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Meet and Run
by
Gia Mongell Binner

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Date

Maura Donohue

Thesis Sponsor

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Date

Laura Brungard

Second Reader

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MANIFESTO

1. If one is looking for artistic fun, there are first some tasks that must be done.
2. Read this fully before you start, those who follow the rules will be set apart.
3. Five minutes early is ten minutes late, don't be the person who holds the flight gate.
4. Start from within, not from without, it is the only way to create with no doubt.
5. Emotional baggage gets heavy fast, learn from the races where you finish last.
6. Feel deeply and fully and run towards what scares you, big dreams are reached only by the brave few.
7. Under promise, over deliver, over prepare, then let your plans crumble and quiver.
8. Say yes to opportunities of every kind and always be willing to change your mind.
9. Trust the process and know its life's greatest mission, to not worry about the product's commission.

B R E

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.....and don't be afraid to make shit, shit is fertilizer.

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“I believe in serendipity, but I also believe there are times when you have to be the one who lines up everything so it can fall into place.”

— Susan Stroman

INTRODUCTION

Meet and Run is a musical film that brings vibrant dance, contemporary cinematography practices and a team of new voices to the field in a heart-felt exploration of the value of community in a disconnected, urban life in the 21st Century. It is a work that was developed and premiered as an MFA thesis project at Hunter College in the spring of 2022. *Meet and Run* presents five characters who navigate an overarching non-linear plot through four subplots that converge momentarily in a NYC bar. Each character grapples with their own belief systems about right and wrong behavior and how they try to evade their own negative feelings.

My interest in the correlations between morality, empathy and art drive the inquiry in content, context and process for this work. I argue that accessible art, known in this paper as commercial dance, often derided as a simple diversion, can be a meaningful vehicle for compassion and positive social change, including the ability to dismantle the outdated, European concert dance dominance in The Academy. This piece ultimately aligns itself with the philosophy of John Dewey and the work of Eric Booth by offering an encounter with art that provides the viewer with an indelible experience that is built, not only on a satisfying viewing of well-crafted art, but upon the desire to see the world anew. I believe that the richer the life experiences one possesses, the richer one’s work of art can be. And, vice versa, as inspirational art so often offers valuable aspirations for an abundant life.

Despite historic biases against popular forms of dance within college dance departments, *Meet and Run* lands in the world like a cunningly sunny advance guard for the fight to value art aligned with commercial aesthetics. A work of art can be accessible and artistic. And, for me, one of the criteria I would offer for the artistic value would be the level of craft and complexity involved in the endeavor. And by complex, I don't mean complicated, but rather diligently planned, precisely executed, responsive to changing environmental issues (like cast and location changes), and thoroughly refined through intricate editing and constant analysis and reflection. *Meet and Run* does not tell a linear story because audiences can be engaged and entertained without being spoon fed the content or meaning. This film asks the audience to do some work to make the narrative connections, and then, the connections with their own lives. By asking the audience to do work on their own, I am able to bridge the concert and commercial dance worlds due to the fact that commercial dance as "entertainment" implies no effort on the viewer's part.

I wanted to create a piece at the intersection of my own work experiences between concert and commercial dance. When I thought about how to structure the work I decided to go at it the same way I would a concert dance piece. It is recognizable as a "commercial" work already in the fact that the characters sing, thus aligning it with musical theater and Broadway's for-profit art making model. And so, I use commercial as a genre designation, without The Academy's inherent and inherited disdain for anything that might be popular with the masses. In this paper, I offer historical context for the contributions and challenges that commercial dance is framed against, looking at the evolution of African American vernacular forms that became known as jazz dance, how those forms were used by Broadway and Hollywood, and

how the Ivory Tower's pervasive dismissal of "commercial" dance or popular, social and non-Euro-centric concert forms is a dated mindset that is detrimental to the lives of the young artists these institutions aim to produce. Admirably in many cultures across Africa, dance is an integral component of a person's everyday life and how they relate to society. It is considered a utilitarian practice that uses art for life's sake (Hanna 165). Throughout this paper, I will make the case that my work connects with the belief that art is for life's sake.

I have been fortunate to cultivate an artist experience that melds western institutionalized techniques via my participation with Youth America Grand Prix, Regional Dance America and my eventual graduation from The Juilliard School with popular social and cultural dances via the Broadway stage during my time in the original Broadway cast of *An American in Paris*. I also teach at the Commercial Dance Intensive which grounds my experiences and advocacy. I am fortunate to have a multitude of contrasting artistic experiences which allows me to create art from a unique vantage point. As we move forward in reinventing the jazz wheel, and all movement styles, we must have an understanding of where all of our movement forms came from. My multiplicity of styles serves a modern life, but it wasn't until graduate study that I came to understand the origins of much of what I was dancing. It does our community a disservice if we do not know where the movement originates because it dilutes the fullness of the lifesource. The documentary film *Uprooted* says it best, "How can we know where we are going if we don't know where we came from?" (Uprooted).

It is from the lives of artists, our unique experiences and our ability to share those on behalf of finding common ground that dance becomes the perfect vehicle for art to be

experiential and vital to a full life. “The work of art lives in the experience, the journey within the process, not in the resulting monument to be presented in a certified art-place” (Booth 27). In the United States, we live in a disconnected space where our art rarely intersects with our religious institutions, government or war practices. Across many cultures and countries in Africa however, art is woven into the fabric of various people’s lives via, “religious traditions, achievement and status values, and economic patterns that are communicated through the dance” (Hanna, 165). Life is about the journey and not the destination, right? When you disconnect the object or substance from the life source, the experience is killed, like a body no longer breathing, it simply becomes an object, an artifact. When art becomes only an artifact and not an experience or a process, it becomes inaccessible. When art becomes inaccessible, slowly, we lose our connection to ourselves and our communities.

As American philosopher and educator, John Dewey notes: “When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life experience” (Dewey 1). *Meet and Run* breaks the barriers between high and low art in order to meet the viewer where they are in their daily lives. Dewey sees a problem with putting pieces of art on a pedestal and thus making them untouchable. My deep alignment with this belief connects me with building accessible works and pushing the boundaries of academic dance to build an inclusive community for popular or “commercial dance” forms. By providing a singable soundtrack and multiple streaming platforms to listen to it, my team also provided a way to return to the message of *Meet and Run* long after viewing, thus integrating the viewing experience with a sustainable, renewable life experience.

In the creative process, we encounter experience. In dance and dance making, as well as film and filmmaking, the development and process of the work of art is where the artistry exists rather than the actual artifact itself. What is a screendance but a large collection of data? The art only activates in the hearts of the viewers and the experiences of everyone who collaborated. The process of filming *Meet and Run* was one of the most fulfilling and perhaps stressful experiences of my artistic career. I kept reminding myself throughout that this was a process to be enjoyed and the more awake I was to the process, the more the film would succeed in its mission of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. This was my life happening. And, if I wasn't recognizing how it filled out my life, I was actually missing the points I just made above.

Because this is a film within the canon of musical dance films (and my own history in musical theater) I recognize the intersection of concert and commercial dance within the history of jazz dance in America. Jazz dance is most commonly associated with musicals and is also stigmatized as a technique due to its link to popular culture. "Popular entertainment forms are categorically denied, because of distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art" (Perpener 340). Jazz is an American form and it is also a form that evolved from the African/Afro-diaspora. As such, it has been derided by an academic culture that establishes European artistic practices as high art and popular forms that have been co-opted, assimilated or stolen from African Americans as unworthy of study.

During the enslavement era, African American dances emerged by combining African movements from various regions with movements that mimicked the landowners (*Uprooted*).

Throughout the 20th century, African American dance evolved into several variations, including what we now call jazz dance, although the term jazz dance did not emerge until the 1920s (Amin 35). The earliest iterations of jazz dance were primarily folk dances that continuously developed alongside jazz music in the United States. Minstrel shows and vaudeville performances were the foundation of all art that we now describe as Broadway. European derived couple dancing was popular in America during the early 20th century, and these social dances were inspiring Black communities to blend them with their own Africanist elements. Jazz dance has primary roots in African derived movement. However, it is also the result of humans who were enslaved poking fun at European aesthetics and an appropriation of African aesthetics by Europeans. Both African American and European American cultures alike were highly influenced by jazz music. These hybrids are what we now know as the Charleston and the Lindy Hop among others (Crosby 45-46).

In the number “Lost”, a song that takes place between the characters Brad and Kira, I wanted to insert some partnering and social dancing into the work to represent that we are never alone in our trials. There is always someone that can relate or someone that's willing to sit with you in discomfort if you are willing to open yourself up to the opportunity. Brad married young and is currently having marital issues and Kira is the child of divorced parents who also married young. This encounter and waltz with one another brings healing and perspective to both situations and allows space for understanding and growth. The music signature is $\frac{3}{4}$ and so a waltz seemed like the natural choice. However, I included elements of West Coast Swing and Lindy Hop as a nod to early iterations of jazz dance.

Body percussion, storytelling, and isolation of the hips and shoulders are all components of jazz dance that were originally derived from African sources. These elements can be seen throughout jazz in musical theatre. Actor, director, dancer, choreographer, screenwriter and filmmaker Bob Fosse appropriated these qualities in particular. However, many people praise him as a pioneer within the commercial dance industry. They credit him for the creation of these elements and his lack of transparency has contributed to this divide between the commercial and concert dance worlds. In the number “People Who Self Destruct”, I wove some of these quintessential jazz elements into the style of this number as the culmination of dance being used as a device to express escapism. The number would probably be labeled as the most musical theatre-esque number in the line up. It is the use of body percussion in physical practice (contract and release) and quirk, the use of repetition building on itself to aid in storytelling, and the ritual act of a narrator, in this case, Natalie, alluding to her own reality via a catchy tune, mood lighting, black fishnets and a red lip. This aesthetic is a sacred space for those of us who call ourselves Broadway enthusiasts. It is puzzling to me then, in the twenty four years I’ve been in the field to only now begin digging into where these ideals originated.

Throughout the 20th century, African American dance evolved and was appropriated into several dominant forms, including jazz dance. It is maddening that the concert dance world and the institutions that feed them see only artistic value in forms that derive from either ballet or modern dance. At the core of the matter, we are dealing with power-wielding institutions deciding what dance forms are worthy of study in presentation and education. “Much of the powerful influence of elevated forms of art can be attributed to the fact that a specific--and powerful-- group of people has agreed upon and perpetuated the idea that select forms of art

deserve a position of prominence” (Perpener, 340). I would go as far to say that the poo pooing of popular entertainment as art is rooted in white supremacy, colonial domination and elitism. The majority doesn’t acknowledge this as it would threaten to dethrone their privileged art forms and status, as evidenced since “mid nineteenth century minstrelsy through early twentieth-century Broadway shows that featured the unaccredited work of black dancers and choreographers, to Katherine Dunham’s early revues” (Perpener 346) is a practice maintaining itself still. A white supremacist society creates a culture that, “has always seemed to thrive upon and profit from the very cultural elements that it casts a disdainful eye upon” (Perpener 346). I propose that we celebrate and recognize where the aesthetics of commercial dance originated even if doing so calls for a leaning into discomfort. By doing so, we can create a culture that is inclusive, vibrant and loving which will then make space for art making processes that value the artist as human. In doing so, we can elevate our whole community. It was important to me that I try to model this process as I navigated the creation of *Meet and Run*.

PROCESS

Our timeline began in the spring of 2021, when I approached Ryan Korell and Jonathan Keebler to collaborate on the 45 minute musical film. Ryan Korell agreed to write the music and Jonathan Keebler, the story/lyrics. I led the collaboration in content creation, casting, choreography, cinematography, and editing. This all-original score was recorded in late November of 2021 and released on the streaming platforms Spotify, Apple Music, iTunes, Pandora, Youtube, Amazon Music, Deezer and Tidal on April 1, 2022. Research and choreographic pre-production took place August 2021-December 2021 culminating in a

"In-Process" Presentation at Hunter College. Filming of the project took place in late January through early February 2022 and all editing was completed in late March 2022. The final film premiered April 8th, 2022 in Hunter College's Lang Hall at 8:30pm.

In my thesis research and development, I engaged in a multi-faceted process building fleeting communities among Hunter College BA in Dance students, the main cast of professionals and, eventually, a viewing audience that explores a trajectory through familiar, but entertainingly crafted musical film numbers. As I choreographed *Meet and Run*, I was interested in how music could interact with movement to highlight intricacies of the musical score. I love to use and understand music in a way that transforms both the choreography and the music into one being. I imagine music as another invisible dancer or entity that I play with as I make work. Sometimes, I use it a lot as its own soloist and sometimes I let it slip to the back. Most of the choreography was done on my own before the shoot day and the dancers learned as we went because that was the most time efficient. There were a few numbers that had the luxury of rehearsal and I feel those numbers are the ones with a richer sense of musicality. There are moments I wish I would have had more time to really workshop each number but then I remember that oftentimes on set the choreographer is going through the exact process that I experienced. Multiple-Emmy-winning choreographer, Kathryn Byrns, notes that being on set requires being in a state of fluidity. "Being a good troubleshooter, and working around people's schedules — everything is always changing — so knowing how to troubleshoot is an asset...You have to be adaptable" (Careersinfilm). I am grateful to have had this safe space to practice this skill and I look forward to doing it again.

Filming *Meet and Run* took an immense amount of planning on my part due to the short amount of time we had on each set (small budget) and also called for me to be resilient in working with the obstacles that popped up due to the Covid-19 Omicron variant surge. As the sole leader of this work, I was in charge of booking every space, supplying the props, scheduling each shoot, making shot lists and hiring all of the talent. It took hundreds of emails to organize the endeavor only to have something pop up and derail an entire shoot. I dealt with spaces that canceled on us, Covid-19 restrictions and positive Covid-19 results the day of the shoot. I had to reschedule due to rain and lost many dancers because of it. I navigated all of this while going to school and working full time. Throughout this process I gave myself the grace and support that I hope I offered to those around me and I emerged from each shoot exhausted but full of zeal to keep going. *Meet and Run* could not have succeeded in the way that it did if it had not been for the community around me that rallied with me to surmount every hurdle.

It was important to make the process as supportive as the story we were trying to tell. During the editing process, I held a very informal, colloquial showing of *Meet and Run* with fellow MFAs and a few faculty on March 8th, 2022 at 8pm in THH601 at Hunter College. We watched a rough draft of the film sitting on the marley floor as a subpar projector worked to illuminate the white scrim. Even in this humble setting, I was delighted to find that this nonlinear story did in fact make sense, and not only did it inspire empathy toward the five main characters, but it also made the viewers curious about the other people present in the film and what their stories might be. By keying into these five ordinary lives, suddenly, they became extraordinary and the viewers wanted to explore more. This is deeply relevant because so often we fail to see the beauty right in front of our own eyes. When we can key into the idea that

everyone has a story and everyone is dealing with their own issue at any given moment, we are able to tap into our own empathy, have compassion for those around us and maybe even see beauty in the struggle.

Early in the research process, I had the fortune of sitting down with Eirene Donohue, a screenwriter for the TV channels Freeform and Lifetime. In December of 2020, I watched her feature-length film *A Sugar and Spice Holiday* on Lifetime. It was an uplifting piece that also challenges the status quo as the first Asian-centered holiday movie that Lifetime has ever produced (Bickford). I look up to Ms. Donohue's work because there are a variety of stigmas in our world related to representation, as in whose stories get told and who gets to tell those stories. Speaking with Ms. Donohue bolstered my belief in using our own experiences to create change by challenging and questioning our world through our art, while also providing a sing-along soundtrack. While there is certainly a place for art that distresses the viewer I argue that it is possible that change could bloom exponentially faster if we infiltrate the minds of our aggressors with something that is completely unassuming. In his book *Unconscious Branding*, author Douglas Van Praet writes that getting people to believe your idea was theirs all along is the easiest way to sell an idea. What could be a better way to create radical change, without having people realize it? Let me entertain you!

A Sugar and Spice Holiday may seem like your typical Christmas RomCom that drips with the smell of gingerbread, when really it is a call to resistance. Lifetime is a network that reaches the depths of middle America and they chose to broadcast a Christmas love story centered around an Asian American family during the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic with Asian hate at an all time high (Gover, Harper & Langton). If this isn't an extremely profound catalyst for

change, I'm not sure what would qualify as such. Wrapped in a pretty Christmas bow, the viewer steps into the work with their guard completely lowered and therefore able to have a real genuine encounter with the work. The viewer is able to see these relatable characters as more than the vessel that holds them and emerges consciously or subconsciously altered.

Ms. Donohue is able to attack the beast from its vulnerable belly instead of trying to jackhammer through its hard outer shell. This is exactly the kind of art that I am interested in making. During my conversation with Ms. Donohue, we discussed at length how to best set each character up in the beginning so that their trajectories would be clear to the viewer. I explained that when I first began discussions with my collaborators about what I wanted this work to be about, we brainstormed many of life's overarching problems. We settled on our own personal problems as it is always easier to tell the stories you know. Body image, self love, unfulfillment in one's life work, relationship issues between partners, dissonance between generations and the inevitability of loss are the trajectories we decided to explore. I was nervous that since *Meet and Run* has no spoken word, the audience wouldn't understand who they were or what problems they face. Ms. Donohue suggested I write down each character's biggest problem or need and try to expose and fulfill each one in the work (Eirene Donohue). I structured the opening number in accordance with Donohue's advice.

I established that a bar would serve as the most likely scenario for a variety of characters to converge and through a series of quick flashbacks (foreshadowing their individual "big problem" songs), I give the viewer a simple and concise visual that relates to each character's problem/issue/need. For Kira, we see her walk into a diner, reluctantly sit down and storm out. We then pan to Brad and see him tying his tie and frowning about having to go to work. When

we make our way deeper on to the dance floor we see David dancing with Alex and then a series of flashbacks that show David not knowing what to wear, alluding to his lack of self love, and Alex making soup for his sick mother. Lastly, we see Natalie making her bed, a foreshadowing of her cheating on her husband. The flashbacks grow in scale giving the viewer a fuller sense of each character's problem and then the final song "I'm Not Going Anywhere" provides a bit of a resolution. Not all problems can be completely resolved in life, but we can sit with them and move forward with the support of our loved ones.

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey states that art isn't just a thing to be viewed, the art is not the actual artifact. Rather, the real art is something that the artist experiences during the making of a particular work and the audience experiences during the viewing of that work. Art is a process meant to be experienced, and dance, music and film all provide an experience that unfolds over time. Art is transformative and has the power to free us of our everyday lives and transport us to a different reality. The findings during these experiences have the power to affect change. "For 'taking in' in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known. It involves reconstruction which may be painful" (Dewey 42). This is what makes art so vital and powerful. Art has the ability to shine a bright light on an issue we may not otherwise have recognized. This is because art creates a safe space for contemplation and reflection. Through the cultivation of the viewer's imagination, it also helps a person develop empathy and the ability to step into someone else's shoes. In the finale song, "I'm Not Going Anywhere", all five protagonists sing, "I know I tend to hide, I know I tend to flee. I'm scared to look inside, I'm scared of what I'll see. Together there is pain, together there is strife, together is insane, but without you what is life? I'm not going

anywhere” (Keebler). These characters are singing this to one another but they are also having the moment of revelation. They realize that by giving one’s self grace and leaning into the discomfort, an unbearable load becomes a little lighter.

As Eric Booth points out, “Acts of empathy are world exploring” (29). When we empathetically enter another person’s world and see their world as if it were our own, it has a transformative impact on us and can lead us to some of the most profound experiences of our lives. It is the hope of this project that the audience connects with conflicts presented in the film and may follow a similar trajectory for a kinesthetic release during this final moment in the hospital when the characters all decide to stop running from their problems. If *Meet and Run* inspires even one person to face their own hardships, lean into their discomfort and find strength, this piece will have played a small role in bettering the community.

In American culture, movies and music are the most influential forms of mass media within our communities and they have had intertwined histories since the earliest moving pictures had the capacity to collaborate. In 1897 when Thomas Edison was first introducing his moving picture, he exclusively chose dancers to film as he felt they were the most compatible subjects for the screen (Reynolds 708). George Méliès, who was a magician turned filmmaker, was the first to create fadeouts, and hand color his film. He made a glass studio in 1897 and made fantasy films that featured many famous ballet dancers of the time (Reynolds 710). “In the United States, the film musical genre, the site of the most intense interaction and synergy between movies and music, evolved from such diverse cultural forms as minstrelsy, vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley, and musical theater” (Grant 7). If this synergy has been so prevalent since the beginning of cinematography, why then is there such a divide between the commercial and

concert dance worlds? Perhaps it is not the actual movement causing this divide, but rather, the origins of the movement itself. There are so many iterations of dance on film ranging from MGM musicals like *Singing in the Rain* to raunchy music videos that became a cultural phenomenon in the 1980s with the emergence of MTV. While the most iconic configuration of a movie musical is a story within a story, *Meet and Run* uses more of a kinetic visual approach to communicate a nonlinear plotline.

I have never studied filmmaking¹. In fact, pre-pandemic at the Commercial Dance Intensive, I often avoided any aspect of the video related tasks as I felt I would be inadequate at executing at a high level. With forced remote instruction, I found a love and appreciation for dance on camera. As a novice filmmaker, I used what I had easily accessible to me which was an iPhone and a handheld gimbal. However, as a choreographer I went about using the camera as if it were one of the dancers. I found as time went on that this gives the viewer the sense that they are really a part of what is taking place on the screen. I also purposely didn't choreograph the camera and instead chose to move it less in the last number "I'm Not Going Anywhere" to allude to a sense of grounding and perseverance. In the 1930s, Busby Berkeley was the first to create dance routines specifically for the moving camera. He gained accolades for his use of a dancing camera, "creating the cinematic equivalent of pace and energy of Broadway dancing by fragmenting its forms and conventions in an imaginative way" (Reynolds 716). I align with Berkeley as I think the use of camera as dancer takes the work from something the viewer

¹ I will note an entire year of remote instruction and the necessity of screendance and dance for camera projects clearly influenced my decision to make a dance film instead of a stage production. I also thank Hunter's Film and Media IMA program for welcoming my cohort into their courses, as well.

observes to something the viewer experiences which is an overarching goal of my work in *Meet and Run*.

It was thrilling to have the cast and creatives all come together to watch our work when it premiered on April 8th, 2022. Feedback from viewers affirmed that we had effectively brought our audience on a meaningful AND enjoyable journey.

I think what impressed me most was the subtle use of dance and movement throughout the film. I particularly loved that the use of movement started out slow; easing us into what was to come. Without stepping out of the dramatic situation that was evolving, movement began quite realistically. That subtle use allowed me to engage more with the characters on an emotional level. As the film progressed and the songs helped to enlarge the emotional space of the characters into a larger sphere, the movement too began to grow. By the time I was fully engaged in the story and the characters' individual contributions, as an audience member, I was ready for larger dance numbers and even the "out of reality" moments of dance that contributed to the character's inner life without seeming too "fantasy-like" or unreal with what the eventual emotional payoff would be for me (Willis).

I intentionally played with style and the use of fantasy to delve into where each character was emotionally, so this feedback was thrilling to read as this was exactly what I was going for. We decided early on to use dance as a vehicle to express the characters' need to escape. I tried to structure it so as the need increases, so does the movement.

My biggest insecurity was that the moments wouldn't play that were meant to be soft and poignant. There is something about live theater when everyone is in the space, and the moments of vulnerability are physically felt, and the world gets quiet. I had never tried to create that on screen before but really tried to set up the audience by playing with fantasy versus reality. I chose to have the largest fantasy number right at the end so that when we are snapped back to reality, it would hit a little harder. Originally when I first heard the song "People Who Self Destruct" I was going to create a final bar number but instead ended up creating the

fantasy world where all of Natalie's cocktails become personified. When we are jolted back to reality we feel the weight of what is unfolding before we are brought into the resolution which has little to no fantasy elements.

Every melody, every lyric, every movement of dance keeps pulling you toward the moment when all five characters are actually in the same space and time. I can't even tell you what it was that made me grab my friend's leg. And I don't think it was a specific theatrical conceit that was used to do it. It was a "gotcha" moment where I was suddenly hooked, filled with emotion and tearing up. From that moment to the finish, it was a beautiful catharsis of lives inter-connected and coming to a fulfilling uplifting resolution to the film (Willis).

Something that I was not expecting was how many people complimented me on what I have accomplished (conceptualized, produced, directed, choreographed, shot and edited) as a female voice in the industry. I have to admit I have never thought much about my gender or how it may or may not act as a lens for those to view my work. As a cis white female, I took this as a moment to acknowledge my privilege but to also dive into a quick search about females in both dance and cinematography. Taking into consideration that we are still suffering from the Covid-19 pandemic, I pulled numbers from 2019 and found that while the majority of artists trying to work in these fields are overwhelmingly women, it is dominated by men. According to an article published by Backstage.com, a prominent online resource for commercial creatives in 2019, "ProductionPro's statistics also reveal shocking gender dichotomies for artists who identify as female. According to the data, seven Broadway shows had no females on their creative team—including writer, director, choreographer, or designers (whether scenic, costume, lighting, sound, makeup, or hair)" (Backstage). They also stated that eighty-seven percent of directors on Broadway were male and only twenty four percent of Broadway choreographers are female. Forbes noted that, "The Celluloid Ceiling Report reveals that

women made up 12% of directors working on the 100 top-grossing films in 2021, down from 16% in 2020” (Forbes). With this information in mind, I began to look for women who were in fact doing what I want to be doing (choreographing and directing for commercial theater and film).

Susan Stroman is a personal hero of mine who has dominated the field as a director and choreographer. I have wanted to be her since I first saw *Center Stage*, the movie, in 2000, not only because we were both born in Wilmington, DE but also because she is proof that a woman can do it all. She has won five Tony awards and set works for companies like Martha Graham and Pacific Northwest Ballet. I have seen her command the audition room. Julie Taymor is another force to be reckoned with as she was the first woman to receive a Tony award for Direction of a musical in 1997. “The Lion King has gone on to become the most successful stage musical of all time; 24 global productions have been seen by more than 90 million people. The show has played over 100 cities in 19 countries, and its worldwide gross exceeds that of any entertainment title in box office history” (Broadway World). The Tony Awards started in 1947. It took 50 years for a woman to receive an award for direction. On the film side of things, there is also Patty Jenkins who directed *Wonder Woman*, proving that women can succeed in the creation of things appealing to wide audiences. These women are all amazing but they shouldn’t be exceptions.

Art, especially experiential art, has the ability to create a safe space in which we can enter into and learn just as much about ourselves as the work of art itself. In Paleolithic times, art was an essential piece of everyday life. African dance is utilitarian and viewed as a “cultural behavior, determined by the values, attitudes and beliefs of a people” (Hanna 165). In the West

however, “by the time we tripped into the twentieth century...Art was not viewed as a critical tool for connecting to the most important things in life, nor as a means to teach and develop understandings about how a society should be and how we should be in society” (Booth 14). Brad, the first character we meet in the film, is struggling to find fulfillment in his everyday work life. He married his wife Natalie very young and felt the pressure of society to provide for his family. Brad takes a 9 to 5 boring analytic desk job in which he feels no purpose or satisfaction. He has overlooked every creative impulse he has had and traded it for a life of stability. When we continually overlook our creative impulses, “sadly, we can end up dancing to every tune except the quiet one that is our own” (Booth 40). This dissatisfaction of his work situation has trickled over into his personal life as well, causing his marriage to Natalie to grow stale and stagnant. When Brad finally gets the courage to take the first step and quit his job, there is a ripple effect and he has to continue to face the other issues created by his lack of creative energy in his career in order to reach his fullest potential.

People in our society are generally miserable and are not tuned in to following their bliss to realize their entelechy, their true potential or soul. In an intimate way, *Meet and Run* imagines how beautiful the world would be if the characters - and through an act of audience empathy where “they” become “we” - all tapped into their/our fullest potential. *Meet and Run* offers a meta-narrative and a viewer's experience built upon the belief we will realize our truest potential through artistic experiences of opening to the unknown and finding community. This is not to say that everyone will become painters, musicians and dancers, but rather, through the experience of art people become artists that work in hospitality, win awards for creatively selling the most merchandise, build roads, and travel to space. Once we embark upon the path

of our truest potential where we create things that hold meaning to us and we can empathize with other people, we earn the title of an “artist”. Every human deserves to live the artist’s way and to not live their day to day life feeling like they simply exist. Every human deserves to thrive. Perhaps this excerpt says it best, “Our goal should be to perceive the extraordinary in the ordinary, and when we get good enough, to live vice versa, in the ordinary extraordinary” (Booth 75).

I have always valued balancing my artistic life with my everyday existence. Too much of one extreme or the other and it leads me to feeling incredibly stifled. I see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Watching my Yiayia, a retired home economics and astronomy teacher, bake a pie is still to this day one of my favorite things to experience. She treats every pie as if it were a sublime living organism and by the time it comes out of the oven, it is a delicious masterpiece. I credit this ability to early exposure to art and aesthetic education. “Aesthetic education, then, is an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what is to be noticed, and to lend works of art their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful. When this happens, new connections are made in experience: new patterns are formed, new vistas are opened” (Greene 6). It is through aesthetic education that we can foster the ability to observe, ask questions and explore realities outside of our own. We, as artists in America, hold a great advantage. While we may be seen as frivolous and futile by our government, in reality, we are the keepers of life’s greatest secret. It is imperative as we move forward through these trying times that we do our best to impart our knowledge and fight for the arts and aesthetic education within our communities. It is through these foundations and principles that we have

the power to change the world. *Meet and Run* aspires to have its viewer perceive the extraordinary in the ordinary, so we may be able to all live in harmony extraordinarily. That is the power of art.

CALL TO ACTION

Perhaps under the feign of being anti-capitalist, many artists turn up their noses to Broadway and art as entertainment. A great deal of my contemporaries in the concert dance world have leaned away from their inclination toward making entertainment art for fear they wouldn't be taken seriously. Art has value for simply being someone's expression just as we all have value for simply having a heart that beats. *Meet and Run* tells the story of five different people all coming from a variety of life experiences. We illuminate each character's deepest insecurity and we bring them through it together. While no two character's hardships are the same, they all find solace within each other and through this compassion are able to move forward into the unknown more gracefully than they would have been able to alone.

Meet and Run doesn't just illuminate how important it is to lean on community in troubling times but also how important it is to look inward to illuminate your bliss so that you can cultivate your most fulfilling life. In the text *Letters to a Young Poet*, the author Rainer Maria Rilke talks about not looking for outward approval (as in the song "Magic Words") but rather, making art from the inside out. We all have the power to create our own worlds and find a richness in our lives that is simply within ourselves. And by digging deep we are finding new ways to explore and adapt, which is incredibly exciting and inspiring. Rilke challenges us to take responsibility for our own happiness. By producing *Meet and Run* on my own, I was able to

demonstrate to myself that I have the power to create opportunities for myself that aid in my own happiness.

Trust the Process, An Artist's Guide to Letting Go by Shaun McNiff describes art as unpredictable magic and how by looking at our everyday world more imaginatively we will see that we already create daily. An artist is an expression of different ways of living. He encourages his reader to lean into their own past and present discomforts and to create as a way to incite healing. The process itself is a kind of intelligence that can be trusted. True creativity can be found when we trust this process so much that we find our true purpose. *Meet and Run* believes that viewers can understand the form of a dance film enough to engage in the process, and thus benefit from it. As the film unfolds, the idea of leaning into one's past and present discomforts to incite healing becomes clear. The character Alex runs away from a hospital that his mom was in because he doesn't want to see her in a hospital gown, as he knows her time on this earth is fleeting. He decides to go dancing instead. When he finds the character Natalie passed out on the bathroom floor at the club unable to wake up, he faces his past and present discomforts and is finally able to bring himself to be there for his mother in the hospital. Sitting next to his mother in the hospital, Alex experiences his own painful human experience, but through it finds peace. The process provides narrative content and artistic validation. The characters learn to trust in themselves, one another and in inevitable mortalities. Watching something entertaining with deep roots in an African sensibility of art and life as one, but inside a Euro-American construct of concert dance and film, the audience becomes co-authors of a tale of compassion, cooperation and self-love in a time of great divisiveness.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Like Alex, the dance field is only limited by our own perceived barriers and there is room for everyone to express in the ways they desire without judgment or alienation. “Each theory, like each dance word, has its own internal logic, and it is the task of the researcher, like that of the choreographer, to discover that logical structure” (Hanstein 69). In order to understand dance, we need a perspective that recognizes the complex, nonlinear, multidimensional, and interactive nature of many of the areas of inquiry pursued by researchers in the field. Academic dance institutions also need to recognize the validity of more genres than the eurocentric concert forms that have dominated curriculums. This thinking suggests an organismic model. “Organismic models allow for the representation of organized complexity by accounting for the understanding that the parts do not have fixed and separate actions but rather act interdependently to maintain their wholeness” (Hanstein 83). Dance in higher education and the world can educate everyone as to the importance of cultivating a community that is capable of working together to bring forth change for the good.

My MFA Thesis Project *Meet and Run* provided Hunter College BA dance majors with real life experience not only working on a film set, but also with leading industry professionals. By bringing together working artists to work with Hunter students, connections were made and future pathways were revealed to burgeoning artists. This work initiates a potential legacy at Hunter College. My combination of concert dance with musical theatre and mediated arts will be the first such MFA Thesis in this budding and noticeably diverse Hunter College Dance Department². I will join historic and contemporary practitioners in the long lineage of dance for

² My thesis sponsor heard comments from other faculty about how incredible it was that every thesis project was “so different from the other,” “so clearly each artist’s different vision,” etc.

the camera, dance in film and screendance. I will also provide a new way to consider the existing tensions of Ivory Tower's persistent stance against popular dance. There are few schools one can attend that provide educational experiences in the realm of commercial dance. With so many college dance programs still trying to alleviate themselves of dogmatic underpinnings of American modern dance foundations, a challenge to high versus low, avant garde versus commercial binary-style thinking is still a nascent area of study within college dance in America. It would be my hope to bridge this gap by helping to create course offerings that reflect the importance of commercial dance in America and by facilitating courses that speak to the histories accompanying these methods. Artists are healers of the soul and deserve to receive adequate compensation. Artists are often the most passionate about their causes, which sometimes overshadows the need for compensation, but this shouldn't mean that we can stand for little to no pay.

It has been at the forefront of my process that I pay every creative that works on my project. I was able to raise a total (after taxes and processing fees) of \$22,031.42 for the *Meet and Run* operational costs. We spent a total of \$7,016.00 on operational costs including the recording of an album, set rentals, costumes, and craft services. The rest of the \$15,015.42 went toward paying the 50 creatives we had on the team. While the rate is significantly less than SAG minimums, at \$100 per day on set and \$50 per rehearsal, it was the principle of the matter. It is important to me that the artists who so generously gave their time to this project know how much I appreciate and value them. While I wish it could be more, someday when I have the ability to pay more, I will. Going through the effort to raise the funds and put money in the hands of my artists is the model that I establish for myself and hopefully will inspire others

to do the same. I also believe it establishes me as capable of leading larger budget endeavors in the future.

We will have another premiere in Atlanta, Georgia in August of 2022 where many of our fiscal supporters live. We also plan to submit to film festivals and to use this work as a calling card for future work. I expect to get into the film scene in Atlanta and *Meet and Run* will serve as a reel of my work. Ryan, Jonathan and I have also been talking about expanding this work and making *Meet and Run* into a stage adaptation. I look forward to continuing to find ways to make art that leads with love while pushing the boundaries of what we know to become better versions of ourselves, together.

CONCLUSION

My use of narrative without the presence of a script, situates my work in the continuum of concept musicals and relates to the organismic model of multiple interconnected experiences. The piece took operatic elements and mixed them with musical and dance concert elements. These ideas were taken and then incorporated into a movie. This project emboldens the dance community to connect with their own individual “why?” while exploring a work that asks a similar question. It also gave a much needed creative outlet to friends and coworkers who have been out of creative work for so long due to the Covid-19 global pandemic. It has been two years since the shutdown and only a small percentage of us are back actively working in the field. It was beautiful for us all to come together to do what we love; dance, connect and create.

Throughout my time at Hunter, I have come to realize that I don’t need anyone else’s permission to create art. I don’t have to wait to be hired. I can make my own work and I have

the capacity to take on any role in the making of it. There is no merit in being a miserable artist and we all have the ability to generate our own happiness via projects that we create ourselves. I aim to lean into my perceived flaws and to create things that are uniquely my own as a way to encourage others to do the same. It is paramount to my own belief system to create *Meet and Run* so that it has many points of accessibility regardless of dance literacy, age, gender, race, etc. However, while accessible, I strive to create a world in which those who seek to can get lost in their own imagination—in which they use my work as a conduit into different layers of perception. I am interested in dissecting the intricacies of the human experience and celebrating human flaws as a way to hold up a mirror into the viewers' world. I want to highlight perceived human flaws which are really a manifestation of our insecurities; to create work that accepts and leans into those insecurities and allows and inspires growth.

Previously, I have been interested in creating work that plays with the idea that time and space are only constructs that we have created for ourselves. I want my work *Meet and Run* to look and feel like the viewer's perceived reality. I am interested in the complexities of the human experience and how “normal” life is often the most interesting, complex, and beautiful. Through the process of viewing *Meet and Run*, the viewer can leave with a sense that their reality has shifted because of something that they experienced. My work challenges people to lean into their own discomfort and to find small revelations that they can take with them to help them in their everyday lives. In a New York Times Article that explores art as a way to justify one's everyday life experience, David Zwirner states, “I would contend that art and culture are the most important vehicles by which we come to understand one another. They make us curious about that which is different or unfamiliar, and ultimately allow us to accept it,

even embrace it” (Zwirner). While at Hunter College I was able to bring a diverse group of people together across socioeconomic, age and religious barriers to encounter this work and these ideas. *Meet and Run* illuminates that we are all more alike than we are different, and it is our differences that make living interesting and worthwhile.

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