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A NEWFOUND PASSION- CHOREOGRAPHY

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A Newfound Passion-Choreography

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Fine and Performing Arts Honors Program

By

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Fine and Performing Arts Honors Program

East Tennessee State University

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I. Introduction

A Newfound Passion- Choreography analyzes the artistic process and life journey of creating choreography for musical theatre. My training as a dance minor at East Tennessee State University from 2011-2015 culminated in my final senior capstone experience as a choreographer for the ETSU Division of Theatre and Dance's production of *Oklahoma!*. Composing a new musical theatre dance and analyzing the original choreography of *Oklahoma!* (and the art of choreography more generally) provided significant material for analysis, and the following research reflects what I learned and experienced. Overall, the experience of choreographing has changed the way I see myself as a dancer and has instilled in me a new sense of respect for choreographers around the world.

II. Finding Inspiration Through Dance

I have been a dancer for eighteen years and have always considered myself well-rounded in many different styles of dance. Until three years ago, I had only spent my time as a student learning techniques from other instructors. My dance background includes not only learning choreography in the Tri-Cities area, but also travelling all over the country learning new dances from a number of acclaimed choreographers. I consider a majority of my middle school and high school years as the "competitive" years of my life. I became determined to push myself to travel and compete in dance as much as I possibly could. Throughout my life, I have won seven National Championship titles for various styles of dance including: jazz, lyrical, tap, and hip hop; five cash scholarship awards, and countless overall winner awards while a student at *The Dance Company* (Johnson City, TN) studio.

I came to college with an open mind, for I had no idea where dance would take me for the rest of my life. When a dancer graduates high school, the dance competitions and categories change completely. I was accustomed to competing by myself or in a small group; dancing in college as a major or minor is typically done in large groups, so I felt the strong desire to be a part of the college / university's dance team.

As soon as I graduated high school, I thought I was following my dream. I had been accepted to the University of Tennessee and auditioned to be on the UT Dance Team, which is known in the dance world as one of the best dance teams in the country. I had paid my first tuition payment and met my roommate, with whom I would be living for the next four years. I decided this was not what I needed to do. I came to ETSU and wanted to major in Pre-Med and become a Dermatologist. I have always believed that God has a good way of showing me the path I need to follow, and interestingly enough, I ended up doing none of those things.

I had dreams to move away from my hometown and make something bigger of myself than I ever could be in Piney Flats, TN. With big dreams of wearing orange and the big "power-T", my plan changed when I lost both of my grandparents within four months of each other. My family is my entire life, and when I lost my Papaw and Mamaw, my life changed drastically. My family needed me and I needed them, so I decided to go to ETSU my freshman year and then transfer to UT. I had always told my family that I wanted to break the tradition of graduating from ETSU. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins went to ETSU, as well as my mom and dad. To my surprise, four years later, I would not want to be anywhere else. I am not a member of the University of Tennessee Dance Team, but I am the captain of the East Tennessee State

University Dance Team. I am not a Pre-Med major (After a year being a Pre-Med major, I found myself successful in the subject area, but knew it was not where my heart wanted me to be), but I am a Communication Studies major with a minor in Dance. I am blessed to have been given more than I ever imagined in scholarship. When I thought coming to ETSU was the last plan of action on my list, it ended up being the best opportunity I have ever been given.

ETSU is where I found myself in dance. Even though I have danced my whole life and loved every minute of it, my unfortunate family loss became a new light for my future. Along with the loss of my grandparents, my dance teacher of eighteen years, Kristy, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Even though I graduated from the dancing school, I have stayed by her side to teach dance classes for her five days a week for the past four years. Having never had the opportunity to choreograph for others, teaching dance for Kristy allowed me the opportunity to do so. This is where I found out why I truly love dance. In all the chaos life has brought me in the past couple of years, dance was always there to pick me up and give me a reason to keep waking up every morning. My grandparents and Kristy taught me more about life than anyone else. Kristy's cancer has now moved into the bone, and the only way the doctors can treat it is to slow the spread of the cancer throughout her body. Kristy only misses dance classes when she is required to travel to Nashville to get treatment, but otherwise she never takes a day off. She taught me that when the world is crashing down and life is out of my hands, dance allows me to escape my deepest fears. In Kristy I see so much strength; I see hope in her eyes as she strives every day to inspire her students to love dance just as much as she does. In my opinion, if it were not for

dance, cancer would have taken her body much sooner. This will be her eighth year fighting cancer.

While I am not sure if it was cancer or death that allowed me to find a new path in dance, all I know is that it is the path I was destined to travel. My path led me to want to use my own choreography for the first time and to share my life through the art of dance. I still use the choreography of others to become inspired, but I more frequently use my choreography to inspire my students.

I was so excited when my Faculty Advisor for my Honors Thesis, Professor Cara Harker, mentioned that ETSU was doing a musical this year. *Oklahoma!* is one of the most widely known musicals in history. She explained to me that she was allowing students the opportunity to present personal choreography in the show for a senior capstone experience and asked if I was interested in choreographing the saloon dance sequence, which is part of the *Dream Ballet* at the end of Act I. I knew that this was exactly what I wanted to do, even though I had never choreographed anything for live theatre. I remembered my grandparents and Kristy and knew that they would want me to take the challenge. I not only found dance inside of me, but I found a new meaning for life and the challenges it brings. Life comes and goes very quickly, and that is why I must share my love for dance to as many people as possible.

III. Agnes DeMille and *The Dream Ballet*

In describing what it was like for me to become a choreographer, it is important to define the role of a choreographer:

a person who creates dance compositions and plans and arranges dance movements and patterns for dances and especially for ballets.

(Dictionary.com)

This is one of my favorite definitions of a choreographer. I do, however feel as if it is outdated. In the last twenty years, dance has transformed into many different styles. Ballet is the foundation of many types of dance, but choreography is so much more than just arranging movements for ballet. For *Oklahoma!* the definition is very fitting, considering the choreography in the original 1943 Broadway production was set by a ballet choreographer. Agnes De Mille is her name, and she set the standard for early musical choreography expectations.

I was familiar with who Agnes De Mille was before spending time researching the musical and actually being involved with the ETSU production, but I knew nothing of her choreography background. I attribute my process of becoming a choreographer to the inspiration of Agnes. It is important to know some background information about the original choreographer of *Oklahoma!* to see why it has made such an impact on me not only as a dancer, but as the choreographer for the saloon dance scene in *The Dream Ballet*.

Agnes De Mille was born in Harlem in a middle class residential area, but she was not middle class. Her father was a successful playwright and her uncle was a very well-known film director. "Being the daughter of a successful playwright, she had to adjust her life of luxury to worrying about being able to pay for her dance and theatre lifestyle when she moved out on her own" (Agnes De Mille). She was unable to find anyone that would hire her to choreograph, so she decided to start doing little jobs on her own to make money. She ended up losing more than she was earning and took off to London with her mother, who had just divorced her father. She

began to blossom with love of choreography and returned back to the states after making a name for herself. She was hired to create choreography for *Oklahoma!*, and she never turned back.

Agnes De Mille's name then began to appear in the conversations of all musical theater lovers around the world. *The Dream Ballet* was the crowning moment to De Mille's rapidly growing career. *The Dream Ballet*, which occurred at the end of Act 1 of *Oklahoma!*, is not just a dance number, it is a story in itself. Having been a well-traveled woman, Agnes studied dozens of different genres of dance. Many who follow Agnes De Mille appreciate that she is such a well-rounded dance professional. Agnes De Mille knew ballet, but she pushed herself to make the musical number one that could inspire everyone.

The story of the ballet is one that sets the scene for the entire musical. The love story between Curly and Laurey is one we see often between young adults in love who do not want to let the word out for fear of having everyone talking about them. They are both very stubborn characters when together, and will not admit they have feelings for one another. Laurey decides to go to the box social with Jud. Later, Curly pays a visit to Jud in the smokehouse; a friendly conversation leaves Jud feeling like he is alone in the world not worthy of any woman's heart.

Laurey's dream is expressed through what Agnes De Mille envisioned as a way to express emotion. "Her conflict between Jud and Curly leads to a dream of her future with either of them. It begins with a wedding where Curly waits at the altar. Much to her surprise, Jud is there to make sure the nuptials do not happen. Much like how the world views Jud, in the dream he attacks and kills Curly and demands that Laurey go away with him instead" (*Oklahoma*

Synopsis). She encounters many people in the dream who seem to convince her to be with Curly and to stay away from Jud. Jud wakes Laurey up from her dream and insists that she go to the party with him as her date. Interestingly enough, Curly comes to her side to request the same thing. Laurey is frightened and feels that her dream was a warning of events. She decides to stand against the warning signs of the dream and agrees to go with Jud to the party.

My assignment for Oklahoma was the ‘saloon girl’ section of *The Dream Ballet*, which is very significant to Laurey’s imagination and how she sees Jud. The saloon girls represent that Jud is “easy” when it comes to being swooned by women. Jud is a hired worker on Laurey’s family farm. Aunt Eller seemed to be the only person around that would hire him because everyone else was afraid of his temper.

Those around him see Jud as rugged and masculine and as a person who will beat someone up to get what he wants. “The saloon girls represent the desires and temptations of men. Jud wants ‘real women’ not the pin up images of women that he can buy. These saloon girls resemble that very thing. The mere fact that his last name is ‘Fry’ and he lives in a smokehouse represents his type of character like he comes from the fiery flames of greed” (Bruhm 103).

In her article, *Bodies of Work-Broken Dolls*, Lisa Gennaro States:

Rather than presenting the ‘Postcard Girls’ realistically in a raucous bar room performing dances appropriate to the time and place, de Mille created a surreal image of the saloon girls as seen through the lens of Laurey’s sexual naiveté. Working with methodologies developed by Louis Horst, one of the primary architects of American modern dance, de Mille employed his method of modernist distortion to create a movement vocabulary (5).

It was important to use the background of the original musical to help with the foundation of my choreography. I had to know the character of Laurey, “who is a heroine confused about Curly and seems always to be waiting for him to make the first move; she is too innocent to see that her acceptance of Jud's invitation will mean trouble” (Oklahoma! Rodgers). I used the character traits of Laurey and Jud as a basis for modeling the movement of the actors in the ETSU version.

I choreographed Laurey on stage right looking curiously as the saloon dancers appeared. Never having experienced in real life what she was experiencing in her dream, it was important to make the choreography resemble something that would actually happen in real life. The saloon dancers must be seductive and represent the desire that Jud has for women. I incorporated the dancers and Laurey together in a way that showed them nagging at her like she is no woman that Jud would usually desire. I had Jud always standing tall and strong and always in control of the saloon women, as if he were to “have his way” with them. Collaboratively with the design of the characters, the choreography had to reflect every aspect of the storyline. Agnes De Mille did a very good job making a clear picture for the audience through her choreography.

The music Agnes De Mille worked with was very simple, but at times she would push the bodies of the dancers to the limit. This was something I wanted to share with my dancers in the piece, to not only challenge myself, but them as well. Ms. De Mille created in one dance number more variety than I have ever seen. Her joy was expressed to the dancers with whom she worked. It then was shared with members of the audience, and then later influenced movies and musical theatre to new levels of creativity. *Oklahoma!* was a musical based on the words of the songs and

real emotions of the performers. Without Agnes De Mille, the world of dance would not be where it is today.

Agnes De Mille believed that it was just as important to fight for dance rights and to surpass boundaries as to show it onstage. She spoke across the United States about “the part of government subsidy for the arts, resulting in her appointment by President Kennedy to be a member of the National Advisory Committee on the Arts, the forerunner of the National Endowment for the Arts, to which she was appointed as a member of its National Council by President Johnson when it was activated during his administration” (Agnes De Mille Dances). Not only did she impact the dance world about making dance a part of the plotline of the musical, but also she took dance appreciation to a national level.

Agnes was the first principle dancer and member of what is now the American Ballet Theatre to have dances performed by only black dancers. This opened up dance to an “outgroup” of the ballet realm and allowed diversity into dance theatre. She was also the first to bring American Folk Dance and Classical Ballet together. This was her version of modern dance. Even today, many well-known dance choreographers are influenced by De Mille’s choreography and contributions to dance, and the innovation of her work still stands strong.

What is most inspiring about Ms. De Mille is that she was able to go from suffering a cerebral hemorrhage of the brain in 1975 (while touring with her self-established company, *Heritage Dance Theatre*) to using what she knew from her discipline of dance to overcome a huge medical obstacle. She learned how to write with her left hand, later becoming an author of

five books and still was able to teach her techniques of “motivated gestures” of movement instead of the boring old “technical style” (Anderson). Motivated gestures made a strong impression on me when I watched De Mille’s choreography of *The Dream Ballet*, especially for my saloon girl section. In The New York Times Newspaper, Anderson says:

Viewing dance as a theatrical and expressive art, Miss de Mille stressed motivated gestures rather than niceties of classical style in her choreography and in her coaching of dancers. For her, bodily movement was a form of communication akin to speech. An eclectic, she drew from ordinary gesture and everyday movement as well as from the technical vocabularies of classical ballet, modern dance and folk and social dance. The dramatic situation always determined the type of movement she employed... (4).

That is what made Agnes De Mille such a powerful choreographer for all time, because the world would not know “communication through dance” if it were not for her. She took a little bit of every dance style she knew and made a signature style of her own. She was not afraid to express her opinions and dared to be different. Throughout my process of becoming a choreographer for a large college production, I kept note of the attitude that Agnes had and dared to go out of my comfort zone to try just do what my body told me to do.

IV. Oklahoma!

For those who do not know the musical *Oklahoma!* the story has so much to offer the audience in humor and in romantic relationships. *Oklahoma!* is not just about cowboys riding

around shooting their guns up into the air; it captures the heart in music and dance. The history of the musical lives on and provides a great comparison to how musical theatre has transformed and impacted not only those who watch for enjoyment, but how dancers and musicians are viewed today.

Here is a look into the opening night of *Oklahoma!*: The St. James Theater was full, the lights were bright. People waited anxiously for the curtain to open, and for the show to begin. The greatest western cowboy musical ever written was about to make history on March 31, 1943. It was *Oklahoma!*. The development of this grand show has changed the way the world sees musical theatre and set a high standard for how music and dance can lead the story line. The history of *Oklahoma!* is one that has been alive since that opening day in New York City.

The name “*Oklahoma!*” is no stranger to those in the world of musical theatre; especially to dancers. The original name *Away We Go* naturally evolved to what we know it to be today because of the song that closed the show, “O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A, Yeeow!” The musical book called *Oklahoma!* was written by Oscar Hammerstein II based on the play, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which was performed on Broadway in the 1930’s. *Oklahoma!* was directed by Rouben Mamoulian, who is known for *Porgy and Bess* as well as *Love me Tonight*, and the music and lyrics were by Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers. Each contributed their love and passion to the musical in hopes it would be a success. “2,248 shows later, the name *Oklahoma!* was one to be put in the history books” (Playbill).

Not only did the show impact the live stage, but also two movies (1955, 1999) were made based on the stage performance. The most memorable aspect of the musical to me is the fact that murder was involved; murder in a musical was certainly a break from the norm (Kenrick). Curly proved his love for Laurey by way of self-defense to the extent of killing Jud. Hollywood was introduced to a new “cliché” of singing cowboys. The question in everyone’s mind was would it be accepted? The answer is yes and it went beyond the expectations that the makers had imagined. Kenrick quotes from Richard Rodgers- *Musical Stages*:

I feel that the chief influence of *Oklahoma!* was simply to serve notice that when writers came up with something different, and if it had merit, there would be a large and receptive audience waiting for it. Librettists, lyricists and composers now had a new incentive to explore a multitude of themes and techniques within the framework of commercial musical theater. From *Oklahoma!* on, with only rare exceptions, the memorable productions have been those daring to break free of the conventional mold (229).

Each cast member was strategically picked by Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Mamoulian. Based on the reviews and the success of the musical, one can assume that they did very well in choosing the lead actors and actresses. Some of the star performers that made the show come to life were Alfred Drake, Celeste Holm, and Joan Roberts. Alfred Drake played Curly and quickly rose to be a star as the top baritone on Broadway. “Celeste played Ado Annie and was so well liked that she continued to make her appearance on the Broadway stage into the next century” (Kenrick). Joan Roberts played Laurey, who was known worldwide for her radio and voice-over personality. These were not the only stars that became well known after their roles in *Oklahoma!*. Howard De Silva is also well known today as being one of the “324 actors who were

blacklisted in the 1950's" (Burnage). (After his role in *Oklahoma!* and before his career was put on hold due to the blacklisting for being involved for "communist activity.") Howard starred in movies such as *The Lost Weekend* and *The Big Shot*.

Another memorable aspect of the musical was the music in relation to the story line. Up until its creation in 1943, musicals were about "kick lines, and stories with music to go along with it" (Crowther). Cecil Smith- in *Musical Comedy America-* Theatre Arts Books says:

In fact, everything in a musical now had to serve a dramatic purpose. The diverting dance routines of the past were replaced by choreography that helped tell the show's story. Any number of earlier shows had attempted a book-driven approach, but they showcased particular performers in songs and scenes that did not always serve the story. For example, the original *Show Boat* gave Captain Andy several excuses for irrelevant physical clowning, and *Lady in the Dark* gave both Danny Kaye and Gertrude Lawrence star turns that had nothing to do with the plot. *Oklahoma* rejected such high jinks, tossing out anything which did not fit the plot or bring characters into sharper focus" (343-344).

Rodgers and Hammerstein broke boundaries in how audiences would appreciate musicals for the next seventy years. The dynamic team met at Columbia University working on varsity shows. They hit it off so well because they had the same interest in writing the music before the lyrics. While they were very good at what they did and believed that a lot of practice was the only way to make the songs the best they could be. "Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1943 Broadway musical was considered revolutionary for a multitude of reasons, not least of which were the play's intricate integration of song and storyline, and the simplicity and austerity of its production design" (Rovi). Along with the exquisite production of the music, Agnes De Mille pushed above the standards of dancing live and challenged her dancers to be the stars, and the main attraction.

Before the feature film premiered, *Oklahoma!* ran on Broadway almost completely sold out for five years.

Rodgers and Hammerstein made large contributions to *Oklahoma!* and made it an important part of their personal lives. When The Theatres Guild went into a financial crisis, “Rodgers and Hammerstein were given complete control of the development of the show” (Kenrick). They decided to risk all they believed in to make it a show that had never been seen before. The opening scene is not one of astounding music and a line full of dancers, but a woman churning her own butter on a beautiful day. That is a scene to remember, one that made history. What is fascinating about the creation by Rodgers and Hammerstein is that they wrote about their real-life experiences. They each lived on a farm; Rodgers in New York and Hammerstein in Pennsylvania. They paid special attention to the language used by farmers and the culture as a whole.

“*Oklahoma!* opened new doors for the American Musical Theatre with its new and unorthodox approaches” (Rovi). For its time, *Oklahoma!* broke all of the existing records for tickets sold and amount of time it played. Being the first collaboration between Richard Rodgers and Roger Hammerstein, they made an excellent pair. *Oklahoma!* also has several other “firsts”; “it was the first musical to have the entire score recording, being a full album; in 1944 it won the Pulitzer Prize; and it was the first piece of musical theatre that Agnes De Mille put her hands on” (Oklahoma Synopsis). Maybe the greatest of accomplishments the musical made was the title of being the longest running musical (until fifteen years later when *My Fair Lady* broke the record). (Oklahoma Synopsis).

V. Composing Choreography for a College Production

After being inspired by the work of Agnes De Mille and researching *Oklahoma!*, I took note of some very special key aspects of what it takes to be a successful choreographer. In the beginning stages of meeting with my faculty mentor Cara, she reminded me that I have had several experiences and opportunities choreographing for “in-class” dances. Some of those included: a personal tap dance, a country line dance for a song called *Footloose* to be taught to the entire Musical Theatre Dance class, a self- expressive piece for an improvisation class, as well as choreography for a ballroom dancing course.

While I never considered myself a choreographer, the past four years of college I explored choreography more than I thought. This was the initial spark of motivation to get started with *The Dream Ballet*. I had to remind myself that I have done more choreography than I had thought, not just at ETSU, but when teaching dance as well.

I had a fear of creating choreography that my dancers would not like or that the director would not like, but ultimately I had to remember that I should not be afraid to show the world my views on how the piece should be depicted. I believe that my true love for dance and motivation to push my personal boundaries as a dancer is what makes me unique to being a choreographer.

After much reflection, the hardest part of the entire choreographic process was how to manipulate the dance to fit perfectly for a large production, like it had been done in the original production. I wanted to take what I saw from the original musical and apply it to the ETSU version. *Oklahoma!* is a landmark for ETSU (like it had been for the world in 1943), being the

first musical to be performed in many years, and all of the cast and crew involved had a mutual feeling that we needed to make it a memorable performance.

I wanted to choose the part of the music I wished to use before I met the dancers with whom I would be working, the original *Dream Ballet* lasted nearly fifteen minutes; good thing I was only assigned the saloon girl section! I had narrowed down the music to about a minute and a half and focused on putting my favorite parts of the music into that time frame. After the music was chosen, I then began to watch dozens of videos online in order to prepare to present my choreography in a large production stage and setting. The director chose the three dancers for my piece. The challenge for me in this situation was that I was unable to meet the dancers before our first rehearsal, and was blind to see their overall look and ability while trying to choreograph. Yes, it was a challenge, but I did not want to devote my time to it if it were something that did not help me grow. Through this, I feel as if I was given the ultimate creative experience with endless possibilities to explore by trying to choreograph a piece without knowing the ability of my dancers. That is when I knew I needed to construct my ideas on paper to get a better focus on what I wanted out of the performance and my dancers. I used an online source to help me narrow down the categories I wished to keep in mind while creating my dance piece; these categories are “space, timing, shape, and dynamics” (Making Dance).

1. Space- The first aspect of focusing on how to produce choreography for a large production is the usage of space. While I was working with a fairly large stage area, that being the Bud Frank Theatre on campus at ETSU, I had to remember that I only had three dancers.

Space is very important because in order to keep the audience interested, one must be aware of how to use the stage.

The scale that I used for my dancers was a large scale, and while there were so few of them, I wanted them to cover as much of the stage as possible to add dimension for the audience's viewing. I had learned in Dance Improvisation class that there are dozens of different ways a dancer can move: "in symmetry, in asymmetry, in high levels, low levels, etc." (Making Dance). I wanted my dance to be symmetrical meaning that the dancers used both sides of their bodies equally and were performing as if they were on balance the entire time, but I also wanted them to be asymmetric in their movements while challenging the body to do one arm in one direction while the opposite side leg may be doing something else. With discovering the way our bodies move, this allowed me to look at my own body in a mirror to see which movements added the "large and expanded" look I was going for to fulfill the need to take up as much room on the stage as possible.

2. Timing- To me, timing is the most important aspect of how I choreographed *The Dream Ballet* for the ETSU production. When I had chosen specific parts of the music to use in my version of *The Dream Ballet*, I wanted the music to start out very slow and build in energy and speed both for the audience and for the dancer. I have always been taught to pay special attention to the beat of any selection of music, and use that as inspiration for dance movement.

The role of a saloon girl in *Oklahoma!* is to be seductive to one of the lead characters, Jud. I pictured the girls entering the stage in a very slow, seductive way hitting sharp movements

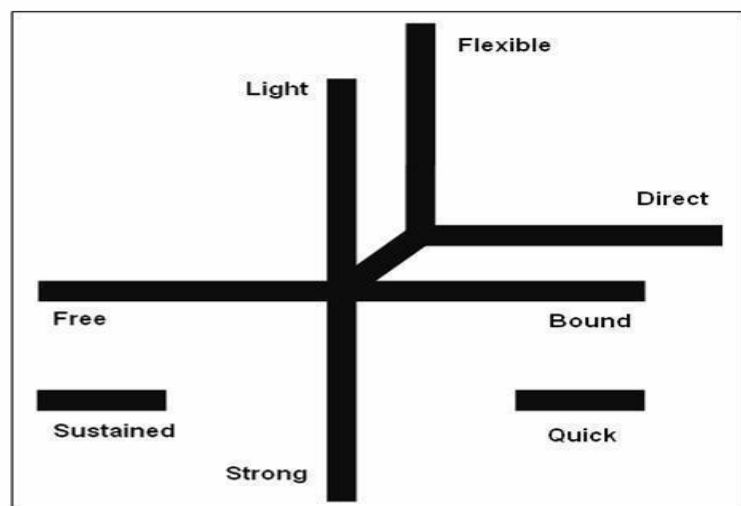
when the beat of the music hit hard, also called metre. “Metre refers to the organization of beats into bars with strong accents on the downbeat followed by lighter accents. Dancers sense metre as a recurring rhythmic underpinning” (Making Dance). Combining slow movements with sharp head movements and quick leg kicks brought together that sense of seduction I thought the choreography needed. Rhythm is also a component of timing. “Rhythm refers to the pattern and emphasis of beats and sub-beats in a phrase” (Making Dance). The music in *The Dream Ballet* is solely music played by the live orchestra that resided behind the main stage. There is a main stream of instrumentation and a soft beat that follows. I, as well as the dancers had to really focus on the music to lead the movements of the dance.

3. Shape- The third element of choreography composition that I focus on is shape. “Shape is not the dancer's figure or proportions, but rather the configuration of his or her torso and limbs into positions that change over time” (Making Dance). As the tempo of the music climbs in energy and speed, the shape of the dancers must change. The movements with the slow music must be small and the limbs of the body stay inward against the torso. As the can-can section of the dance gets faster.

The shape and the levels of the body will expand in what is called “a high level,” lower down toward the stage floor in “a low level,” and shift between the two in “a middle level” (Oklahoma). Body levels are always changing in all dance choreography. As a choreographer, it is my responsibility to challenge the bodies of my dancers to learn to shift their body weight using various body parts (such as kneeling on a knee or sitting down on a hip). Having chosen a

fast tempo at the end of the dance, the low levels of the shape of the body become difficult, but add great excitement.

4. Dynamics- The fourth element I used in composing my dance choreography was dynamics. This was the most confusing element for me to put into words when taking notes of my choreography process. I feel as if it is something that is understood by dancers, but hard to explain. To me, a dancer or choreographer with good dynamics sets them apart from the others like them. Good movement dynamics are easier to understand if they are shown visually. I learned this in the fall of 2014, when I took a Modern Dance class in Brooks Gym as part of my dance minor. Having never taken a modern dance class before, this class opened up a new world of dance to my life. Modern dance is a very self-expressive form of dance. Where one is allowed to let the body move as it wishes. I learned many techniques to take out of this class to contribute to my choreography, but there is one topic that helped me to express dynamics like I had never discovered it before. This is the Laban Effort Graph. It is pictured below:



As one can see, it is fairly simple to read and understand. Created by Rudolf Laban, to simplify the anatomy and movement of the body, dance choreographers around the world look to Laban to teach how movement and dynamics work. In the duration of my modern dance class, as students, we were to use our bodies to act out the branches of the graph to see first-hand what the differences are between them. Without the Laban Graph, I would have never understood dance movements as clearly. I drew out the graph while listening to the music I was to choreograph, and pictured myself doing the movements we learned in class. Even when meeting with my dancers, I used the terms listed on the graph to describe the movements I wished to see my dancers execute.

These four elements of dance composition really helped me to narrow all of my ideas into what I call my “big picture.” I now knew what I wanted my dancers to look like and how I wanted the audience to perceive their movements.

VI. A Choreographer’s Perspective

In addition to artistic preparation, the actual process of choreographing a dance performance for a large production includes many stages of logistical pre-preparation. For *The Dream Ballet*, and for all dance numbers in ETSU’s *Oklahoma!*, the directors and crew must set up pre-audition, auditions, and call backs.

A pre-audition is where the choreographer, directors, and auditioning cast must prepare themselves for an upcoming audition. Based on my experiences with auditions, I always find it

important to be knowledgeable about the musical. It is advised to research the character/part in which one is going to audition. This goes for both the choreographer and those auditioning. As a choreographer, this is where I brainstorm what I am looking for in the roles I am looking to cast. Casting is mainly up to the director, but a choreographer will be looking for dancers that fit the role of the part. The choreographer in this stage must prepare choreography to present during the audition.

The next step is the actual audition. Typically each auditionee will dress so their body is easily seen. Sometimes the director will list specific articles of clothing for the auditionees to wear. When the dress requirements are not specified, wearing something to make one stand out is ideal. When the dancers arrive at an audition, they will sign in and receive a number to wear through the duration of the auditioning process. Numbers are used instead of names to make the selection process easier. When there are a large number of people auditioning, numbers are much easier to remember and write down than first and last names, and sometimes more than one person has the same name. Those auditioning will be given the opportunity for time on their own to stretch their bodies and warm up in order to be ready to “wow” the director/ choreographer. Typically the choreographer will split the auditions up by numbers. For example, the choreographer may ask numbers one through six to show the choreographer’s dance, and from there the director/ choreographer will take note of which dancers out of the group they would want to see at a “call back.”

While I was not in attendance for the audition process for *Oklahoma!*, I have been an auditionee myself many times. I did have the opportunity to host my own “mock audition” (a

practice or pretend audition) as part of my honors assignment in my musical theatre dance class. I was given a piece of music from the musical *Footloose*, and choreographed a one and one half minute long dance to be taught to the class as if it were a real audition setting. I came into the room with a different mentality toward the class. For that specific day I was the choreographer and I had to act like it. I taught the choreography faster, like a real choreographer would do because “time is money.” It was nice to be on the other side of the spectrum, being the choreographer to my fellow classmates was something I found exhilarating. This opportunity gave me the chance to really observe the other dancers in my class in a way I have never been able to before. We have so many talented students at East Tennessee State!

Often choreographers offer a chance for the dancer to perform a prepared dance to showcase any special skills that they might not have been able to show in the first audition. This is where people seem to really show how they stand apart from the rest of the dancers. As someone who has been involved in several call backs (making it through the first cut of auditions), this can be a very nerve-racking experience. Something that a dancer wants can be “so close, but so far away” as the old saying goes. The director/ choreographer can have as many call backs as they please to keep narrowing down the choices, depending on how many auditioned. In conclusion to the final call back, dancers will be cast and the dancers will be asked to return for rehearsals to prepare for the big show!

A choreographer lives to see their work on a live stage. As I was involved with the process of the musical, I looked for encouragement from famous dance choreographers. Some of my favorite quotes include:

When I first began choreographing, I never thought of it as choreography but as expressing feelings. Though every piece is different, they are all trying to get at certain things that are difficult to put into words. In the work, everything belongs to everything else - the music, the set, the movement and whatever is said. –**Pina Bausch**

There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique, and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium; and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is, not how it compares with other expression. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is on a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others.-**Martha Graham**

To dance is to be out of yourself. Larger, more beautiful, more powerful. This is power, it is glory on earth and it is yours for the taking.-**Agnes De Mille**

As a choreographer in a musical theatre setting, I gained my inspiration from those who have gone through life fighting to spread their love of dance to the world. I admit that there were times when I was afraid to trust myself and my body. Just with life in general, dance is my escape from reality and the place where I feel safe. Whether the joy of dance is spread from watching a video on the internet, or watching a grandchild put on their first pair of ballet shoes, everyone can benefit from what dance has to offer.

My perspective as a choreographer changed as I met and rehearsed with my two female dancers and one male dancer for the saloon dance scene. The two female dancers were young women that I had dance classes with and have grown to truly respect. Sarah and Cheyenne are

two bubbly redheads who were cast perfectly for the Saloon Girls. The male, Luke, who does not have a dance background, is also a redhead. Collaboratively, they made the perfect team! The role that Luke was cast to be is a “macho man” who is known for being rugged and ill-tempered. While Luke does not possess those qualities, he can fool anyone into believing that he can act the part. After the dance and choreography director, Cara, had cast them, I was notified to start attending the rehearsals. After spending hours preparing myself to meet with the dancers, I felt more than ready to share what I had created for them to perform onstage. The first time we met was for two hours and I taught them the first half of the piece. Since I had never met Luke, I was not sure if I had created choreography that might be too hard for him to pick up. To my surprise he was patient and laughed and smiled the entire time. Within the first fifteen minutes of the rehearsal, my nerves began to calm and I felt as if there was a strong bond of trust forming between myself and the three dancers.

VII. Musical Theatre Dance- Then and Now

Since the premier of *Oklahoma!* in 1943, there are aspects of how musical theatre dance has changed, and ways it has not changed. The growth of technology has allowed dancers and choreographers the ability to simply click a few buttons on a computer to look up millions of videos, etc. which contain dance choreography. This is how styles have been seen on a large scale and used as influence to those who view them. While our society views change as a great thing, there are a few aspects of musical theatre dance that have not changed.

Being a successful dancer is not something that is given to us overnight. Musical theatre dance goes beyond the expectations of just being a good dancer, to playing a role of a character in the show. “Hard work, talent, practice, knowledge, inspiration, and passion are still essential ingredients to the performing arts” (Technology). To me, those who wish to see musical theatre dance prosper are those who are willing to give blood, sweat, and tears to make not only their dreams come true, but to do it for the sake of doing what they love.

When people ask me about why I dance after I tell them I do it for free I answer them in a few short words “It is who I am, and what I love to do.” I cannot begin to explain how great it feels to look out at others who support my college and to dance before them. I have thought to myself many times of the job I could have had and the money I could have made if I put my love for dance in occupations that could pay a lot of money. Through this challenge, like with the challenges of many other dancers, it is a feeling that cannot be understood than by those who feel the burning passion to do nothing else but dance, even if it does not pay the bills.

The second challenge I have faced as a dancer (that many have faced before me through the generations of musical theatre dance, and dance in general) is not having a proper place to practice. This is true not only for the ETSU Dance Team, but in my experience being a dance minor at ETSU. I have heard stories and watched movies where dancers go through life struggling to just find a place to dance. I love dance so much because it has always been something to fight for. In the past four years on the dance team and as a dance minor, we have been relocated dozens of times. My junior year, the Athletic Department forgot to include our dance team on the schedule of practice times and days for all athletes. We then came together

and decided that we had to practice and that we would do it at 6:00am, which was the only time there was not another sport practicing. Sometimes we would be in the Mini-Dome, sometimes in the CPA, sometimes on the side basketball court that is now the football workout facility. Never did this affect our decision to stop dancing. We wanted to dance, so we would not let anyone take that away from us.

The facilities for dance minors are also hard to come by, and constantly changing. There was a dance studio in the Dome that was taken over as the hospitality eating area for those who donate to the ETSU Basketball team. It is still used, but very rarely as it is not the ideal space or acceptable flooring. The Department of Communication and Performance, division of Theatre and Dance, also lost theatre and dance space at the V.A. Center and built a performance lab in the Campus Center Building. While I do love this space for its lighting and technological advantages, there is a huge pole located in the middle of the room that makes it hard to dance around. We also have classes in Brooks Gym, which can be very cold in the winter months and is a small space for a large class of dancers. These locations, (along with the Bud Frank Theatre) were all rehearsal spaces for *Oklahoma!*. Each space brings a barrier to overcome in order to make it work as a performance space.

As of this year, a plan for a performing arts establishment is beginning to make way. With this said, I think there is one thing going through all of our minds as dancers, with that new facility will bring new hope for us to excel as a dance program. We have done extremely well as a department with what we are giving, but like I said you cannot take dance away from those who love it just as I do.

Our performance lab is a great space for technology. It enables a dancer to use a projection screen if needed to view choreography or to use as a learning tool in class. However, I have on more than one occasion looked up a video on the internet in the performance lab and the first thing I noticed was how different the performance spaces in the video are than what we have at ETSU; their spaces are much larger and better equipped. I really feel in my heart that ETSU has so much to offer the world of musical theatre and dance, but we just need the resources to do so. The faculty and staff at ETSU are some of the best in the country and do an amazing job working with what they are given. And while technology is necessary, it is very expensive and our funding does not cover all of our needs. “The audience needs to see, hear, and feel a performance as fully as possible so that it is a rich, emotional, and unforgettable event. Modern technologies have given us the tools to enrich the whole of this experience, and students today are mastering the use of these tools” (Technology).

“Dance practitioners see video, motion capture, and the many digital systems of editing human motion as extensions of our abilities to mobilize ourselves in space,” said Peter Sparling “But these spaces are no longer strictly confined to the dance studio or stage. We can dance for many cameras at once, appear on multiple screens, and be wired for our motion. We can appear instantaneously on screens all over the globe. We can re-choreograph our motions while editing in Final Cut Pro, or drop our bodies into any simulated environment” (Technology). This is how dance, and in this case particularly musical theatre dance has the ability to transform itself over time.

Musical theatre dance has adapted and changed into five separate categories since the late 1920's. They are: "Jukebox Musical, HotchPotch Musicals, Musical Revue, Dance Musical, and Musicalizing Films" (Lyen):

- a. Jukebox Musical- A group of musicians put together songs to build the storyline of the musical. Traditionally, after the music is set and dance choreography (if any) is not changed after it has been taught to the cast. An example is "*All Shook Up*" (Lyen). *Oklahoma!* is a jukebox musical because the songs are of most importance and the storyline was made within the song.
- b. HotchPotch Musical- These are made by completing the storyline and finding various artists songs to fit into the existing story. An example of this kind of musical is "*Moulin Rouge*," which is known for its burlesque dancing and difficult dance choreography (Lyen). It can also be classified this way by having no storyline, but having a mix of songs to make up a theme.
- c. Musical Revue- This type of musical has been around since the early stages of musicals, but it seems to be the one that has been around and will continue to be influencing musical theatre. They have a theme, but often not a defined plot. The songs are added to the mix to help clear up the message the musical needs to portray. An example of this is Bob Fosse's show "*Fosse*" (Lyen) which I have had the privilege to

see live in Johnson City. *Fosse* was the first Broadway type show I had ever seen, and it influences me because I have now seen the way musical theatre dance has developed into what it is today.

- d. Dance Musical- Dance is the main component of the show, “there are sometimes when there is no music and just dance movements can tell the story” (Lyen). An example of this is “*Movin Out.*”
- e. Musicalizing Film-Ideas and concepts are borrowed from films, and actually is quite common. This brings popularity to the musical or film by using things that work or do not work in the eyes of the audience.

There are many other forms of the “traditional musical” that still exist, but those five are the most widely used. As the style of musical changed, dance styles changed as well. For example, tap dancing was first introduced in the 1920’s. Tap dancing was influenced from Irish step dancing, “blackface” dancing (minstrelsy) on a live stage, and even from influences of the ancient Greek Theatre. While we know “today’s tap dancing” to have started in the 1920’s, the Ancient Greeks were the composers of an influential tap dance style where they nailed pieces of metal to their shoes called “scabilla” to the bottom of their sandals (Parnyan). This is where tap was truly born.

It is amazing how long musical theatre has existed. The Greek Theatre is the earliest form of the musical that is known today, beginning in 550 BC, when women were not allowed to perform. Men would dress in women’s clothing and perform to an all-male audience. As we can see from Greek culture, our culture has brought women into the limelight of the musical theatre

stage and use men dressing as women only for humor and comedy, which was also a target for the Greeks. Much like the technology I spoke of earlier, contemporary theatre has come a long way since the Greek Theatre. Their technology consisted of “candles, weapons made of wood, and masks that they held up to portray their character’s emotions.” (Parnyan). In musical theatre today, especially comedy, masks are used as a creative tool to add humor to the show.

From the Greek Theatre style of dance came Minstrelsy, also known as “blackface.” “Blackface is when white men paint their faces black and exaggerate the black man in a comedic parody to show how white people thought black people acted” (Kenrick). Thomas Rice was the man that created what we know today as the “Shuffle”, which is a motion where you bend your knee and take it behind you, and then strike the ball of your foot against the ground forward and back making two distinct sounds. As a dance teacher, the shuffle is one of the very first tap dancing steps that I teach children, starting at the age of three years old.

While tap was taking over the country, the sights of ballet dancing on a musical stage were just around the corner. “When a fire at New York's posh Academy of Music left a Parisian ballet troupe with nowhere to perform, Broadway theatre manager Thomas Wheatley used the dancers (and their lavish sets) in a mediocre melodrama that he also peppered with several songs. The result was *The Black Crook* (1866), a five hour long mish-mosh that became an unprecedented hit” (Kenrick). A controversy then arose; ballet dancers wear tight fitted clothing and tights often the color of their skin. This was the very first time that the musical theatre audience had seen figure relieving clothing on women singing and dancing on stage. “The

clothing trend at this time was hoop skirts and bustles, which very much hid the physiques of women” (Kenrick).

After this show, women became the spotlight for beauty on stage, and the world saw that women do not need to be covered up. *The Black Crook* showed that the storyline was not the important aspect to becoming so famous, but the fact that the audience came to look at the legs of the women for five hours. Without this transition of women in show business, Laurey would not have been the character she is in *Oklahoma!*; first, she would not have been able to be in the musical as a woman if it were not for the Greek Theatre, and second, she would not have been able to dance ballet in a tight wedding dress as in *The Dream Ballet*.

Burlesque dancing soon came after in the 1920's. Women went from not dancing on stage, to being the reason to go watch a show. In burlesque dancing, women dance for a male targeted audience and are seen as objects of sex and desire. This continued to be the main musical theatre dance type until the 19th Century when it began to change again. To me, burlesque dancing is still very much alive. I believe that sexual desire is what drives media and television today. Women in media are judged on external appearance and how they hold themselves in front of a camera, and this can be related back to how women are seen onstage. Recently a movie with Christina Aguilera came out titled *Burlesque*, and it is one of my favorite movies because of the fast pace choreography and exquisite costumes.

Vaudeville was the next style of stage musical to emerge. It is known in history to bring about fashion from the stage to the shelves of every shopping mall in the United States,

becoming popular in the early 1930's. Dancers would be hired to dance on stage, "bringing many styles together from coast to coast" (Kenrick). New dance steps would be created from the combining of styles, opening the world of dance up to a variety setting on stage.

Following all of these different forms of stage dancing in musicals, individual dancers began to show themselves as different, by representing different styles. Vaudeville, with the collaboration of the other dance styles allowed dancers to reach beyond the preferred "mold" of dancing and to create their own style to stand out. That is where musical theatre is today and why it has transformed. Computers make it so easy for us to easy how people dance in India or in China. That is what I love so much about where technology has taken us over the years. I believe that learning from others and incorporating it into my life is what helps me grow as a dancer and as a choreographer. I could not dance freely like I do today if it were not for influences from long ago.

VIII. Working with a Director

Perhaps the most fun and the most stressful part of my process was working with Cara, the dance and choreography director for *Oklahoma!*. I wanted to make sure whatever I did, choreography wise, would make her happy and reflect well on the university as a whole. Being my first time choreographing for a large musical production, I was afraid to initially start my research of *Oklahoma!* (and specifically the saloon girls part I was going to be working with) and looked for ways to make it my own.

I watched the entire movie version of the musical three times before I allowed myself to sit down and reflect on what I wanted to do visually. Cara is always so kind and easy to talk to, but I also know that if I came up with something she did not like she would say she liked it and then make changes to it on her own (which is exactly the same personality I have). Cara had mentioned to me that she thought the dancers would look great onstage if they danced with chairs. We watched several versions of the saloon girl's dance online together during our meetings. Some of the videos had the girls with chairs and some did not.

In my mind, I saw them without chairs, Cara played around with the idea, but collaboratively we decided to dance without them. I ran into the dance captain of the show, Eva, and she told me a couple days before the show that Cara needed to make necessary cuts on the entire dream ballet because it was nearly three minute over the time it needed to be; this involved cutting just a bit of my choreography.

I also was given sections of music to choose from. I chose the section of the music that was originally used in the 1943 version of *Oklahoma!*. It was strictly instrumentation that fit the personalities of the two saloon girls and Judd. I thought it was perfect for the show! I did not take the time then, but I have now to think that just because someone else used that music, I thought I had to use it. Cara went a different direction with a different section of music to flow better with the rest of *The Dream Ballet*. I had also made the saloon girl piece too long, and it was cut down. This was a great change by Cara, as a choreographer who usually just makes up individual dance routines at a time, one minute and thirty seconds is a short amount of time. For a musical, that length of time can seem to drag out forever. This is something I found very interesting in the

process, it was something I would have never considered until I actually watched the musical itself after I had choreographed my section.

I was given the opportunity to choreograph a section of *The Dream Ballet* to challenge myself. I have always been a perfectionist and not feeling like what I did was good enough bothered me. I also know Cara, and she takes just as much pride in her work as I do. I have never choreographed a part of a musical, I had never had so much freedom to choreograph, why was I so concerned with my work not being shown on the stage the exact same way I taught it to my three dancers?

I have learned through Cara and my experience that collaborative efforts are what really make a show come together. The night I went to watch the show live in the Bud Frank Theatre, all of my questions were answered. There were no more questions like “Was it not good enough?” or “How could I have choreographed it differently to be more to her liking?” I knew that Cara had made the changes she did for very specific reasons.

That is something else that went through my mind during the final night of the performance at ETSU; Cara was a professional and has worked with onstage performances most of her life. I held myself to the same standard I held her. This is completely unrealistic considering this was my very first try. I appreciate this eye-opening experience because it humbles me to appreciate all of the lessons that Cara has taught me without really trying to. I hope to one day impact someone with some of the lessons that I have learned from her. She taught me patience; large production numbers are not perfected overnight. She also taught me

not to be so hard on myself when I expect more from myself when typically others just want me to push through it and get it done, much like this thesis paper!

Many times I have looked at this thesis paper as trying to prove who I am and what I have become because of it. It is the struggles in life that make us realize that we are human and sometimes we cannot escape that. I am blessed to know that through this long process, while it might have been one of the hardest things I have ever had to do, I am a better version of myself. I can now call myself a choreographer. I have spent my life fearful of what other people expect out of me, especially since I choreograph dance numbers on a regular basis. In the process of choreographing for *Oklahoma!* I have seen defeat and my greatest triumph.

It all paid off the day the show opened. I was able to bring my family to the show, and they were more proud of me that day than any other day of my life. My mom spent her four years on that very stage when she went to ETSU. While I was not onstage, and my work was in collaboration with Cara, I had never felt so fulfilled either. I saw my choreography in every step that the saloon girls and Jud performed; they were just tweaked to a different section of the music. I had done it; I had created something I consider very beautiful and set it afire onstage.

I love that life brings so many challenges for us to face. Through my challenges, I have found a new passion for choreography. I love that it forces me to find myself and why I love to dance in every single step. What started as a required project that just happened to pay my school tuition, turned out to be a lifelong achievement. It is so ironic that the thing I was most afraid of in life has become something I love the most.

IX. Conclusions

In both choreographing and writing a thesis on my experiences working with the saloon girl section of *Oklahoma!*, I have pushed myself to do things I would have never been able to do otherwise. I have learned to appreciate how hard it is to be in charge of a project where many others depend on me. I have also learned not to be so hard on myself and just to enjoy the opportunities that life brings. I am so thankful to have had guidance from Cara, for without her I would not have been able to better myself through the challenge of choreographing for the musical.

I thought to myself many times that I should take the easier route and invest my time working on a thesis project that I had been involved in my whole life, U.S.O Shows, but I am so happy that I went another direction. I also made some very good friends working with the cast and crew, many whom I will always look to for guidance and artistic ideas. The three dancers I worked with even volunteered to perform the saloon girl dance live for my thesis presentation, and to me that is a respect that many others would not show for me. I also have to say that the people involved in the ETSU Department of Communication and Performance, division of Theatre and Dance, are the most invested and driven people that I have ever had the pleasure to work with in my life.

I am blessed to have taken a fear of mine and turned it into a newfound passion. I have always lived my life playing on the safe side and choreographing for *Oklahoma!* has been one of the most challenging tasks I have been given. I hope through my experience that I may inspire

others around me to challenge themselves to take on a task that is bigger than them. I take great pride in the performing arts, as it runs in the blood of my family members. Dance is not just my passion, it allows me to express who I really am. My life is changed by dancers like Agnes De Mille, and through my research, she has become my greatest role model. If I could influence one person a day like Agnes has inspired me, my newfound passion would become a lifelong dream fulfilled.

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