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### Finding Light

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FINDING LIGHT

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors-in-Discipline

By

Olivia Jones

The Honors College

Theatre and Dance Honors-in-Discipline

East Tennessee State University

April 15, 2023

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cara Harker", positioned above a horizontal line.

Cara Harker, Faculty Mentor

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Melissa Shafer", positioned above a horizontal line.

Melissa Shafer, Faculty Reader

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## Introduction

Dance is versatile. It can showcase a wide range of emotion and messaging through a combination of steps and rhythms. Choreographers and dancers, symbiotically, work together to construct a message through body movements and expressions. The message can tell a wordless story, that the audience directly follows, or the message can be more abstract, that each audience member interprets differently. The music or sound used can layer more complexity and impact to the choreography. There is a saying that comes to mind when discussing the perception of dance: dance is the universal language. Just like language, dance is tied to many cultures. Each dance genre has very distinct qualities of movement with varying dynamics; however, each genre diverged from the dominant genre and blended with one or two lesser-known genres to make a new category. From my research, I discovered that there are significant connections between a time period's social and political shifts and the art being produced. Through my learning process, the topics of dance history, modern dance pioneers, and my developing dance philosophy were used to evolve and deliver my original dance composition, *Finding Light*.

*Finding Light* explores the analytic and creative side of choreography with inspiration from dance history to tell a contemporary story. My experiences as a theatre and dance Honors-in-Discipline student from 2019-2023 has been invaluable in creating my suite, *Finding Light*. It was performed in Campus Center Building, Studio 205 on November 6, 2022. Prior to the performance, I used my knowledge of my completed twelve dance courses during my time at ETSU. This thesis represents my dance journey through college and how my view of dance and what it means to be a dancer adapted.

To understand modern dance, there needs to be a clear definition of the word, *modern*. It is defined by Merriam-Webster in the following ways: “relating to characteristic of the present or

immediate past” or “relating to a period extending from a relevant remote past to the present time” (Merriam-Webster). In terms of dance, *modern* relates to the early 1900 and dance pioneers like Serge Diaghilev, who modernized ballet, Isadora Duncan, commonly referred to as the “Mother of Modern dance”, Martha Graham, who secured the future modern dance in American culture through her school and dance company, and Merce Cunningham, who integrated technology into his choreography in the latter half of the twentieth century. These icons brought new techniques and ideology through compiling aspects of various traditional dance forms from Indian, African, Caribbean, and Native American cultures.

This thesis, *Finding Light*, demonstrates that typical hallmarks of modern dance from Duncan, Graham, and Cunningham can tell a contemporary, yet universal story of social unrest. Modern dance has an extremely strong connection to the society from which it originated, and my choreographic aim was to explore present day themes through modern dance fundamentals. This research provides a glimpse into my year-long creative research into modern dance as a social experiment that pushed the dance trends of its day and how modern dance continues to be a source of creative expression.

### **The Modernization of Dance**

Though there was a very gradual deviation from ballet, the beginning of modern dance is agreed to have started with an American dancer living in Europe, Isadora Duncan. She lived in many different lively cities, learning from well-known artists and critics, and while she was a part of a successful troupe in New York City, she left in 1899. She found a space in the world to think freely and absorb other types of art and ideology, in Berlin. Eventually it led to a speech she delivered in 1903 as she insisted for a shift in dance to favor, “the dance of the ancient Greeks, natural and free” (University of Pittsburg). Her philosophy challenged the societal norms

that ballet upheld. From that moment, she became the leader of a movement and later known as the “Mother of the Modern Dance”.

As the new century proceeded, Isadora Duncan created the infamous hallmarks of free dancing. It quickly became the abandonment of the restrictive postures and placements of ballet. It started by stripping the body of limiting items such as thick and heavy costumes and cumbersome shoes. She believed that clothing should be minimal and drape-like, resembling a toga. The pictures below highlight the stark difference of Duncan’s new dance style, shown on the left, and the traditional ballet costume of the time. The ballet costume worn by world-famous ballerina, Anna Pavlova, resembles a swan from the highly acclaimed solo, *The Dying Swan*. The costume is extremely detailed and decorated with real swan feathers, a boned bodice, and many tulle and cotton layers for the tutu. There are even sequins on the top layers of the tutu. From looking at Pavlova’s picture, extravagance and even pompousness can be felt about ballet. Isadora Duncan, shown on the left, is wearing a loose-fitting, floor-length gown with a rope to secure it around her upper body. The origin of her minimalistic style demonstrates her desire to replicate Grecian fashion. Which came first the chicken or the egg? Was Duncan making these stylistic choices intentionally or were there financial limits to her vision? Many aspects of Isadora Duncan’s niche style points to stripping back from the opulence of ballet and turning to an artwork that showcased a physical presentation of the spirit and energy that surrounds.



Isadora Duncan



Anna Pavlova

Around the turn of the twentieth century, ballet was as rigid and strict as ever and worked against gravity, but the new “free” dance genre allowed the body to move naturally with gravity. Duncan was also radical in the notion that the body’s natural movement initiates from the solar plexus. The solar plexus is a connection of many nerves that is located near the diaphragm, or center of the torso. Her methodology flips ballet’s teachings on its head in a way. Ballet dancers are taught to keep their torso stiff. Duncan’s inspiration relates to nature, Greek art, and her imagination. It can be assumed that Pavlova’s pose was given to her to replicate. Duncan’s dance style set a new precedent for dancers to become choreographers concurrently.

As Duncan’s style was the antithesis of ballet, or tradition, many people were intolerant of modern dance--especially upon her return to America in 1908. Her dancing was, at first, poorly received by the New York audiences, but popularity began to grow within a year. Duncan started up several schools in Europe and mentored a group of students. While her physical life ended in a tragic car accident, her legacy continued. Through her spirit, Duncan inspired others to push the boundaries of dance, and even ballet.

Isadora’s experimental and radical nature brought great change for ballet. While ballet was viewed as aristocratic currency in Europe, a revolutionary and provocative Russian ballet

company named the Ballet Russe debuted in 1909 Paris. It bridged the gap from classical ballet to a more contemporary version of ballet. The artistic director or impresario for the company, Serge Diaghilev, had a personal mission to share his homeland's art and style to Western Europe, and show off modern movement with traditional ballet training. This instant success led to reestablishment of Russia's vitality and dominance among the other world powers of dance. The Ballet Russe was trailblazing in one aspect mainly. Diaghilev made the ballets a masterpiece—telling a story through means of collaboration with many artists. He set a precedent for Western dance and ballet. Diaghilev was most likely a micromanager while he built a ballet from nothing. The only constant that audiences could depend on was the central message of triumph and virtuosity. To show his devotion and patriotism to his home country, Diaghilev favored native Russian dancers, choreographers, designers, composers, and so on. This could have been a way for Russia's court to boast about the concentration of talent, opulence, and overall strength of a country.

While the dance troupe stated that it was a ballet company, the Ballet Russe was shockingly radical for the ballet world. Everything from the costuming and movements to the plotlines and color schemes were experimental. The choreography and music were made to complement each component, an innovation for the time. In its detail, the costumes were a great show of Russian aristocracy and wealth. They are believed to be the first company to divert from traditional ballet tutus and skirts and dress in pants, tunics, shorts, and even midriff-showing two-piece garments. While the dancers told the story with movement, the meticulous set designs allowed the audiences to be fully immersed into the storyline. This was the beginning of contemporary ballet.



The pictures below are original Ballet Russe costumes. They utilized popular colors, patterns, and shapes to tell an otherwise traditional story. It bares resemblance to a more structured look to Duncan's costuming.



*Le Coq d'Or*, c. 1914; by Natalia Goncharova



*Parade*, c. 1917; by Pablo Picasso

### **Modern vs. Contemporary**

Since the dance world has evolved, modern dance and contemporary ballet were blurring the lines of the genres. What was the difference between calling dance modern and contemporary? Contemporary is defined as, “happening, existing, living, or coming into being during the same period of time”, or “marked by characteristics of present period” (Meriam-Webster). While grammatically speaking modern and contemporary are synonyms, in dance, they are not. Modern concepts have a harder time being accepted by the masses, because the new idea is opposite of present ideas. Contemporary, in terms as a trend, can be more easily accepted by the masses, while it is a slight deviation from the norm. There can be contemporary modern but not modern contemporary. There will continue to be the constant shift of what is modern and contemporary, which can be nauseating for critics and audiences alike, but this fluidity in trends and pop culture is what allows for every artist to become a pioneer. For an example, take

classical ballet; the Ballet Russe was contemporary ballet, while Isadora Duncan was modern—at least until the next innovator took over.

### **American Modern Dance**

The American modern dance gained widespread popularity as result of the social and political aftermath of World War II. Post-war audiences were rapidly entranced with the counterculture that surrounds modern dance. Since the late eighteenth century, people were accustomed to the conservative roles of women that were shown in popular ballets like fairies, princesses, nymphs, and damsels in distress. Modern dance was (and continues to be) the counterculture to the traditional ideals. In more recent controversy, many choreographers have worked outside the status quo of a female and male duos. For the first thirty years of modern dance, the public had mixed reviews with lots of passionate beliefs about the radicalness of modern dance philosophy, with harsh criticism apart of the majority.

### **Who is Martha Graham?**

Martha Graham was a force that forever changed the landscape of dance and choreography during her life-long career and through her legacy of her school and company. In the beginning of her professional career, she danced with the Denishaw school but felt it was too akin to ballet. In a revolutionary time in America, Graham rejected the typical ballet characteristics for women like the roles of fairies, the emotionless smiles, and delicate stage presence. Her purpose of creating was to represent fears, struggles, and strife between a person or group. As per usual with modern dance at the time, the showcase came with polarizing reviews. Graham knew that modern was not widely accepted as art or even dance, so she examined movements and emotions. This led to her development of Graham technique.

The hallmark of Graham technique is the opposition of release and contract. Her philosophy of anatomy and movement paved a new thinking that the center of the body is not where the heart is located but much lower in the hips. Establishing this sense of bodily awareness, Graham was able to make complex poses and sequences utilizing more control through breathing through the center. As time progressed, there are more contemporary forms of all types of dances, but Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham are evidence of the evolution of modern dance.

### **Graham's Legacy**

Martha Graham continues to have a strong influence on the dance world decades after her time on Earth. This level of ascendancy was accomplished through the establishment of her dance school and company. The Martha Graham Company debuted in 1926 becoming the oldest modern dance company in America. During her lifetime, she created nearly 181 ballets and a fraction are still performed with little adaptations. Graham had an eye for physically strong dancers with commanding stage presence. One of her male principal dancers eventually became a highly experimental choreographer after leaving the company in 1945. Merce Cunningham and his collaborator, John Cage, were the dynamic duo; Cunningham choreographed while Cage composed. This added a unique marriage of dance and music—which again brings to my mind the saying, “Which came first? The chicken or the egg?”. Sometimes the music was never listened or danced to until showtime, or the music would change last minute. Cunningham wanted to be unpredictable with his work and push the dancers to not rely on musical memory. While he started his professional career with Graham, his own technique had slight differences that hers. Cunningham tended to have straighter legs with calmer upper body movements. As a choreographer, he would create a handful short sequences and number them. Then, he would roll

some dice to create a full dance. Yet again, he pushed his dancers to not rely on muscle memory. He gained widespread popularity being a choreographer at the forefront of integrative art, using film, special effects, and lighting in dance to enrich the audience's experience.

In the span of twelve dance classes I have taken at ETSU, I had a growing interest in the previously discussed modern dance choreographers and dancers, and I wanted to make a suite representing all three. Each piece would pay homage to Duncan, Graham, and Cunningham. Fully understanding their unique techniques, inspirations, and works sparked a new creative outlook in my mind that came to exist as *Finding Light*.

### **My College Dance Journey**

For the suite, *Finding Light*, I wanted to use my dance training I have acquired at East Tennessee State University since Fall of 2019 to Spring of 2023. Upon acceptance into ETSU, I was an aspiring Rockette who became a member of the ETSU Dance Team, which was a major shift to my past training of mainly concert dance with a small dose of competition dance. I enjoyed the challenge of learning the skills needed for the team like turns in second, turning discs, pom technique, and different movement quality than I was accustomed to. At times I wanted to give up, I told myself, "This is for a greater purpose. I am going to be a Rockette one day." Looking back, I was dancing to prove myself, not for expression or enjoyment, and I was on the path of losing love for dance. For the next two years, I became burned-out, and I felt my body breaking down. I had a reoccurrence of an eating disorder that started in early high school and left me with extremely low vitamin D, dental carries, and hair loss. My mental health was also deteriorating with overwhelming negative self-talk, comparisons to others, and constant worry of not being good enough. I felt like there was something wrong with me, so I pushed myself harder. This led to not one but multiple sprained ankles and bouts of sickness in a span of

three months. I let my external responsibilities like dance team and school be my excuses for the lack of personal care. Continually, I neglected to listen to my body and rest. Surprisingly, this cycle lasted for two years until it was time to leave the team. Gradually, I began my journey of healing my relationships with dance, food, and body.

Up until that point, dance was like a job; I had people depending on me to show up and perform at my best at each practice and event. While being a dance team member, I craved for the structure and technique that classes offered, and the Dance minor courses gave me that outlet. Class was a soothing experience. The environment nurtured individuality and free-thinking. I was used to being tense and on-guard that my creativity and passion were waning. I couldn't simply stop dancing; I had a minor to complete and grades to worry about. After contemplating, I decided that until I could fully take a break from dance, I would enjoy class just as class. This was quite hard for me—and still is. Wanting to break away from the pressure and stakes I placed on myself, I had to separate dance just like my other classes. It was hard to transition dance to a part of me and not my identity. As I have grown into a healthier relationship with fitness and dance, my movements I gravitate to changed. The me as a freshman and sophomore would want legs, legs, *legs*. Now, there has been a shift to more abstract movements that feel good in my body, which in turn make me happy.

The biggest turning point of regaining my passion for dance was spring semester in 2022. Tap II and Dance History gave me new ways to gain confidence and inspiration. Tap class pushed my musicality and mind; I told myself for so long that I couldn't count, or that I was not a natural tapper. Luckily, my instructor, Kirk Pfeiffer, encouraged open discussion for the mental load of dance. By the midterm, there was this genuine camaraderie among the class. The other class I took that semester was Dance History with Jen Kintner, and the depth of information was

a large inspiration for my thesis. The class being centered around discussion extended my perspective of the meaning and purpose of dance around the world. Being able to connect when and how dance was passed down generations and across cultures was eye-opening and allowed me to break the imaginary, grandiose standard of choreography. The past four years in ETSU's Theatre and Dance Department gave me a new, lasting love for dance and performance to carry me into post-graduate life.

### **Choreographic Process**

A mix of modern and contemporary dance, with an ode to jazz, are used to show the juxtaposition between emotion of the dance and the emotion of the music. Stereotypically, modern, and contemporary dance are used to convey the heavy, complex emotions, and jazz dance is used to showcase the lighter, simple emotions.

My dance style is heavily influenced by the training I grew up with. For ballet, it was primarily a blend of French and Bournonville method. Jazz was usually Broadway style, and modern was Horton Technique. All these styles, unconsciously, influence choreographic choices. At the time of choreographing, I had previously completed Dance History and currently was enrolled in Jazz II. Both classes were imperative to the development of my dance philosophy. Along with my admiration for Graham's technique, my creativity fed off muscle memory and current training.

The process began in the summer. My vision was to have three dances: two group numbers and a solo. I wanted a mix of modern and contemporary dance, with an ode to jazz, are used to show the juxtaposition between emotion of the dance and the emotion of the music. Stereotypically, modern, and contemporary dance are used to convey the heavy, complex emotions, and jazz dance is used to showcase the lighter, simple emotions.

For the first group number, I decided to use a past dance I choreographed during the class, Dance Composition, in the fall of 2021. The solo was going to be me doing an improvised dance inspired by Martha Graham's *Lamentations*. The final piece of the suite was going to be a dance with a lot of groups and accented parts. In preparation for rehearsal, I improvised in front of a mirror to random songs for choreography ideas. Week after week, I kept trying something new. I tried instrumental, percussion only, spoken word, even sounds of a thunderstorm—nothing was sticking. Around July, I concluded that my creativity was overworked, so I decided to take a break from it until the day before the first rehearsal.

The dancers I asked to be a part of my thesis were people who I greatly valued as artists and friends. I wanted to create almost a reunion in a way. Two of the dancers I have been dancing with since I started dance in 2010. Three, I met through dance team, and the remaining two I met through dance classes and mutual friends. Including myself, I had eight dancers. This was going to pose a small hurdle for my creativity since I was accustomed to spacing odd numbers. Luckily, for the first dance, I was able to work as strictly the choreographer and had seven dancers.

During my “no choreography” cleanse, I laid on the floor listening to songs, skipping when thirty seconds were uninspiring. I rediscovered a song that I grew up listening to with my dad, called, “House of the Rising Sun” by *The Animals*. This song had a roughness I wanted for my big group number. With the song picked, I was able to visualize the beginning steps and subsequent formations. With eight dancers in this dance, the formations took more thought. I used paper or whiteboards to map out the movements. Once rehearsals started, I got in a rhythm of coming in with the next two to three formations planned, and the choreography was set on the spot. This process served the group well. The “House of the Rising Sun” formations are my

favorite part of choreographing; they offer depth and more possibilities to the choreography in that section. The first formation was a diagonal line on the floor, and it fed into a circle downstage. The formations were familiar, but the way of getting into formations, was where I tried to think outside of the box. My favorite formation and pattern of travel was about halfway through the dance, and my inspiration was the topic of my Nutritional Biochemistry class—a protein. I wanted these two circles to spin around and unwind into three diagonals to mimic a denaturing protein.

The next two dances were harder to find music for, because both songs had to flow with the larger group dance. The other group dance took a more collaborative route with my dancers. We were warming up, and I played the album of *Harry's House* upon request. I heard “Daylight” and knew it would work for the existing choreography and the whole suite. This dance was going to be the opener of the suite and only seven dancers. My original choreography was set to a different song and had only five dancers. This gave me another chance to play the part of only choreographer. For formations in this dance, I wanted to mimic a sun rising and setting. The opening and ending of the dance featured the dancers in a straight line representing the horizon. Then, the dancers spread to two lines that rotate into a circle. From the circle, the shape moves into a V-shape as homage to sun rays. As this point in the dance, the V-shape formation is where the most dramatic movements are done, loosely representing the strength and intensity of the Sun's UV rays. Then, the dance ends with a straight-line leaving stage left.

Throughout the course of the rehearsal window, I kept putting off my solo. I didn't want to make another contemporary piece to music I would have to find for days. I was debating to cut it completely. Simply, I was burned-out on creativity. After some encouragement, I kept my solo but reframed the concept. From taking loose ideas of modern dance pioneers to an improvised



dance on a cube, I was going to replicate my version of *Lamentations*. This paid homage to Martha Graham, for being a physical inspiration, but also Merce Cunningham, who danced in Graham's company and went on to leave dance up to change. Cunningham was the choreography that experimented with chance, and I played with chance by improvising my version of *Lamentations*. This was going to challenge me as a dancer to live in the moment and be fully aware for a minute and thirty seconds. Overall, choreographic process, though different than planned, came together in the end to match my earliest vision.

### **Significance and Meanings**

Originally, my inspiration of the suite was finding light and hope at the end of the day. I was going to take a more personal mental health approach, however a recent epiphany of one of the songs gave me more insight into an additional story and meaning for the audience. The secondary meaning of my suite is fighting the systemic oppression of women and minorities in the United States. This message was not aimed to be directly interpreted by watching my suite, but it was my reaction to what happened over the summer to the beginning of last November. My music choice helped me achieve that journey of looking for hope with the common theme of light in the title or in the quality of music.

The suite starts with "Daylight" by Harry Styles, and it is an upbeat, sad song. Messages of loneliness and questioning purpose of life are sung about, and the metaphor of, "if I was a bluebird, I would fly to you" give a depth into the hope for freedom and free will. By the end of the line above, it is discovered that the narrator only wants to be "stuck like honey" to the person they miss, so it is a false sense of freedom for both parties. The lyrics in "House of the Rising Sun" give an idea of eternal damnation, as the narrator is telling his story as a cautionary tale through the line, "...tell your children, not to do what I have done...". I believe this is an indirect

way to say, “don’t let history repeat itself”, and yet it is with new cycles of oppression and abuse of powers in present day. The song continues to use imagery of a ball and chain, either metaphorical or literally. There are theories about the inspiration of the song, but the one I find the most compelling is that it was based on a brothel in New Orleans. It was named after Madame Marianne LeSoleil Levant, which means “rising sun” in French. My solo was my version of *Lamentations* from Martha Graham, and it was a dance to mourn the loss of women’s right of choice. The costume choice of the dance bag gave an interpretation of external limitations and hinderance in action. For me, the bag represented the social and even legal restrictions I have on my body as a woman. Through this exploration, I discovered that Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham choreographed dances in response to social and political movements. Despite my original efforts in creating an abstract suite, I found an unintentional story, further insisting that dance is fundamentally communication.

### **Conclusion**

For so long, I separated dance and academics until this thesis. Though it was challenging, it was exciting to get to research and discover more details about my favorite dance masters. The abundance of information was overwhelming, and it took a lot of brainstorming to organize how I could use it in valuable ways. This type of mental block pushed my choreographic process to take forms that mimicked the artists discussed. I played with chance, nature, and inanimate objects as my influence for movement. The group of women I was gratefully able to dance with one last time was a cathartic event to close my time dancing at ETSU. The knowledge and memories I have gained through my minor and thesis are invaluable and will last me a lifetime.

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