Research in Dance Choreography at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and the American Dance Festival Winter Intensive

Natalie Johnson, 2013

New York City is home to the largest dance archive in the world, and a diverse and energetic performance arts culture that is excellent for training dancers and exposing people to some of the newest offerings in choreography. My independent study in choreography culminated in an evening-length production of modern dance, of which I was the director, choreographer, and one of the four performers. To prepare for this, I wanted to take advantage of the rich possibilities in the New York dance community to further my learning and experience as a choreographer, and give as much foundation, knowledge, and creativity to my final showing as possible. During my stay in NYC over winter break, I spent my time richly immersed in the broad offerings of the performance arts community. My two weeks there were divided between dancing at the American Dance Festival’s winter intensive (ADF), researching at the Jerome Robbins Division of the New York Public Library (NYPL), and attending professional dance performances of various styles. Each of these dimensions of my experience offered valuable and unique insight into the field that I intend to make my career, and directly impacted my approach to my independent study in dance upon my return to Bowdoin’s campus.

The lesson that carried across all of these experiences was the importance of risk and experimentation to dance, in both physical training and composition. While at ADF, my teachers regularly asked the students to push themselves beyond what they thought their limits to be. For me, this meant mentally sharpening my focus in order to learn dances more quickly and execute them more accurately, especially in less familiar styles. There were also demands that challenged our technical capabilities. For example, in the modern technique classes taught by Christian von Howard and Jesse Zaritt, I had to overcome my physical discomfort with quick transitions to the floor, including bearing my body’s weight on my hands. Part of what I found to be important about ADF was that I was surrounded by committed dancers and excellent teachers in a safe environment, helping me to truly challenge myself and better understand my body’s capabilities. Through this, I was surprised at the potential I found, and learned that it would serve me well to keep exploring the physical possibilities available to me as I continue to choreograph and perform.

The choreography I created in the spring semester for my independent study reflected my heightened curiosity and willingness to take risks, brought on by my experiences at ADF and my research at the NYPL. This added a new tone and depth to the final show I presented, and taught me to employ my classroom lessons in my creative process as well as my dancing. The winter intensive required concentrated mental and physical effort, discipline, bravery to try new things, and trust in the teachers and students around me. After ten days at ADF, I left with strong connections to these people with whom I had shared that experience, many of them now contacts and future colleagues, or mentors who are interested to help me in my ambitions to become a choreographer. The influence that ADF has had on the quality of my work for my independent study has been remarkable, but I also know that this festival’s impact will extend far beyond my Bowdoin life, and into my future career pursuits as a professional dancer.

My research at the NYPL made me more conscious of my insatiable thirst for knowledge about dance. I found myself engrossed for hours at a time, being led from one book to the next, spanning across topics of all kinds. Some of these included the collaboration between visual arts and dance, the German expressionist movement, improvisation techniques, and autobiographical writings by some of the most influential dancer/choreographers in history. Along with these writings, I viewed as much video-documented dance as possible, from the works of classical modern dance pioneers such as Doris Humphrey, to more contemporary artists such as Anna Halprin. My experience at the library refreshed and informed my mind, inspiring me to generate many new ideas that excited and intrigued me, and inciting a broader approach to my creative process at Bowdoin. Overall, I was left with the understanding that there are innumerable ways in which one can make art—so why limit my options with fear of the unknown? Thanks to the generous support from the Grua/O’Connell Research Award, I was able to present an evening-length production in modern dance that was strongly supported by extensive research only available to me outside of Bowdoin. By being exposed to many differing ideologies, aesthetics, and techniques at ADF and the NYPL, I examined my work with a more knowledgeable eye, and ultimately presented a public performance that was reflective of my personal artistic abandon and discovery.

Faculty Mentors: Charlotte Griffin and Gwyneth Jones

Funded by the Grua/O’Connell Research Award