“Emotions in Contemporary Dance”

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SENIOR HONORS THESIS

Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the
College Scholars Honors Program
North Central College

May 13, 2013

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the effect of psychological and environmental changes on emotional expression in contemporary dance. Based on preliminary research, several pieces of original choreography were created for an experimental performance. The cast members chosen for this performance learned several pieces of original, contemporary choreography intended to express varying, specific emotions and underwent several psychological and environmental tests to determine any effect on their emotional expression. Data was collected from dancers throughout the rehearsal process and from audience members following a live dance performance. Surveys completed by audience members ascertained how easily they could identify the emotion expressed in each piece. The entirety of the data collected was used to answer the fundamental question: How can different psychological techniques and performance characteristics affect the emotional expression and observation in contemporary dance?

Introduction

“Dance is the hidden language of the soul.” This statement was made by Martha Graham, a famous modern dancer and choreographer (Moncur 1). She maintained that dance has the power to move beyond simple movements and become a deep, emotional experience. Many studies have been conducted in the hope of determining the best ways to exhibit emotion in dance. Some concentrate on different parts of the body; some look at environmental choices; some consider psychological approaches and techniques. Most studies look at emotion from an audience’s point of view, while others examine the dancer’s personal emotional experience. The following is a detailed account of the research, methods, and results of an experimental
performance. Ultimately, this study strived to determine if a dancer’s expression of emotion was affected by diverse psychological influences and environmental settings, as well as, discovering how accurately an audience can understand emotional expression through observation.

Literature Review

The first element of this research project involved the examination of some basic concepts about emotions. According to “Body, Psyche, and the Emotions”, an article by J. Chodorow, there are seven basic emotions upon which all other emotions are based. They are joy, interest, surprise, grief, fear, anger, and disgust (Chodorow 100). Emotions can be felt in graduating degrees of sensation; each degree usually has a more precise descriptive term. For example, an extreme degree of fear could be described as terror. Fear and terror are the same general emotion but represent different levels of intensity. Allison Winters’s “Emotion, Embodiment, and Mirror Neurons in Dance/Movement Therapy: A Connection Across Disciplines”, describes a study that discerns whether various postures can evoke identifiable emotions. Included in this study is an extensive list of secondary emotions, categorized by the fundamental emotion to which they are related, as well as examples of sayings or scenarios that are commonly associated with each primary emotion (Winters 99). A funeral, for instance, is a situation that has a high correlation with sadness. It is clear that emotions can be both basic and complex. In order to fully study the complexity of emotions, there must be multiple methods for examining it. “Approaches to Emotion”, a book by Scherer Ekman, suggests four categories of examination: biological, developmental, psychological, and sociological. The psychological and sociological components of emotion are the most relevant to this study. The psychological method is based on the presumption that one must truly feel the emotion if he is to express it successfully (Ekman 323); one must experience the emotion many times in order to recreate it.
The sociological method states that in order to express an emotion in a way that can be understood by others, one must be aware that regional or cultural differences will affect an audience’s perception of an emotion (410). In the context of this study, dancers must perform movements that are culturally relevant for the emotion they are expressing. Therefore, they must be familiar with the elements of movement.

Examining facets of movement is an integral part of this study. Movement is extremely complex; a body can produce countless positions and actions. Obviously, it is easier to understand movement when it is separated into various components. J. Chodorow’s article describes movement as being made up of time, space, weight, and flow (Chodorow 107). By changing the elements, one can create several movements based on the same general action. To illustrate, an arm raise can look completely different depending on its speed or fluidity. “Contribution of General Features of Body Movement to the Attribution of Emotions”, a piece by Marco De Meijer, subdivides movement into slightly different categories. Trunk movements are described as any bending or stretching, while arm movements are when the arms are either opening or closing. Vertical directions are movements that are upward or downward, and sagittal directions are explained to be forward or backward motions. Force, velocity, and directness (indirect or direct movements) are the remaining movement dimensions (De Meijer 252). The emotion to be conveyed largely determines how specific types of movement will be used. There are certain movements that have been found to correlate directly to a specific emotion.

The four primary emotions and examples of correlating movement found in literature are happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. According to “Bodily Expression of Emotion”, an article by Harald Wallbott, happiness is often expressed by purposeless movements such as spontaneous
jumping, clapping of hands, head nods back and forth, and/or simulations of laughter. Sadness is characterized by motionless, passive movements such as hanging one’s head. Anger, on the other hand, is shown by more purposeful movements. Typical signals of anger are body tremors, striking motions, pacing, clenched fists, and more-squared positions. Fear is revealed by sinking heads; crouching positions; and violent, convulsive movements (Wallbot 880). Allison Winter’s study produced similar conclusions. She found that anger was associated with tight fists, confrontational stances, and crossed arms (Winters 95). In the article “Perception of Movement and Dancer Characteristics from Point-Light Displays of Dance”, sadness and happiness seem to be expressed by similar movements which have differing emphases. Sadness is shown by slow, unexaggerated, low-energy movements. Happiness is evidenced by those same movements but executed at a faster rate and with greater energy (Brownlow 3). There were also examples of secondary emotions included in Brownlow’s work. For instance, any type of holding of the body, such as wrapping arms around the torso, is considered a sign of self comfort (Chodorow 110). Wallbott gives examples of movements that express pride, shame, disgust, and contempt (Wallbott 880). The professionals agree that movement cannot accurately express a specific emotion without the dancer’s intent and zeal. In other words, there must be some type of connection between the performer and the emotion itself. Several techniques that can help create this connection are outlined in the following paragraph.

The literature identifies two primary influences which activate emotions: psychological and performance-based triggers. Psychological techniques are usually used to help make a personal connection to the emotion. Some dancers recall emotionally-charged events from their past which serve as inspiration to produce the particular emotion they are trying to express (Chodorow 106). Reliving previous interactions with people and/or reactions to ideas can be
triggers to evoke a personal emotion according to Ribeiro and Fonseca. Additionally, tangible items, such as pictures or poems that a performer finds significant, can induce emotion (74).

“Thinking in Action: Thought Made Visible in Contemporary Dance” by Shirley McKechnie emphasizes the importance of discussion in rehearsal. Sharing stories and experiences in a group can promote cohesion among dancers and choreographers. In fact, sometimes a choreographer’s personal story can provide a more-effective impetus than the dancer’s own experience. This is especially true if the choreographer is passionate about the piece (McKechnie 2). Performance-based triggers are also important to consider. A study by P. Keller and V. Sevdalis shows that changes in environmental aspects of a performance can have an effect on the emotion generated. The example given refers to the Argentine tango; when dancing to music with a partner, the dancer is more expressive than when alone or in silence (Kelly and Sevdalis 234). This suggests that both nature of the music and number of dancers present can have an effect on emotional expression. This premise is particularly pertinent to contemporary dance.

Because this study is about contemporary dance specifically, a brief background on its evolution is included. According to Contemporary Dance History, the art form is a combination of ballet and modern dance. Ballet lends its techniques and skill training, while modern dance provides a rebellious expression of emotions (1). The website also gives some background on several influential choreographers in the field. Martha Graham is considered the mother of modern dance, and many components of contemporary dance are based upon her revolutionary ideas. Other choreographers featured are Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch. Cunningham was a student of Graham’s and is particularly known for having some very innovative views on dance. For example, he conceived the concept of abstraction: expressive movement beyond the point of intention (2). Bausch is a German choreographer who is known for her atypical style and
method of questioning dancers about their life experiences in order to develop a piece (5). In addition to knowing the historical background of contemporary dance, McKechnie explains that it is important to have a thorough knowledge of the specialized vocabulary relevant to contemporary movement (8). The consensus among professionals is that it takes well-educated, committed performers to produce contemporary dance with the diversity of movement and range of emotion intended by the pioneers in the field. The information garnered by reading accounts of seasoned practitioners has become the basis of the following experiment.

Methodology

Participants in this study were chosen through a formal, open audition. The dancers were evaluated on their dancing technique, capacity to learn choreography, and ability to express a specific emotion. Those who efficiently mastered these criteria became members of the performance cast. Subsequently, the two distinctive sections of the research experiment began: the rehearsal process and the live presentation. Although the two segments are related, each had different scholarly goals. The intent of the rehearsal process was two-fold: to allow dancers freedom to state their opinions on what sorts of external factors affect their emotional expression while dancing and to afford the choreographer an opportunity to personally observe gradual changes in the dancers throughout the progression. The implementation component also had two objectives: to allow dancers to showcase what they learned and to survey the live audience to determine if they could recognize the emotions depicted by the dancers.

In the first few days of rehearsals, the dancers were taught a short contemporary dance combination that was used throughout this portion of the experiment. The control for this experiment occurred when the dancers are asked to execute the combination without any prior instruction. Then the dancers repeated the combination with a series of changing variables
designed to activate personal emotions. For example, dances were done with and without lights, mirrors, music, other performers and direction. Dancers were asked to compare the emotions they felt during the control combination with those they experienced when dancing in various environments.

The first few workouts were psychologically-based. Initially, the dancers were asked to lie on the floor and listen to the lyrics of a particular song. Afterwards, they performed the original combination with the intent of relating the lyrics and music to their personal lives. Then I, the choreographer, gave my interpretation of the lyrics and requested that the dancers do the combination again with this new explanation in mind. The final psychological exercise began with a discussion about which media references could be associated with a specific song. Examples of appropriate media references could have been famous people, movies, or television shows. The dancers chose a reference and tried to make an emotional connection between the song and their movement.

There was also a series of movements which were environmentally- influenced. For example, dancers performed a particular piece with the lights on and off. They repeated the combination while facing mirrors and while turned away from them. They also danced with music and without music (the choreographer simply counted the steps aloud). Another facet of the experiment involved the use of a completely different song.

Ultimately, dancers were given a chance to take artistic liberties with the combination; they were allowed to alter the steps in any way that might have had a positive effect on their emotional expression. Initially, every dancer completed the sequence once, while the rest of the cast watched. Then each danced individually again, but this time there was no audience--not even the choreographer. The dancers were surveyed after every experience to explain how each
situation affected their feelings and their ability to express specific emotions. The choreographer observed and took notes during all exercises--except the one which requires no audience--in order to decide which produced the most significant, recognizable change. Eventually, the cast was taught full-length contemporary dance routines; each represented a particular emotion.

The second part of the research project took place in the form of a live production. After several weeks of rehearsals, the dancers performed the contemporary pieces they had learned before a live audience. There were seven original creations, each designed to depict a specific emotion. The emotions chosen for performance were based upon research revealing which movements were commonly associated with explicit emotions. Lighting and costuming was held to a minimum, thereby limiting distractions from the movement itself. Some dances evoked primary emotions such as happiness/joy, sadness, and anger. Others were related to secondary emotions such as longing, empathy, affection/admiration, and grief/loss. All of the pieces were put to songs that have lyrics in an effort to conclude whether music was more effective than movement in understanding the emotional connection to contemporary dance.

At the conclusion of the performance, the audience was surveyed to see how well they were able to distinguish the emotion of each piece. Responses were used to determine if primary emotions are easier to identify than secondary emotions. To fulfill the primary objective of this study, the results of the research were analyzed to ascertain which factors influence emotional expression and observation in contemporary dance.

Results

As stated in the methodology section, results of the study were analyzed in three separate components: dancer surveys, choreographer observations, and audience surveys. The first to be considered were the surveys dancers completed after being subjected to a series of performance
and psychological modifications to the piece they had been taught initially. They had to assess the effect various exercises had on their ability to express emotions. They were to indicate whether a specific exercise improved their ability to express emotions, worsened it, or made no difference. Based on the accompanying graph, exercises that enhanced expression for most dancers were those with no lights and no audience. Most dancers said that they liked the autonomy these exercises gave them. Having privacy as they reacted to the music allowed them to concentrate on the expression. Other alterations that were moderately helpful include: artistic liberties, changes in music, dancer ideas, choreographer’s interpretation, and media reference. Least beneficial to nurturing emotional expressions were: no music, performing individually, and no mirror. Dancers stated that dancing without music seemed too much like rehearsal and too technical; this adjustment was not conducive to expressing emotion. Performing solo for others made dancers too nervous to focus on their emotions. In addition, several felt that turning around and having no mirror for feedback caused distractions and made the steps too confusing.

The dancers were asked how specific exercises affected their comfort level; they were also asked to gauge how their degree of comfort affected their ability to express emotion. The
following graphs illustrate response to these two questions. In general, dancers were comfortable with most exercises; however, those which caused some discomfort included: performing individually; lack of music, mirror, or audience; and dancer ideas. They explained that being observed by other dancers caused anxiety. Dancing without music made their movement feel forced and clumsy; dancing with no mirror was directionally confusing. Some struggled when asked for personal innovations. Overall, the results show that the dancers believe their level of comfort did have an effect on their emotional expression; ie.,
the more comfortable they felt, the better the expression produced. The dancers were asked to identify the particular emotion they felt during each exercise. Many felt anxiety during the individual performance; however, they believed it had more to do with the situation than the dance itself. Performers felt safe and free when the lights were off; they felt awkward and unfocused when there was no music. They felt more affectionate when the music changed; this was an appropriate reaction since the lyrics to the second song were more love-oriented.

Most dancers felt a sense of freedom and ownership of their expression when allowed to take artistic liberties. The wide variety of dancers’ personal background and experience was reflected in their ideas and approach to creating unique movement. The emotions expressed in their choreography were quite diverse because each was related to an exclusive set of circumstances. Surprisingly, some dancers felt a sense of strength and empowerment when the choreographer supplied the emotion upon which to base their piece. Others said they found it much harder to connect to a media reference or the choreographer’s idea than it was to create expression based on their own experiences. Although some struggled with having no mirror, several of them said that by the end of the assignment their dancing reflected the pride they felt in themselves for completing the piece despite the absence of a mirror. Some dancers claimed dancing without an audience was too similar to rehearsal; this inhibited their ability to convey much emotion. Others explained that dancing with no one watching allowed them to be more emotionally connected; one actually cried. After all the exercises were complete, dancers were given a final survey to summarize the entire creative experience.

Final survey results give an overview of the effectiveness of the exercises. The dancers were asked to rank the exercises on a scale from one to ten (ten being the worse) according to its impact on emotional expression. The following chart shows the results. Dancing without music
appears to be the least helpful exercise for emotional expression, followed by the absence of a
mirror. Dancers rationalized that without these performance aids they were forced to think more about steps and less about the emotional intent behind them. The dancers’ favorite exercises were those with no lights and no audience. They felt safer and more comfortable when they knew no one was watching or critiquing.

Dancers were asked to compare the helpfulness of psychological and performance-based exercises. The following pie chart shows the distribution of responses to this issue. Fifty percent of dancers indicated that the psychological exercises were the most helpful, forty percent said performance tasks were the most helpful, and ten percent said they were equally beneficial. Some performers liked the context and structure used in approaching dance from a psychological perspective, while others liked the freedom of the performance aspects. They were encouraged to list other exercises which may have facilitated their emotional expression. Their suggestions included: changing the tempo of the piece, doing the piece in smaller groups, incorporating partner-oriented movement, allowing them to choose their own music, contrasting two different combinations, and permitting improvisation. Finally, the dancers were asked if they found the experience beneficial on a personal level. All responded positively, citing a greater
understanding of style, their own comfort level, their own personal expression, and their strengths and weaknesses as a dancer.

Throughout the exercise process, I, the choreographer, took notes on how each exercise affected observable emotional expression. When asked to make a personal connection to the music, most dancers displayed quite a lot of emotion, especially through the eyes. They were more emotionally engaged when basing their movement on their ideas and experience and less engaged when attempting to create something using the choreographer’s interpretations of the music. The choice of media reference determined the intensity and intent of each dancer’s expression. For example, one dance said they were going to use Tyra Banks as a reference of a tenacious individual; their expression instantly became one of strength and determination. Another used the romantic reference of Twilight; their expression exhibited softness and affection.

Although the surveys indicated that dancers felt less emotionally connected when the mirror was removed, I observed the opposite. They seemed to be more emotionally invested without a mirror. Body movements had more expression when the lights were off; I could not see faces to comment on facial expression. When dancers had only my count and no music, their movement became extremely robotic and unemotional. Some really embraced having artistic liberties; this had a positive effect on their expression. However, others were intimidated by having to create options of their own; consequently, their expression was stifled. All of the dancers changed their expression to reflect the mood of the second song. It was slower and softer-sounding than the original piece, so movements became slower and softer to correspond. During their individual performances before an audience, many dancers were stiffer and made noticeable missteps due to what appeared to be performance anxiety. This nervousness
manifested itself in the expression of fear on their faces. Others capitalized on the adrenaline generated by being in front of an audience and danced with a great deal of expression, confidence, and poise. Since the final exercise was executed without any observation, I could not assess that performance.

The final component of the study was an analysis of surveys completed by the audience at a live performance. As previously explained, the audience watched seven dances; each was choreographed to express a particular emotion. They were then asked to respond to a short survey. The first item asked the audience to identify the emotion portrayed in each dance. The following graph illustrates how many people, out of sixty audience members, selected the incorrect emotion for each piece. Grief, empathy, and longing proved to be more difficult for people to differentiate. Happiness, anger, sadness, and affection seemed to be easier to determine. The audience was also asked to rank the level of difficulty in recognizing each emotion on a scale from one to seven, seven being the hardest. The findings are shown in the accompanying graph. According to these results, affection was the easiest to comprehend, while sadness, grief, empathy, and longing were most difficult.
A question was posed to find out if the music lyrics helped determine the emotion of each piece. To this question, 96.5% of the audience replied with ‘yes’. Out of those who said ‘yes’, 49% said that the lyrics were more helpful than the movement itself. They were also asked if the dancer relationships made it easier, harder, or had no difference on understanding the emotion. To this, 83.3% said ‘yes’, and the remaining 16.7% said ‘no difference’. Sixty-five percent of the audience said that the lighting design helped them distinguish the emotions of the pieces, and 100% claimed that facial expression assisted in their understanding. Half said that facial expressions were more helpful than the movement itself. When asked if they had a personal, emotional reaction to any of the pieces, 81.4% of the audience responded ‘yes’. Finally, the audience was given the opportunity to share their emotional connection. Out of those who chose to do so, three connected to sadness, one to grief, three to empathy, two to happiness, seven to longing, six to anger, and an astounding fourteen to affection. Some responses discussed first loves or loss of loved ones; several even mentioned being moved to tears. Based on all of these results, several conclusions and observations can be made.
Discussion

Data for this study was collected from two sources: dancers during the rehearsal process and audience members after the live performance. Several significant outcomes and inferences emerged from both. Rehearsal surveys indicated that comfort and privacy generally improve emotional expression. Dancers felt the more expressive exercises gave them the highest level of comfort and/or privacy. They also believed that they emoted more during exercises to which they had a personal connection or ownership; their movement was more natural and less structured. Another discovery was that the way dancers interpret their emotional expression and the way it is construed by an observer are not always the same. There were several instances in the rehearsal section of the experiment in which the dancers claimed that a certain exercise worsened their expression; however, I, as the choreographer, observed the opposite. This reinforces the notion that internal feelings are not always conveyed to an audience as effectively as the performer intends.

Based upon the audience surveys, secondary emotions were harder to identify than primary emotions. To illustrate, the primary emotions (sadness, anger, and happiness) were matched to the correct piece more often than the secondary emotions (longing, empathy, and grief). Affection, however, was an exception; although it is a secondary emotion, only three audience members were unable to correctly identify the intended piece. The final major inference revealed in the audience surveys was that lighting, facial expression, music lyrics, and dancer relationships are all significantly helpful in determining emotions in contemporary dance.

Overall, I consider this project successful; however, I recognize that several changes could have improved the results of this experiment. First, I believe the results would have been more consistent had all the dancers had the same level of dance instruction. In addition, a more
intensive rehearsal schedule would most likely have affected the results as well. Dancers would have had more time to master routines and consequently, be able to focus solely on the emotion aspects of the pieces. It would have been interesting to see how the audience survey results would have been affected if there had been no lyrics to any of the music choices. Given different resources and more time, these adaptations could have potentially clarified or changed the results of this project. However, I believe there was sufficient data collected from dancers and audience members to determine which psychological techniques and performance characteristics effect the emotional expression and observation of contemporary dance.

Bibliography


