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Le sacre du printemps: The First Rite (An Exploration of Modern and Aerial Dance as Storytelling)

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Le sacre du printemps: The First Rite
An Exploration of Modern and
Aerial Dance as Storytelling

Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the University Honors Scholars Program

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Contents

Terms and Definitions	3
I. Introduction	4
II. The Concept	6
A. Nijinsky's <i>Le sacre du printemps</i>	6
1. Setting the stage	
2. Changing ballet (and dance) forever	
3. Creating a heritage	
B. Three Rites (Creating a plot, choosing music, observing style)	12
1. Plot	
a. Nijinsky's <i>Le sacre du printemps</i>	
b. Graham's "The Right of Spring"	
c. Taylor's "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)"	
d. My "Le sacre du printemps: The First Rite"	
2. Music	
a. Nijinsky	
b. Graham	
c. Taylor	
d. Bates	
3. Aesthetic	
a. Nijinsky	
b. Graham	
c. Taylor	

	d. Bates	
III.	The Process	22
	A. Absorption	22
	1. What is absorption?	
	2. Nijinsky, Graham, and Taylor influences	
	B. Creation	25
	1. Floor, Silks	
	2. Invented Apparatus	
IV.	Conclusion	30
	Works Cited	33
	Appendix A: Video Resources from Research	34
	Appendix B: Invented Apparatus Rehearsal Photos	35

Terms and Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, I have here defined some terms that are specific to dance technique, dance history, or aerial dance, so as to remove ambiguity and clarify for all audiences in a way that is succinct. Terms are organized by their appearance in this paper, or by most logical order.

apparatus: the aerial rig, such as silks or trapeze, which the aerialist uses to perform

turn-out: the rotation of the hips that produces a turning out of the feet, present in the first five foot positions of ballet; stylistically imperative to classical ballet; in first position, the legs are together and the feet are turned out so the heels touch and the toes point away from each other, the arches of the feet clearly visible from the front

parallel: the feet are parallel to one another, toes facing forward away from the body, as is natural in everyday walking or standing

turn-in: the opposite of turn-out; in first position, the toes of the right foot would make contact with the toes of the left foot and the heels would be apart, the arches of the feet hidden from the front

port de bras: carriage of the arms; in ballet, the arm positions corresponding to the positions of the feet; for example, second position arms correspond to a second position in the feet

eurythmics: a movement-based discipline emphasizing musicality and the body's ability to naturally move to rhythm

tanztheatre: literally "dance theatre"; a dance form/ideology originating in Germany in the early 1900s; it implements several elements of theatre along with dance that "distinguishes itself [from ballet] through an intended reference to reality" ("Tanztheatre").

Le sacre: a shortened form of the title *Le sacre du printemps*, used exclusively in this paper to refer to Nijinsky's original ballet

Modern: a capital "M" indicates that this term is an abbreviation for "modern dance"; for example, "I went to a Modern class," i.e. "I went to a modern dance class."

Le sacre du printemps: The First Rite

An Exploration of Modern and
Aerial Dance as Storytelling

Introduction

Paris, May 1913: Igor Stravinsky sat in his box in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées waiting for the premiere of his new orchestral work, a ballet entitled *Le sacre du printemps*, or *The Rite of Spring*. Choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky stood in wings of the theatre, anticipating the performance by the Ballets Russes, the premiere ballet company in the world at the beginning of the 20th century. The audience included not only French aristocracy but also artists, writers, and creators such as Gertrude Stein, Jean Cocteau, and Valentine Gross Hugo. The air must have been electric, anticipation filling the newly constructed theatre, the audience awaiting what was only Nijinsky's third creation as a choreographer (Sigman; Riding). Before the end of Act I, however, the anticipation had turned to hostility. The audience revolted against the ballet, booing and hissing so loudly the dancers could not hear the orchestra. Professional dance on the European stage at this time was primarily classical or romantic ballet, and onto the European stage Nijinsky thrust a kind of choreography that had not been seen before—choreography that generated a strong, negative response at first because it was so unlike the long, beautiful lines ballet was famous for. But, by the end of the performance, the audience was applauding. Nijinsky had not just redefined the stylistic expectations for ballet, he had bridged the gap between the budding art form of modern dance and dance's traditional audience.

Nijinsky knew he would have to change the usually straight, beautiful lines of ballet to be twisted and broken shapes because he was telling a difficult story that was itself twisted and dark. In this way, he was placing himself firmly in the realm of early modern dance: the pioneers of modern dance found the art of ballet too sterile and endeavored instead to use dance to tell a

more human story. Ironically, the tradition of modern dance has always been to break tradition. Modern dance choreographers have often found the need to reinvent dance technique to create movement which allows them to express what they uniquely desire to express.

In the 1970s several modern dance pioneers began breaking tradition by integrating aerial arts into the world of Modern. Since the late 1990s, there has been an explosion of creativity and opportunity in the world of aerial arts; however, in the same way that Nijinsky's audience associated dance primarily with ballet, the audience of today continues to associate the aerial arts almost solely with circus. Even within the world of circus, in which companies like Cirque du Soleil are renowned for their unique storytelling capabilities, the true human connection of the story can become lost in the midst of superhuman and dramatic aerial acrobatics. In the world of dance, meanwhile, aerial dance is often treated merely as a means for creating spectacle. Story and emotional connection can be lost in the midst of the desire to climb higher, spin faster, fall farther. Instead, the aim of my choreography is to expose the audience to the vast possibilities that await theatre and dance through the use of aerial apparatus. Spectacle, by all means, should be a tool used in dance to great effect; however, in order for aerial dance to become more than just an impressive set of skills, the aerialist must find a connection with the audience. While aerial dance has often endeavored to thrill the audience through its daring beauty and superhuman feats, it often has neglected to connect with the audience through its more human elements. Aerial dance can tell stories, touch hearts, convey emotion, even advocate for truth or change, yet it is not often given the opportunity. In *Le sacre du printemps*, Nijinsky pushed ballet in a new direction to serve a greater purpose; in "Le sacre du printemps: The First Rite," I endeavored to do the same for aerial dance.

The Concept

Nijinsky's Le sacre du printemps

By the premiere of *Le sacre du printemps* on that fateful night in 1913, Nijinsky had already attracted notice in the world of dance with his scandalous choreography in *L'après-midi d'un faune*. Nijinsky shocked the audience with his overtly sexual movements, while his use of the parallel foot position rather than ballet's iconic and traditional turn-out filled the audience's eye with a new dance aesthetic. While ballet may have used a parallel position from time to time, no choreographer before Nijinsky had established a parallel stance as the primary mode of movement for an entire ballet. The audience that filled the seats the night of *Le sacre's* premiere had to be wondering, what boundary would Nijinsky push for this performance?

The evening opened with a performance of *Les Sylphides*, a romantic ballet featuring lovely dancers floating across the stage as fairies. Then *Le sacre* began, and the Parisian audience sat in silence. The first clear tone of a bassoon flew out into the theatre, though the sound was hardly recognizable as a bassoon—the melody Stravinsky had written was higher than any other composer had asked a bassoon to play before (“Igor Stravinsky's ‘Rite’”). When the curtain rose, the dancers on the stage were huddled, hunched over, clad in the garb of an ancient, pagan Russian tribe, with a brightly colored, stark, modernist landscape painted by Nicholas Roerich on the backdrop behind them. Soon the fluid, mournful sound of the bassoon gave way to stark rhythms from the strings and scurrying patterns from the flutes, and the pagan tribe began to stomp along to the irregular and unsettling syncopation of Stravinsky's score. Not only was the choreography awkward, hunched, and primal, but Nijinsky had also pushed the boundaries of ballet yet again by turning the dancers' feet further inward, making them shuffle and hop across the stage pigeon-toed. This was completely foreign to the audience of aristocrats

and artists who for so long had enjoyed the lovely long lines and turn-out of classical and romantic ballet. Instead of swans or fairies twirling and gliding across the stage, a primeval display of pagan ritual complete with flailing arms and contorted postures thundered and wobbled on the stage.

The audience's silence quickly turned into an uproar that drowned out the music coming from the orchestra. Valentine Gross Hugo wrote, "It was as if the theater had been struck by an earthquake...It seemed to stagger in the uproar. Screams, insults, hoots, prolonged whistles drowned out the music, and then slaps and even boos" (Riding). Stravinsky sprang from his seat and rushed backstage to help the dancers and musicians stay together over the din coming from the irate audience. Once backstage, Stravinsky had his hands full holding onto Nijinsky, who was standing on a chair yelling the rhythms to his dancers, raring to go out onstage himself.

Granted, the riot may well have been staged, at least partially, by Sergei Diaghilev, director of the Ballets Russes at that time. He mentioned after the premier of *Le sacre* that the riot was "Exactly what I wanted," and Jean Cocteau seemed to see a plan in the mayhem that night, saying that "The audience played the role that was written for it" (Sigman). In an article for *American Theatre*, Matthew Sigman deduces that "Succes de scandale had already become a necessary imprimatur for modernism," and notes that after the seemingly malicious anarchy settled in the audience, "the creative team was lauded." All the same, there were others in the crowd that night that had not been enlisted in Diaghilev's supposed publicity scheme, who truly found the choreography outlandish, unpalatable, or even offensive. "Standing in her box, her tiara askew, the old Countess of Pourtales brandished her fan and shouted, turning bright red, 'It's the first time in 60 years that someone dares mock me,' ...The worthy lady was serious. She thought it was a hoax," wrote Jean Cocteau (Riding). Apparently Nijinsky did not know of

Diaghilev's potential involvement with the audience either: when speaking to one of his dancers after the conclusion of *Le sacre*, Nijinsky stated, "This idiot public" (Crisp 10).

Whether or not the animosity in response to *Le sacre* was entirely genuine, that infamous night and the premiere of Nijinsky's innovative last work with the Ballets Russes are seen in dance history as a turning point for dance as an art form. While some may attribute the beginning of modern dance to Nijinsky and *Le sacre*, I find that does not give due recognition to the many others who were working to develop early modern dance at the same time. Isadora Duncan was a creative force in the world of dance during the late 19th/early 20th century, and amazed audiences with the uniquely free and graceful quality of her movement. Other modern pioneers included Émile Jacques-Dalcroze's, who created eurythmics; Mary Wigman and Rudolf van Laban of the German tanztheatre movement; or even Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn of the Denishawn School in the United States. However, I believe it is appropriate to count Nijinsky as a founder of contemporary ballet, and to say that Nijinsky was the first successful choreographer to put modern-style dance in the public eye on a prestigious company.

What about Nijinsky's choreography was so groundbreaking, so modern, that it changed how the world thought about ballet and dance? First, Nijinsky turned the dancers' feet from the traditional, technically correct turned-out position to a pigeon-toed, turned-in position. This was the equivalent to committing ballet heresy, especially that he dared to put what ballet choreographers considered an "ugly" position on such a prestigious company. So much of ballet is designed with the concept of extended lines: if a dancer properly extends and aligns his arm to his hands to his fingers, or his leg to his foot to his pointed toes, he will create the illusion of a never-ending, continued line, creating an aesthetically pleasing shape as well as an extension of energy from the dancer's body into space. By forsaking not only traditional ballet port de bras

but also going beyond parallel feet into a turned-in position, Nijinsky was visually breaking the dancers' lines in a way that would be considered unacceptable to any seasoned ballet viewer or choreographer.

Second, Stravinsky's choice of subject matter, setting his music around the theme of ancient pagan Russia, allowed Nijinsky to create characters that were contrary to the popular ballet aesthetic of the time. As stated above, ballets such as *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, or *Les Sylphides* featured elegant, beautiful, and otherworldly characters such as beautiful young girls, princes, or fairies. When an evil, ugly, or unsavory character did appear in ballet, he/she most often served the greater purpose of the happy, bittersweet, or tragically romantic ending to the ballet as a whole. Nijinsky instead creates an entire stage of hunched-over, earth worshipping, virgin sacrificing, primitive villagers who seem to believe that murdering one of their young women is the only way to ensure that spring comes again to the earth. The ballet ends with the chosen virgin dancing herself to death in a whirlwind of choreography, while the elders of the village look on approvingly. This was significantly different from the beautiful, often overly romanticized world of ballet. Even Nijinsky's *L'après-midi d'un faune*, though scandalous, centered around nymphs and fauns rather than the darker side of humanity. Nijinsky was bringing the audience a world they would prefer to forget existed, rather than filling their heads with fairytales.

Third, Nijinsky catapulted ballet into the world of contemporary ballet and modern dance, not just because of his ability to go beyond the traditional technical confines of ballet, and not only because he forsook traditional ballet character types for a more human focus, but most essentially because he integrated these two ideas. Nijinsky chose movement that was hunched, awkward, and pigeon-toed because it would serve the greater purpose of the characters and the

narrative he was building. Other ballet choreographers prior to Nijinsky had of course choreographed to fit the characters of their ballets, but not to the extent of breaking through the boundaries of accepted and traditional ballet technique. Marie Rambert, who trained and studied extensively under Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, mentioned she and other Modern innovators at the time found that “ballet was so artificial that we laughed at it. It offered all the artificial graces, while we proposed all the natural graces” (Crisp 5). Nijinsky wanted to tell an earthy, human, natural story, and therefore pursued movement outside the bounds of ballet. Nijinsky was not just bending the structure of ballet technique to fit a character—he was breaking out of ballet itself to a new art form, one that best suited the story he was telling.

While many modern dances have been choreographed with a more pure-form, dance for dance’s sake ideology, one of the elements that is so essential to modern dance is its connection to humanity, both through a natural and human quality of movement and through storytelling. Modern dance innovators were more interested in the kinds of movement that occurred in the human body naturally, rather than the technique of ballet that they found stilted and confining. The early modern dancers explored qualities such as the rise and fall movement that exists in breathing, or the unaffected swing of the arms in a gait and the quality of walking. Because modern dance was as yet just beginning and thus raw and new in 1913, choreographers and movement theorists in the fore of Modern were still wrestling with public perception and acceptance of the kind of dance that they were exploring in their dance companies and small-scale performances. Nijinsky, however, produced a naturalistic, storytelling-centered ballet on a well-known ballet company that would perform *Le sacre* in both Paris and London to impressive, ballet-savvy audiences. In such a way, Nijinsky was declaring to the world that

dance could change, that dance would change, to fit the design of the choreographer's intent, at a time when the works of eurythmics and tanztheatre were still unknown to the world at large.

Nijinsky's bold leap into the future of dance has been the inspiration for many a ballet and Modern choreographer, even to the present day. Various versions of *Le sacre du printemps* have been and are being choreographed, each an intentional or unintentional homage to the significance of the original, creating a lineage that connects the innovations of Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes with those of contemporary ballet and Modern dance today. A significant number of well-established and respected Modern choreographers have tackled the piece, including Mary Wigman, Martha Graham, Lester Horton, Paul Taylor, and Pina Bausch (Johnson 228). Each choreographer has made the piece his or her own, bringing *Le sacre* fully into the present with each new rendition.

As a modern dancer, and aspiring modern choreographer, I was fascinated by finding such an interesting and important through-line in the history of Modern choreography. As an aerialist, however, I was amazed that I could not find for all my searching any record of an aerial dance or circus production centered around *Le sacre du printemps*. Aerial dance began to separate itself more and more from the traditional world of circus in the 1970s by placing a stronger emphasis on dance with an apparatus as its own expressive art form and not just a means for exciting entertainment. Aerial dance has in recent years begun to align itself more with the world of modern dance than ever before, just as Nijinsky began the strong delineation between classical and modern ballet in the early 1900s. As such, I see in aerial dance a gap, a space that yearns for aerial dance to be connected to a lineage that for one hundred years has stood for finding the truth, humanity, and freedom in dance. Thus, I set out to fill that gap by creating my own tribute to *Le sacre du printemps*, not only to place my aerial dance in the

tradition of Modern, but also to demonstrate the incredible power aerial dance can wield when it is freed from convention to tell a story.

Three Rites

My original search for an undergraduate thesis topic led me to explore the connections between modern dance choreographers in an attempt to isolate and solidify a lineage of modern dance technique starting as far back as Dalcroze and continuing through key choreographers to the present day. When I settled instead upon creating a *Rite of Spring* for floor and aerial dance, I began intensively researching those choreographers in the lineage I had selected who had created their own *Rites*, thinking that the more I immersed myself in *Rite of Spring* choreography, the more I would understand for myself what was required to successfully choreograph my own version. Immediately, I was ecstatic to find that two illustrious choreographers, Martha Graham and Paul Taylor, had created their own rites—in my studies of modern dance technique and dance history, I had already become enthralled with their choreographic styles in general and yearned to work more with their different aesthetics. I decided to explore the plots, music choices, and aesthetics of Nijinsky's original *Le sacre du printemps*, Martha Graham's "Rite of Spring," and Paul Taylor's "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)" to create for myself an artistic framework within which I would find my own plot, music choice, and aesthetic for my *Rite*.

Three Rites: Creating a Plot

Until Millicent Hodson and the Joffrey Ballet reconstructed Nijinsky's original choreography for their 1987 season, much of the original plot of *Le sacre du printemps* was lost. *Le sacre* only played a handful of times in Paris and London—by the time the Ballets Russes impresario, Diaghilev, wished to revive the ballet, he and Nijinsky had gone through a falling out

and Nijinsky had left the company. Though another choreographer, Leonide Massine, was recruited to devise a “Rite of Spring” to Stravinsky’s score, it was his own choreography and not a revitalization of Nijinsky’s work. Even as late as 1980, Paul Taylor mentioned Nijinsky’s choreography as a mystery in an interview for the *New York Times*: “We don’t have any accurate record of Nijinsky’s version. We have Stravinsky’s subtitles, we know it was ritualistic, with tribes and a chosen maiden” (Lewis 132). Hodson, a dance historian, set out to reconstruct Nijinsky’s original work in 1971 with urging from Robert Joffrey, and along with her husband Kenneth Archer, an art historian, whom she met in 1981, was able to fully reconstruct “85 percent of the original choreography” in time for the Joffrey Ballet to present the work in their 1987 season, completing the fifteen percent of missing pieces with her own choreography inspired by Nijinsky’s choreography and notes (Riding 17).

With the reconstruction of Nijinsky’s *Le sacre* there is now a full understanding of the plot of the original work. The ballet opens with an old woman blessing the earth, who calls the villagers surrounding her to arise and join in rejoicing over the earth and the return of spring. At the end of the first act, entitled *L’adoration de la terre*, the sage comes into the midst of the celebration, his entrance marking a moment of distinct stillness in the spiritual frenzy of the tribe. The sage then kisses the earth, blessing it, and the villagers break into worship and celebration over the coming of spring. The second act, *Le sacrifice*, begins with the young maidens of the tribe performing mystic rituals through the night, during which the Chosen One is separated from her fellow virgins. Soon the young women leave, replaced instead by village elders, who surround the Chosen One as she dances herself to death and lift her above their heads for the end of the piece.

Though this basic outline of plot events is common among other choreographers' versions of *Le sacre*, many choreographers alter the plot in minor (and sometimes major) ways to make it their own. Martha Graham's "Rite of Spring," which premiered in February 1984, left behind all connection to Russian culture and instead centered around a more Native American/vaguely American Southwestern setting. In her review of Graham's "Rite" for the *New York Times*, Anna Kisselgoff says of Graham, "She has kept the general scenario of a fertility rite in which a young girl is sacrificed by a tribal community to propitiate gods and help the crops grow. But she has universalized the action through movement and motor pulses that seem very modern, with which the audience identifies" ("Dance View"). Kisselgoff also mentions that by keeping the setting and movement less ethnically specific, Graham had created rather a general atmosphere of terror, an atmosphere the audience could feel spread off the stage and into their seats ("Dance View"). One of Graham's most significant changes to the original plot is her development of the Shaman character. The sage who, in Nijinsky's *Le sacre*, was a feeble and ancient man that appeared onstage only once has in Graham's "Rite of Spring" become a powerful primal force. The tribe is powerless to stop him from stealing away one of their young women and performing a mating ritual with her before she is sacrificed to the earth. In such a way, Graham emphasizes the desperation and the conflict of the original plot, while providing an agent for terror in the character of the Shaman.

Paul Taylor's "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)" heads in a completely new direction, one that is entertaining and enjoyable yet unexpected. When the Paul Taylor Company performed "The Rehearsal" in 2013, Alastair Macaulay reviewed the piece as "bizarre," but "compellingly so," and a "fun...suspenseful drama" ("Reaping"). While Nijinsky and Graham have perhaps two or three significant, name-specific roles (Shaman and Chosen One, for

example), Taylor covers the stage with interesting characters. The dance's action cuts back and forth between two seemingly individual plots. Macaulay summarizes the plot as, "A baby is stolen by a crook, who has a mistress, and a private eye finds the child for its young mother; [meanwhile] a ballet company is rehearsing," and Jean Battey Lewis describes it as "an exuberantly straight-faced whodunit" ("Taylor Tackles 'Le Sacre'"). Taylor himself describes the work as "Runyonesque, [a] gumshoe story," and emphasizes that, though he intended to use Stravinsky's score, he knew he would never set a pagan ritual as the focus of the plot (Lewis). Thus, Taylor takes what was originally a harrowing story of ritual and sacrifice and turns it on its head, creating instead a unique and engaging dual-storyline.

I knew that part of what made the original *Le sacre* so interesting was its subject matter: a dark pagan ritual was not commonplace to audiences in 1913, and is still foreign enough to capture the attention and imagination of audiences today. Martha Graham's "Rite" also tells a difficult story, one that unapologetically tackles community and gender roles, the influence and power of religious beliefs and religious leaders, and the pain and fear of human suffering. Because I felt such a personal connection to the issues of the traditional *Le sacre* storyline, I decided to follow in the footsteps of Graham and other *Rite* choreographers like her who breathed new life into the original Nijinsky plot by keeping most of the main events unchanged while developing the story in their own unique ways.

Martha Graham's *Shaman* also made a strong impression on me. Instead of a nebulous, earth-centered religion influencing a community to sacrifice one of their young women, Graham's *Shaman* is a tangible antagonist whom I found much more provocative. While Nijinsky's concept of a belief system rather than an actual person as the antagonist is thought provoking and interesting, as an audience member I preferred having the opportunity to actually

see the evil presence in the story as a physical person. The character of the Shaman is electrifying in the Graham piece, and is a force that actively pushes the narrative forward rather than just allowing the events to unfold as the community sees fit. I definitely wanted to keep that strong character concept as a part of my story line.

As I was watching the Nijinsky *Rite*, many questions came to mind. For example, why were the people blindly following a rite to bring about spring? Could they not wait for spring to come on its own, and realize that bloodshed was unnecessary? Who was this ancient sage, and how much power did he really have? Was he controlling the circle of elders who circled around the virgin at the end as she danced herself to death? Meanwhile, the Graham piece offered more unanswered questions. Who, again, was this Shaman, who in this iteration had so much control and power in the community? How long had the community been under his rule, and how long had they been allowing him to mate with and then sacrifice one of their virgins every year to bring about spring? How did this idea even get started in the first place? It seemed that the *Rite* storylines were beginning in medias res, without further explanation.

I made the choice to answer some of those questions for myself through my storyline. What if, I imagined, I told the story of the very beginning—the first time a maiden was sacrificed to bring about spring? This led me to question how the ritual could have been instigated. Who told the tribe to sacrifice the young woman? While no religion or deity is specified in the Nijinsky or Graham stories, I considered the possibility of a god declaring the need for sacrifice to appease and to entreat him/her to bring about spring. This was an interesting idea, but this meant the Shaman would become less evil and less powerful because he would have to receive agency from a deity, and thus that deity would have to be the actual antagonist of the story. What if, instead, the deity was a benevolent character? Perhaps she could be the Creator from the

beginning, joyful and bringing spring of her own accord, when the Shaman suddenly decides she wants control instead?

Suddenly my story had three main characters: Creator, Shaman, and Chosen One (the sacrificed tribe member). Unlike the other pieces I had studied, I made the conscious decision to avoid gender specifications for my three roles for several reasons. First, I personally believe that good and evil can exist in all people equally regardless of their gender. I want to use my piece to explore the capacity for evil and goodness in a community as a whole without separating into male and female groups as Nijinsky and Graham did in their pieces. Second, choosing to specify gender for any of my three main roles would have caused pragmatic issues for this production because I was choreographing on a group with only one male dancer. Thus, to make him any of the three main characters would have created a more gender-oriented story, which was not my focus for this piece. For example, a male Creator being worshiped by a creation entirely made of females seemed to deify masculinity in a way I was not comfortable with, whereas to have one male Shaman rebelling against a female Creator and exercising control over a tribe of females seemed to vilify masculinity in a way I did not intend.

Therefore, for my first production, all three main characters were performed by women, though any of the three roles could be performed by a dancer of any gender. By choosing for all three characters to be female in this production, I was also providing a unique opportunity for the action to revolve around three women, giving female characters the opportunity to be powerful forces of agency in their story. This is completely contrary to most *Rite of Spring* storylines, where the most significant woman is usually valued entirely for her virginity and her purpose as a victim and sacrifice. I much prefer the idea of catapulting the *Rite of Spring* story into the

present moment, and creating strong female characters gives my piece a unique voice that I feel is indicative of my generation.

Three Rites: Choosing Music

At the same time I was trying to create a story for my version of *Le sacre*, I was trying to find the music that would work best for my piece. Even a casual perusal of the first few pages of the score prove why Stravinsky's original *Le sacre du printemps* has long been esteemed in musicology as an innovative and significant piece of 20th century music literature. It appears as though the work were composed during the more exploratory and experimental years of the mid 20th century, rather than premiering in 1913! Because of its intricate rhythmic patterns and strange tonal qualities, especially unique for ballet music composition at this time, Nijinsky experienced great difficulty working with Stravinsky's score. Diaghilev and Nijinsky requested help from Émile Jacques-Dalcroze after seeing his techniques for integrating movement and music. Dalcroze sent his student Marie Rambert to help Nijinsky and his dancers understand Stravinsky's score (Crisp 5, 7). In an interview, Rambert explained the struggle of working with the music: "Up to this time ballet-music had really been square—eight bars, or sixteen, or thirty-two, easy to work with" (Crisp 5). Essentially, whether the typical ballet music had been composed in a square, duple meter (such as 4/4) or a round, waltzing triple meter (such as 3/4), phrases had developed logically, beginning and transitioning and concluding in fairly even and expected numbers of measures. A choreographer had to decide what would happen in a small section, choreograph it to last for four or six counts of eight, and then he could move on to another section of choreography.

Not so with Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*. In the first line alone Stravinsky changes meter every measure, from 4/4 to 3/4 to 4/4 to 2/4. Even in longer sections where Stravinsky

seems to land on a meter and stay with it, he uses triplets and syncopation to throw off the feeling of the rhythm in a way that disguises the meter from the listener. Not only are the rhythms difficult to understand, but Stravinsky also provides dissonance in a way unprecedented to this time: throughout, small chordal clusters affect the tone of the piece, and then giant dissonant chords surprise the listener's ear. During some sections he includes what has come to be known as the "famous Stravinsky chord," an eight-note chord consisting of an E major chord including the E octave, topped by an Eb7 in first inversion (Fried 30). This, along with other inventive interval arrangements, gives Stravinsky the ability to create an exceptional yet sometimes startling piece in *Le sacre du printemps*. In short, not only is his work tricky to decipher for modern-day musicians, but it also proved a serious obstacle for Nijinsky and his dancers. Nevertheless, Nijinsky and Rambert persisted, until "every note of the music was stamped out" in Nijinsky's choreography (Crisp 7). He was "intent on reproducing every note" of the challenging score, at least in the first act, audibly with the footfalls of the dancers (Crisp 7).

Nijinsky's production was a great success because of the music as well as his choreography, and subsequent choreographers have found a wealth of potential in Stravinsky's score. Graham used the orchestral version of *Le sacre du printemps* for her "The Rite of Spring," whereas Taylor chose Stravinsky's four-hand, two-piano reduction of the score. Though Graham and Taylor both use minimal set and costuming and dim lighting for their pieces, the difference in the voicing of the music (full orchestra versus two pianos) creates a completely different feel between the two dances. Graham's piece remains, like Nijinsky's, ceremonial and grand, as well as terrifying. Taylor's "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)," however, becomes even more comical and cartoonish because of his choice of music. Just as his choreography in this piece is

often two-dimensional, the sparse two-piano version of the score lends a monochromatic and spare atmosphere to the production as well. Taylor's choice of music also helps give the audience context for his narrative: Taylor mentions the reduction "sounded rather like a rehearsal score," completely appropriate for a dance about a company rehearsing (Lewis 143). Where Nijinsky found great difficulty in the music, Taylor found ease and opportunity. In 1980, Taylor said, "Things have changed in music and dance so much since 'Sacre' that we're accustomed to working with complex, fragmented rhythms like that. It seems we rarely work with four or eight counts anymore" (Lewis 143). For Taylor, the once difficult music became inspiration for the plot of his piece: "The music in 'Sacre' changes character every couple of minutes. It's very theatrical which is helpful for a narrative piece" (Lewis 143).

Stravinsky's music provided a wealth of opportunity for me to develop my own narrative. However, I had to consider the context and performance of my piece when deciding which version of the score to use. Because I knew I would be setting my dance on a smaller cast, I felt the grandiose quality of the orchestral version would be too overwhelming and set an expectation for a more balletic production. I found Stravinsky's two-piano version interesting in its clarity and simplicity, but I felt it was a bit more sparse than I liked. After some research, I landed upon an eight-hand or four-piano version arranged by Maarten Bon and performed by the Amsterdam Piano Quartet (Amsterdam Piano Quartet). It provided just the amount of excitement, texture, and freshness I had desired, while the use of piano instead of a full orchestra made the piece easier to comprehend and enjoy than the original orchestral work—for example, passages that before had sounded foreign and bleak in the upper registers of woodwinds or brass now sounded delicate and beautiful in the piano's upper register. I decided the four-piano version of *Le sacre du printemps* was the best choice to serve my choreography.

Three Rites: Observing Aesthetic

After settling upon a score, I began intently studying the aesthetic of each of the choreographers' pieces to better understand what makes each *Rite* so unique stylistically. Though I found a full recording of the Joffrey Ballet 1987 production of Nijinsky's choreography, I was unable to find full recordings of the Graham and Taylor productions because their works are copyright protected. I was eventually able to discover several different fragmented recordings of each *Rite*, as well as dance reviews from the original performances. These resources allowed me to piece together a better understanding of the style of choreography included in each work.

Though Nijinsky, Graham, and Taylor's *Rites* each bring something different and significant to the aesthetic of what is considered typical *Rite of Spring* choreography, they are all connected by several stylistic ideas. First, the choreography is not often visually pleasing in the traditional sense. The more I watch the *Rites* and become exposed to their movements, the more I fall in love with them—but when I first watched them, Nijinsky's *Le sacre* especially, it was not love at first sight. The pigeon-toed, hunched over tribe members stomping and swinging their arms to the music made me dislike *Le sacre du printemps* when I saw it for the first time three years ago. As I continued to watch the piece and gain a better understanding of Nijinsky's intent with the choreography, I began to appreciate his choices. Graham and Taylor's *Rites*, which I enjoyed immediately, also have an oddness that makes them interesting. Often, the movement in their *Rites* is best described as fun to watch, but awkward. The movement in all three *Rites* is at times challenging to perform and is very artfully and intricately choreographed, but underlying all of that is a stiffness and awkwardness peculiar to a *Rite of Spring*.

The choreography across all three pieces is very bound. For example, though the arms of Nijinsky's tribe members swing while they're stomping, they swing down and stick there, or

swing up and stop abruptly midair. In the Graham piece feet are often flexed, legs are stiffly straight or angularly bent, and arms also carry with them a quality of tension as did Nijinsky's. The same is true in Taylor's piece, though in a more light and quick sense of being bound. Much of Nijinsky and Graham's movement is stiff and heavy, whereas Taylor finds a way to be stiff and light with quick, sharp movements and very smooth transitions. Because all three of the pieces use repetition consistently throughout, as does a religious ritual, the bound quality extends itself out from the quality of the movement itself to the construction of the piece as a whole. Not only are the limbs of the dancers bound in their movement, but the dancers themselves are bound in the seemingly endless repetition of various stiff phrases and motifs. Also, the bleakness found in the plots and movement of each piece is accentuated by the lighting and set design. Though Nijinsky's *Le sacre* begins with daylight, the second act is performed in a pale light with a dark backdrop creating a sense of night. Graham creates a world for herself that seems perpetually shrouded by night, and Taylor's piece also has a minimal set and spare lighting that makes the black performing space of the theatre loom and threaten to swallow the piece by the end. If I could combine the bound quality of the movement with repetition, and add a general feeling of bleakness and darkness to the piece, I knew I could create a recognizable *Rite of Spring*.

The Process

Absorption

I endeavored to create entirely my own choreography for my "Le sacre du printemps: The First Rite," but at the same time very much desired to honor the three choreographers I had studied so intently by creating movement that was influenced by their styles for their *Rites*. In this way, I would create a project that honored their works and influence, as well as place my choreography directly in a particular lineage of modern dance. The one thing I did not desire to

do, however, was plagiarize their movements in any way. It is one thing to find inspiration from a choreographer's movement—it is another thing entirely to imitate their phrases too closely and thus steal their creative property. Therefore, I came to rely on a process I began to call “absorption.”

I cannot recall if I had heard the term used in the same way I use it before I had started on my thesis project. Perhaps a teacher had mentioned it in passing, or I had read about it in an article, or I had taken the concept and given it my own name. Regardless, absorption became an essential part of my creative process for the piece. Essentially, absorption (as I use the term) is to immerse oneself in other artists' creative works, noticing their particular styles, concepts, and techniques, and then to separate oneself from those works for a substantial period of time before beginning one's own creative process. I have often used this technique to study for an upcoming singing or acting role. If I found a character or song particularly difficult to grasp or understand, I would watch or listen to it performed by several different successful artists. Then, I would return to the script or score and continue working on memorization and technique, laying a basic foundation before settling upon my own interpretation of character or singing style. By giving myself enough time away from the other artists' versions of the character or song, and focusing on the content rather than my creative interpretation, I allowed the various versions of the piece that I had seen to percolate in my mind long enough that I was not making the same choices other artists had made but rather my own, creative, unique, yet solidly informed choices when interpreting the character or song. I adopted this idea of absorption into my creative process for “Le sacre du printemps: The First Rite” to ensure my piece would have a strong stylistic and creative tie to the three pieces I had studied, and to be certain I was creating my own work rather than plagiarizing another artist's.

Looking back now on my piece as well as the three pieces I used as inspiration, it is interesting to see how I was influenced by each of the different pieces while remaining true to my own choreography and creative process. From Nijinsky's piece I found the freedom to let my dancers' feet make sound in some portions of the dance. While *Le sacre* had the dancers stomping on every significant rhythmic moment during the first act, I used stomping in my piece to indicate moments of tension and conflict. I also found a lot of inspiration from the village characters of Nijinsky's piece: the awkward and somehow sort of pitifully cute tribe members who tended to scurry from place to place definitely found a home in my choreography. Another essential piece of Nijinsky's choreography was his use of the *khorovod*, a traditional Russian form where dancers hold hands or lock arms and form a rotating circle. In my piece, the Shaman uses these circles in an attempt to join all the tribe members with her against the Creator.

From Graham's "The Rite of Spring" I found inspiration in the general quality of her movement as well as the fear inspired by the Shaman. Much of my piece is very bound like Graham's, as I discussed above, and this idea especially helped me develop the character of the Shaman. Throughout my piece the Shaman is almost always moving with visible tension in her body, and definitely uses her tension and stature to threaten and inspire fear in the community. If the tribe members could be described as "scurrying," then the Shaman would be described either as a whirlwind of anger or a solid wall of intimidation. This lines up very much with Graham's piece, during which the Shaman often moves more slowly and deliberately than the tribe members.

Taylor's "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)," though not a reference for me as far as plot goes, was an invaluable resource for style of movement. His dancers will often place themselves similarly to hieroglyphics: their torsos are forward to the audience, while their heads

and limbs face to the right or left. I loved this because it reminded me of Nijinsky's choreography, both in his *Le sacre* and *L'après-midi d'un faune*. I used this idea of twisted body facing throughout my choreography. I also was very intrigued by Taylor's extensive use of gesture to tell his story. Some of the portions of his dance are reminiscent of pantomime, which I found not only enjoyable to watch but a convenient way to communicate and clarify plot moments as well. For my piece, I heavily relied on gestures as symbols for connecting characters and plot moments. For example, the Creator crosses her arms in front of her in a gentle and graceful way, which the Shaman later distorts by crossing her arms forcefully with hands in fists to create a powerful and antagonistic "X" shape. The Creator uses a particular worshipful stance with arms lifted and palms open and up toward the heavens, but after the Shaman expels the Creator the Shaman makes the same shape with her arms and then turns the hands down, palms facing herself rather than the heavens. That particular shape recurs often through the piece, and eventually when the Creator chases away the Shaman the tribe members return to turning their palms worshipfully toward the heavens. In such a way, I found inspiration from Taylor's emphasis on gesture that helped me develop my own gestural code for my choreography.

Creation: Floor and Silks

I began my project several months before choreographing, giving myself plenty of time to let the process of absorbing take place. I immersed myself as much as I could in Nijinsky's, Graham's, and Taylor's versions of *Rite of Spring* by viewing the film of the pieces that I had access to, reading reviews of the pieces' premieres, and taking notes on style, movement, and plot to help my mind process what I had seen. I then stepped away from the other pieces and focused largely on listening to the music—though, as Taylor said, choreographers in the modern and contemporary era work with difficult music all the time, I had not yet worked with a piece as

difficult as Stravinsky's and I also was intent on understanding each transition in the character of the piece and how it would work for my storyline. First, I listened to the recording and notated each time (literally, in minutes and seconds) the music had a dramatic shift in mood, dynamic, or theme, and jotted down key words I could use to remember what the music was doing and what I could imagine happening at that moment. For example, in my journal I have notes such as "6:46 sounds like scattering," "7:40 sounds like joke," or "9:50 panic." Second, I wrote out my plot and tried to align appropriate changes in music with significant events in the story. For example, I picked out a particular melodic phrase from the piece and designated it as the Creator's theme. After reviewing the list of music shifts in my notes, I noticed the last time that particular theme played in the music was at 2:47. So, I notated that at 2:47 the Creator would ascend her apparatus to leave behind the tribe. Having a consistent list of times and plot events allowed me to organize and remember my choices for each section of music, and provided what worked essentially as a checklist for what needed to be done in the choreography.

Unlike other dance projects I created before this piece, I did not often have a consistent space in which to improvise and create movement. From time to time I was able to use part of a studio, gym, or theatre lobby, but in general I was limited to creating movement and floor patterns on paper and in my mind's eye, notating and sketching the movement while listening to music. I then used those notes to speed up the process of physically creating movement in the studio. If I had a difficult section I could not imagine any movement for, I returned to my list of plot events and music shifts to keep myself focused on telling my story through the movement. Then I used studio time to improvise and revise movement that suited the mood, emotion, or plot point I was trying to develop.

As I continued choreographing, sections of the story that had been vague became more clear to me and I was able to include better motivation for my characters, more detail in the plot, and a better understanding of how I wanted to use my music. Sometimes the necessary events of the plot would influence how I used the music, but there were many moments when the music seemed to dictate to me what must happen next in the story. Preparing my story by studying the music and keeping a careful record of my decisions regarding storyline events and shifts in the score allowed my choreography to fully support the story I wanted to tell and allowed the story and the music to work fully in tandem, even without extensive access to a dance space.

While I could develop and time floor choreography relatively accurately without being in the studio and then edit as necessary when I found a rehearsal space, choreographing on aerial silks required much more time and effort in a rigged space. Even when I came up with an idea in my apartment late at night, bringing it into the studio that weekend meant almost the entire hour and a half rehearsal with my dancers would be spent problem-solving the movement, the apparatus, and the amount of time required for the dancers to set up the apparatus and perform the movement. I might decide that a particular phrase in the music lends itself to a certain plot event. I could imagine the floor choreography and perhaps mark through the movement with my hands, to gain a fairly accurate understanding of how much time that movement takes.

However, when dealing with an apparatus such as silks, this was not possible. If I imagined a certain movement with the apparatus taking thirty seconds, and in my mind's eye I moved my imaginary dancer on the apparatus while listening to thirty seconds of music, I might feel that my counting of time was accurate. Even so, I knew I could not be sure of anything until it had been attempted in person at the studio. I like to say that time moves more quickly when performing on the silks. While a choreographer could fill a minute or two of floor choreography

with many different movements and interesting transitions, there are many moments in aerial where just to climb the apparatus to an appropriate height and set up for a specific move can fill all of two minutes. Thus, while working with the silks, my mentor and I would experiment with movement and time it to be sure our work would fit into the music, and then bringing it into rehearsal was a much more predictable process.

From the beginning, I knew I wanted the aerial silks to play an important part in my piece, not just as a means for creating movement but as characters or symbols in their own right. For this piece, I saw the silks as a metaphor for the heavens, or a pathway to deification. For example, the Shaman, after usurping the Creator, climbs up the silks to exercise her power over the tribe members and to set herself up as a new deity. Later, the Chosen One attempts to reach heaven during a dream, but slides too far back to earth to reach the Creator. The piece ends with the Shaman fleeing up a silk in a last desperate attempt to become a god, but falling from the top all the way to the bottom to her death. In this way, I was not only integrating movement with silks into my story, but I was also using the silks themselves as an essential part of the storytelling.

This created a bit of a pragmatic problem: if the Creator descends to create the tribe members, who then shun her for fear of the Shaman's wrath, and the Creator is supposed to ascend back up the silks to her heaven and remain there until later in the piece, how would the performer playing the Creator stay comfortably elevated above the scenes playing out below her for long periods of time? She could not come down again until it made sense for the story, or she would be on earth, and she certainly had to ascend after the Shaman takes control of the village to separate herself from the villagers after they chose the Shaman as their leader instead. Though there are several ways a performer can comfortably and securely suspend herself at a high

position in aerial silks, few are secure for extended periods of time and none are comfortable or safe to stay in for longer than a minute or two.

Creation: Invented Apparatus

This led my mentor and I to create our invented apparatus: a lyra with a silk attached to it. The lyra, once hoisted high above the dance floor, would be the perfect perch for the Creator during the longer moments she needed to float above the tribe, and the silks would provide a path to and from the ground. Though the lyra was more comfortable to sit upon than remaining in some sort of secure wrap in silks, I still felt my dancer would need a chance to relax into the lyra. Also, I noticed that being suspended on a metal hoop twelve feet above the ground did not feel as secure as I had hoped. I suggested that, rather than tying the silk to the bottom of the lyra, we could create a sort of miniature aerial hammock from two points at the top of the lyra that would stretch across the center and provide a place for my performer to recline and feel secure. So, we tied the silk to the two tabs at the top of the lyra, stretching a center section of the fabric in a hammock shape from one tab to the other and letting the tails of the fabric fall down to the floor. After some experimentation, we found that the knots from the silk on each of the tabs were unbalancing the lyra: it was heavier and more tippy on the side of the knots, and harder to maneuver on the side without the knots. The solution was to tie one knot on one side of the first tab, and the other knot on the opposite side of the second tab, thus counterbalancing the two knots against each other.

The hammock-like swath of material in the middle of the lyra provided the perfect place for the Creator to secure herself and find a comfortable position for long periods of suspension. After several of us from the dance company had spent time improvising and working on the invented apparatus, we also found that it provided a wealth of exciting and interesting movement

to compliment the floor choreography in my piece. The hammock of the invented apparatus allowed the performer to recline with it across her back, or she could expand the hammock and sit or lie in it comfortably, or even use it to help make interesting shapes or to support her ascending or descending. The tails on the side meanwhile could be used for aerial silks choreography, or they could supplement movement the performer was doing in the lyra or hammock. I was so pleased with how the invented apparatus solved my practical problems and how beautifully it moved. I cannot wait to see how I can use it in the future!

Conclusion

In the spring semester of 2014, I started my first ballet class since age six. As I struggled to learn the movement that had become so foreign to me, I also threw myself into the world of dance history as a course to fulfill one of the requirements of my newly found dance minor. If I found ballet foreign, the history of dance was even more so: we studied everything from ritual dance, to ballet choreographers, to modern dance lineages, to the history of hip hop. My mentor, Jen Kintner, was the instructor who taught that class and opened my eyes and mind to an entire world of dance I did not even know existed. In this class, especially, I learned about modern dance, why it was significant in dance history, and how every Modern choreographer brought something new and exciting to dance in their own way. This was where I was taught about the Ballets Russes and the amazingly gifted, intelligent, and tragic choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky. I remember laughing while hearing the story of the first riotous premier of *Le sacre du printemps*, and watching the Joffrey Ballet recreation on the projector screen at the front of the classroom.

As I watched it then, the movement amazed me. Because I was just beginning my own journey in dance, I had never seen anything like it. “*This is dance?*” I asked myself, watching the performers stomp awkwardly in circles around the stage, shooting out their arms and moving

their heads at odd angles. “This is not the kind of dance I like,” I decided. “I don’t think I will ever watch this performance again.”

But, somehow, that day always remained in the back of my mind. The more I remembered, the more intrigued I was to go back and re-watch the work that I had experienced as strange, daring, and somehow significant to something deep inside me. I am not sure why, on that fateful day in 1913, the riotous Parisian crowd bubbled and simmered back down to civility after their boiling protest to the choreography on the stage. The perpetuated story is that someone, the house manager, perhaps, or the owner of the theatre, or even Diaghilev himself, flicked the lights on and off and eventually the people were subdued. But why did they obey the flicking lights, and why did they stay until the end of the performance to shower Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes with applause? Perhaps the audience that night was experiencing what I had felt—an inexplicable draw to *Le sacre du printemps* that, though unexpected, kept them in their seats with eyes riveted to the stage to the very end. Perhaps they could sense the coming of a new era of dance unlike anything they had seen before.

I believe I and aerial dancers like me are in a similar situation today. In the world of aerial dance, the amazing and beautiful longstanding tradition has been circus instead of ballet, and instead of modern dance as the never-before-seen era we are heading toward an exciting future where aerial dance might become a recognized form of dance in its own right, separate but just as important as circus or acrobatics. I used my creative project, “Le sacre du printemps: The First Right,” in an effort to continue that shift, and to actively demonstrate the connection between Modern and aerial. I believe I have succeeded in creating a piece that is not only unique in aerial dance, but is also founded in lasting modern dance principles and tells a necessary story using movement and aerials. I cannot wait to see how I can use aerial dance choreography to tell

a story in my future projects, and I am also excited for the development and future of aerial dance as a dance form. Who knows? Perhaps someday soon an aerial dance company will perform at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and cause a bit of a riot themselves.

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Appendix A
Video Sources from Research

Nijinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*

(Joffrey Ballet, 1987)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jo4sf2wT0wU>

Martha Graham's "The Rite of Spring"

(Martha Graham Dance Company)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVEEycmpVBs>

<https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/martha-graham-dance-company/the-rite-of-spring-2013/>

Paul Taylor's "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)"

(rehearsed by University of Michigan Dance Company)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVKzu5Opnco>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAtzF4W8Mo>

Paul Taylor 2013 Season Preview (including clip of "The Rehearsal")

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8g0zTyyDc8>

Paul Taylor 2017 Repertoire (including photos of "The Rehearsal")

<http://ptamd.org/performances/2017-repertoire/>

Appendix B
Invented Apparatus Rehearsal Photos



