

Jessica Tatum

### Self-designed Honors Experience Final Reflection

My Fifth and Final Honors Experience was at first entitled “Up Past Midnight” to reference the song chosen for the original choreography concept. Since then, it has grown and changed more than any of my other learning experiences, but the title has (somewhat humorously) still retained relevance. Indeed, many sleepless or near-sleepless nights were passed brooding over this experience. It also has been my longest running honors experience, since at every point that I thought it was coming to a definitive close, another roadblock would halt my progress and force another detour. Even in light of all the uncertainty surrounding this project however, it has given me many gifts of experience and insights into my own insecurities.

To narrate the timeline of this experience is difficult but begins simply with regards to my initial plan as outlined in my proposal: I planned to choreograph a dance to a remix by Giorgio Moroder of Coldplay’s “Midnight.” The original idea was to explore the effect of storytelling as a form of communication between people, which was inspired by the distinct way my extended family relates to one another – by relating stories. In my piece I wanted to develop my own choreographic voice and, to that end, did hours of research on dance styles I wanted to incorporate into the final work.

This extended thought process, however, is part of why this initial stage of the project was objectively a failure. After spending weeks agonizing and debating on the “perfect” choreography and setting it on a group of four other dancers, I presented my work at the faculty adjudication for the CCM dance department’s choreographer’s showcase. If I had been successful here, I could have continued to develop my concept

for this piece and eventually presented it in the spring of 2017 with a full ensemble cast and professional production. I was not successful. Although I hoped to present the four-minute piece at another time as I originally proposed for this project, the rejection of my months of deep thought about the work was deeply wounding and I grew discouraged. I didn't want to present sub-par choreography to others after it had been identified as such. The problem was that while I knew of the problems with my choreography, I was not motivated or confidence to correct them.

This marks the long lull-period in this experience for me. I wanted to continue with my project but wanted to take it in a different direction. I spent many hours during the progress of my fourth Honors Experience, in fact, puzzling out what new concept I could use for a new piece of choreography. I picked new music and thought about trying to convey a coming-of-age story, the popularized word "sonder" and empathetic connections, and eventually the effect of loneliness and insecurity. Looking back on my scribbled notes and plans from this period gives me a clearer idea of my mental state. Perhaps unconsciously, I was reflecting my own troubles onto choreographic ideas. While an excellent practice in theory, the execution of such ideas always hit a roadblock. Much like attempting to remember a word which escapes in the moment it's needed, I couldn't translate my deeper introspective thoughts into dance. I felt mute, like I could not communicate what I needed to in a language that I was supposed to know so well.

I had almost given up on the project entirely when I was assigned a project in my final semester of Choreography class. I needed to create a three to five-minute piece of work utilizing five dancers and karaoke music. When attempting to complete this

project, I had a sudden realization: I hated my own choreography even as I attempted to create it. I had been so tortured by self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy for so long that I had begun to see anything I created as unworthy of creation itself, and honestly, this frightened me. So much of the difficulties associated with ballet are mental stressors. To secure a job requires wading through dozens of rejections every single year and remaining nonplussed and motivated regardless. What did it say about me then, if I had been so subconsciously defeated by a single rejection more than a year prior? Even as I thought this, the frustration of creation remained.

It was then that I truly gave up. I gave up on trying to create a masterpiece, trying to perfectly convey a complex idea to my audience, on interpreting the music like a master. I just gave in to trying to express the deep pains I was experiencing at the time in the most familiar expression I have – movement.

What resulted is probably the most honest piece of choreography I have created. It did not embody a narrative, or the concept of narratives themselves as my original project intended but was instead focused on showing physically the exhaustion of sleepless nights, the gnawing pain of isolation, and the feeling of emptiness. In my final peer review of the choreography this emptiness was noticed as perfectly reflecting the missing lyrics of the song I had chosen: “The Beast” by Imogen Heap. In contrast to all the pain and doubt poured into the choreography, it is also the best thing I have created. It taught me something raw about the nature of connection between dance and emotion.

I think it is impossible to fully communicate our innermost thoughts with others. We can get close, if our grasp of a particular language – speech, music, art – is sufficiently advanced, but it is the audience of these efforts which translates them into

their own understanding. Dance is the exploration of how the superficial shell of the body interacts with and expresses the deeply emotive nature of humanity; a tug of war between the two.

Moving forward, I want to believe that I can use this acknowledgement of my own inadequacy to create better choreography. If the true interpretation of performance is entirely up to the audience, I think that I can create a more nuanced message by not “translating” my intent and simply trying to speak in the language I have invested so much time into learning.