improvisation is dependent, however, on a clear delineation of parameters and definition of tasks, which means a choreographer must develop an appropriate language by which to communicate ideas and themes to performers, as well as be able to critically reflect on their own process so that changes can be made.

By engaging with the *environment* that is presented during a choreographic process, which includes constraints and challenges as much as play and free expression, and not offering resistance towards it, a choreographer may discover new pathways, methods and strategies.

"With improvisation there is the hope that one will discover something that could not be found in a systematic preconceived process" (Carter, 2000: 182). It is therefore, within the constraints of an improvisation that the creativity of performers, as well as a choreographer, develops.

Future research will investigate and ask whether I imparted enough knowledge to my performers to continue working in a non-deterministic, open way, and ask how it might be

possible to use choreography as an educational tool to empower individuals who are part of a participative choreographic process.

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