



Can Dance Effectively Engage an Audience when Used as a Platform to
Address the Climate Emergency?

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Introduction

Climate change is a global issue that we believe first started during the industrial revolution in the mid-1800s (Met Office, 2020). It is a social and political issue because it requires all of us and the government to act (TEDx Talks, 2019). This is a subject I feel passionate about and wanted to use this dissertation project to create a work titled *Whose Future? Our Future!* that explores climate issues and protest through practice as research. My objective was to engage audience members to witness the facts and points of view about climate change in a physical and artistic way.

A statement that resonated with me was expressed by a dancer from ODC (Oberlin Dance Collective) dance company in San Francisco¹, was:

No dance will necessarily give you all the facts about climate change but what it can do is give voice to how people feel about it

(KQED Arts, 2016,1:42).

This illuminates how dance can raise awareness around issues, like climate change and initiates the importance of voicing points of view surrounding the topic to expose an audience to the feelings of others.

¹ 'ODC/Dance was one of the first American companies to incorporate a post-modern sensibility into a virtuosic contemporary dance technique' (Odc, 2020 [online]). Their 'aim is to inspire audiences, cultivate artists, engage community, and foster diversity and inclusion through dance' (Odc, 2020 [online]).



In this thesis I will be exploring the ways in which dance addresses political subjects and how I put this research into practice. Choreographers that I have taken inspiration from for this project are Lloyd Newson, Kyle Abraham, and KT Nelson. Chapter 1 will explore the history of politics and dance and how dance has evolved to become a platform for political debate. There will be focus on climate change with reference to a piece addressing the topic. There will be an evaluation of the work in progress in chapter 2, discussing the process of creating *Whose Future? Our Future!* and the developments that would have been made.



Chapter 1

Politics and Dance

Contemporary dance has a rich history of exploring political contexts. The merging of dance with politics became a revolution in the 1930s where dance was used ‘as a weapon to expose the harsh realities of society’ (Prickett, 1989, p.47). The New Dance League was founded by Miriam Blecher and other dance associates ² in 1932 in New York whose work was focused on those hit the hardest by the 1930s depression, the workers. During this critical period of American Dance development, writers and dancers were engaged in passionate dialogues concerning the relationship of art and politics (Graff, 1997). The social and political instability of the United States during the 1930s led many artists feeling the responsibility to be agents of change through art (McPherson, 2016). Choreographers such as Miriam Blecher, Edith Segal and Jose Limon started creating pieces addressing events they lived through (Prickett, 1989), discovering what Randy Martin stated,

Politics goes nowhere without movement. It is not simply an idea, decision, or choice taken at a moment but also a trans figurative process that makes and occupies space

(Martin, 1998, p.3).

In contemporary practice today, making politically driven work continues to provide a platform for many dance artists to express relevant social and political topics that are important to themselves and others. Artistic director of DV8 Physical Theatre Company,

² Fanya Geltman, Edith Langbert, Edna Ocko, Rebecca Rosenberg, Pauline Schrifman, and Grace Wylie (McPherson, 2016 [online]).

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Lloyd Newson discusses how his experience of dance excluded all the life concerns he had, such as religion, sexuality, psychology and class and how he intended to address these issues through exploring politically charged subject matter with his own company DV8 (Kolb, 2010). DV8's 'creative approach is on reinvesting dance with meaning, particularly where this has been lost through formalised techniques' (DV8, 2020). The company explores political contexts in a portfolio of work including themes of desire and masculine identity in *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1998) and themes of culture, religion and homosexuality in *to be Straight with You* (2007). This is something dance would not have discussed in previous decades.

In an interview, dance and theatre director Johann Kresnik, was asked the question, 'Why is it, in your opinion, that only a few dancers and choreographers are interested in politics?' by Professor of Dance, Alexandra Kolb. Kresnik responded; 'It starts in ballet school. They are not allowed any opinions they have to shut up and move their muscles' (Kresnik, 2010). Langer says dance was meant to transport you to a different realm and remove you from everyday life (Langer, 1979, p.190), raising the argument that dance addressing political subject matter goes against this by exposing people to everyday life through art. It might be argued that 'notions of the political are themselves expanded when viewed from the perspective of dance' (Kowal, Seigmund, Martin, 2017, p.3) suggesting that people may interpret political issues differently when presented through dance. 'Dance speaks about and articulates political grievances raising the public's conscience for its cause' (Kowal, Seigmund, Martin, 2017, p.3), meaning dance can



make a viewer more aware of its context, working in favour of the objectives of Whose Future? Our Future!

I have chosen to use this choreographic project as a platform to address the climate emergency through dance as my research suggests dance can engage an audience with political matter. Environmental activist Arzucan Askin recalls a time when she saw dancers performing at an activist protest, asking herself 'why don't we use dance to address some of the dimensions of climate change?' (TEDx Talks, 2019, 2:13) Askin argues that there are three main reasons that make dance a powerful tool to address climate issues. Humans are pre-disposed to move rhythmically, dance is universal in all cultures and, dance is a shared form of nonverbal communication (TEDx Talks, 2019).

Co-artistic director of ODC dance company KT Nelson created a piece for the company called *Dead Reckoning*, which explores the human's relationship to the natural world. The aim of this piece is to create an emotional connection to climate change (KQED Arts, 2016). The piece contains striking images that demonstrate we are no longer living in a natural world which is seen when the dancers release lime green confetti from their hands that spreads across the stage. The bright toxic luminosity of the colour indicates that we have transformed our world to a place unrecognisable. This piece uses dance and theatrical techniques to evoke in its audiences an emotional connection to their natural surroundings that many refuse to address. The work carries an important



message, that has been brought to life through emotionally constructed imagery that arguably increases the potential of the cause to resonate with audience members, and perhaps encourage them to act upon the climate emergency. This outcome is something I hoped to reinforce into my own work in progress.



Chapter 2

Whose Future? Our Future! Evaluating the Work in Progress

This chapter will analyse my choreographic processes and evaluate the sharing of my work in progress. I will also use this writing to propose developments for the work, as it remains unfinished due to the Covid-19 crisis. The starting point of inspiration for my choreographic practice was discovering moments in current choreographies that were politically powerful and exploring these with my dancers.

The piece *Pavement* (2012) by Kyle Abraham inspired me with its politically charged imagery surrounding issues of discrimination in Pittsburgh's historically black neighbourhoods (Sadlers Wells, 2020). Appendix A, figure 1 and 2 references examples of this imagery from the work. Using Abraham's approach, I explored realism inside my theme of environmental protest and created a task for my dancers to perform 'protest' movement which was facilitated by showing footage of extinction rebellion protests (See appendix B, Section 1). Emotion was added by asking these questions:

- What if no one is listening?
- What if no one wants to make a change?

This task allowed me to witness movement that initiated starting points for choreography and how my dancers respond to improvisational tasks that explore emotion. This was important because the piece aims to showcase realism and truth within the dancers.



In the early process of choreographing I imagined the movement would always speak for itself, but the feedback sessions revealed other theatrical devices were required to invest the work with more meaning. Therefore, cardboard signs were introduced that were not only a prop but a visual entity that would clarify moments in the piece. In the submission of *Whose Future? Our Future!* the signs were blank which was not my intention; they would have resembled real climate protest signs, with the other side white to identify it as an officer's shield (Appendix A: Image 3, 4, 5, and 7). I was unable to show choreography with the cardboard acting as a shield influenced by the Hong Kong student protests. See Appendix C, Section 1 for rehearsal footage and video clips.

The voice over movement was influenced by body language and speech of Extinction Rebellion protestors. I wanted to capture a truthful representation of existing protest within this section. When the dancers chant 'we want change' it highlights the sounds you hear at climate activist protests that I found on video clips of recent protests, making my work abstract from real life contexts.

I found speech from interviewed activists and used this verbatim text to create movement. Using verbatim speech was influenced by DV8 who use it in their works *John* (2014), *Can We Talk About This?* (2011) and, *to be Straight with You* (2007) (See Appendix B, Section 2 for examples of verbatim). Verbatim speech is a powerful tool to use, in my opinion, as it speaks truth that may resonate with an audience member.



When the story we are watching is based on truth – as it is in verbatim theatre – we are implicated even more. This, we believe, is why verbatim theatre can bring about social change

(Blank and Jenson, 2010).

It was important to use verbatim speech in my piece to explain what is happening that many may not believe is their responsibility. Verbatim has the power to raise questions that society needs to be asking (Blank and Jenson, 2010) and the climate crisis is something, I believe, that everyone needs to know about for change to happen. See Appendix C, Section 2 for all verbatim sections that were choreographed but did not feature in the submission. The finished piece would have demonstrated repetition of the movement with and without sound and speaking the text out loud.

The aim of *Whose Future? Our Future!* was to engage the audience, so I investigated the work of Pina Bausch whose works explore a direct connection to the audience. I took a similar approach to *Kontakthof* (1978) by Bausch, starting with the dancers staring at audience members, instantly breaking the fourth wall (Climenhaga, 2018). This led me to explore gaze which American choreographer Jerome Robbins (1998) used ‘as a tool to illicit responses’ (Cann, 2019). I directed the dancers to gaze at audience members which was most effective during the running sections where the dancers show their physical exhaustion to the audience, highlighting a metaphor for constantly striving for change but going nowhere. Using gaze throughout would have increased audience investment to what was happening on stage (Cann, 2019).



Conclusion

This practice as research project challenged me as a choreographer as I had never dealt with political subject matter that interests me. My research suggests dance that addresses political topics can engage an audience so when creating I hoped my own work would be able to achieve this by applying the research to my practice.

Due to the circumstances I was not able to achieve all the objectives of the piece. However, the submission explored points of view surrounding climate change and protest in an artistic and physically engaging way. I would have developed the use of gaze with the audience to allow more investment to the piece and many of the sections would have been clarified in what they were representing.

Appendix A: Images



Image 1. Pavement, Kyle Abraham (Tristram Kenton)
Available from:
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/nov/20/kyle-abraham-pavement-review-sadlers-wells#img-2>
[online]



Image 2. A.I.M Dancers in Pavement (Carrie Schneider)
Available from:
<http://www.abrahaminmotion.org/water/htmzfz59qpfz2sjt48q18jb5lpnlma> [online]



Image 3. Climate Protest Signs (The Blue Banner) Available from: http://thebluebanner.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Climate-March-9_30-300x282.jpg [online]



Image 5. Cardboard Sign Idea (Pinterest) Available from: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/b6/f6/d8/b6f6d8219a9129a32d05529b01213353.jpg> [online]



Image 4. Unfinished Protest Sign Prop (Lauren Kimber)

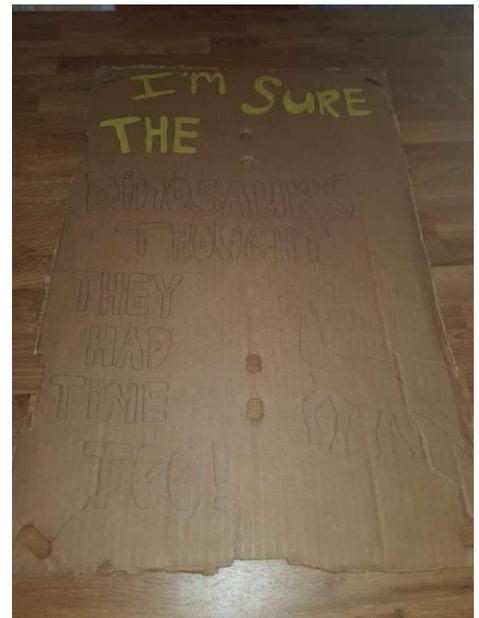


Image 6. Unfinished Protest Sign Prop (Lauren Kimber)



Image 7: Police Officer in Riot Gear (Wikia.org) Available from: https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Personal_armor [online]

Appendix B: Videos

Section 1: Extinction Rebellion Protests



Extinction Rebellion Protest Clip (Guardian News, 2018)



Extinction Rebellion Protest Clip 2 (Guardian News, 2019)



Extinction Rebellion Protest Clip 3 (Sky News, 2019)

Section 2: DV8 Trailers



JOHN Trailer (DV8PhysicalTheatre, 2014)



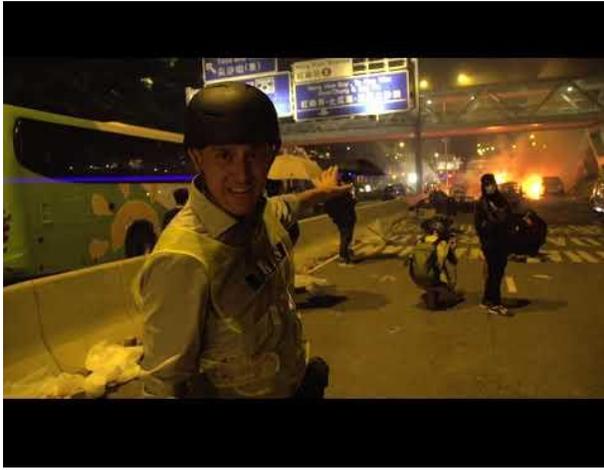
Can We Talk About This? Teaser
(Romaeuropa, 2011)



To be Straight with You Trailer
(DV8PhysicalTheatre, 2015)

Appendix C: Exploration of Ideas

Section 1: Shields



Hong Kong Protest Clip (BBC News, 2019)



Hong Kong Protest Clip (CBS News, 2019)



Rehearsal Footage of Shield Section (Lauren Kimber, 2020)

Section 2: Verbatim



Rehearsal Footage of Verbatim Section (Lauren Kimber, 2020)

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