

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: *NINA SIMONE, DANCE THEATER AND THE SHAPES OF WOMEN*

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*Nina Simone, Dance Theater and the Shapes of Women* contains the background, process, involvement and discoveries made during the creation and production of the dance work *Morning of My Life*. The issues of self value and the process of personal change dealt with in *Morning of My Life* are brought to light and openly detailed through movement description. This dance work developed from the unique experiences of the choreographer discovering an understanding of femininity through the music of Nina Simone. From an artistic stand point, the creation of this work examined how thoroughly dance communicates to general audiences connecting to art forms in a world of multimedia and sensory overload.

*NINA SIMONE, DANCE THEATER AND THE SHAPES OF WOMEN*

by

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## Foreward

I began working on the piece *Morning of My Life* when I first encountered Nina Simone. The summer of 2000 in North Carolina was melt-your-eyeballs-in-their-sockets-hot. For the six week duration of the American Dance Festival held in Durham, I lived in a fraternity house with seven other dancers and a ferret. The ferret and I became good friends and still write to each other occasionally. The dancers and I did not become friends and barely acknowledge each other on the street these days.

My thesis begins with the cleanup of a party of questionable morals hosted by myself and the other dancers. Amongst the dancers living in the house were two men and five women other than myself. I have changed the names to protect the innocent. We shall refer to the men as J#1 and J#2. The ferret belonged to J#1 who is openly and obviously homosexual. J#2 is a different matter. He too is homosexual but took much longer revealing this to his house mates who all but J#1 were sorely disappointed by this fact. I bring this up simply to point out that J#2 is a man of a specific subtle sexuality.

As I got down on my hands and knees to mop the linoleum floor in the kitchen after the party, J#2 swept up in the adjacent living room. He had a CD player playing some music I had never before heard. It was something like a cross between blues, Billy Joel and European ska. I popped my head through the door and asked, "Who is this?" "Ninsimn", He yelled back. I didn't understand him. Over the next 20 minutes I asked him five or six more times who it was until I finally understood him. In a somewhat exacerbated tone he yelled. "It's NINA SIMONE!"

Later in the week, I wandered into a used CD shop and bought a two-disc set of Nina Simone's music. There was just something mesmerizing about that voice, such a timeless cool about Nina Simone. In some songs, she would speak rather than sing. Sometimes she played the piano, while sometimes she banged the hell out of it. The deep lower register of her voice and her outspoken lyrics were not unwomanly, but they were not traditionally feminine. Proper women simply did not sing in such a blatantly sultry manner without gaining a certain reputation. Even though not all the songs on the CD were written by her, she made them adapt to her rather than adapting herself to the original version. It is a selection of music from this large collection of songs sung by Nina Simone that I used to create this dance piece.

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## Chapter One: Shapes and Sizes

I listened and continued thinking about Nina Simone's music for years after I first heard it. Somewhere in the years of mass chaos that American culture refers to as emerging into adulthood, my ideas of femininity formed and solidified. Society dictates that femininity is a complicated concept. The dictionary just says it means womanliness. As a choreographer and dancer the shape and sound of things often more strongly reflect their meaning to me. I like womanliness better than feminine. It has more O's and less I's in it. In my version of femininity, women are more like O's and less like I's. Anyone who has so much as watched a woman walk across the street can see the O's in the shape of her breasts and the curves of her waist. Femininity translates to a rounded shaping of O's with the body. Simone's music sounds like those rounded O's.

In discovering a shape for the piece, *Morning of My Life*, I spent a long time watching the realities of the way women move. A so called "perfect body" does not exist. Blame can be placed anywhere from magazines to movie stars to gym class to Barbie Dolls to old fashioned moral values. Most women go through a period or several periods of bemoaning the fact they do not possess an ideal figure. I give a great deal of credit to women who recognize this idealized woman does not exist and work to help other perhaps younger women realize the same.

When I chose my dancers and singers to work with to create this piece, I did not choose any of them for having a specific shape or size. They all move differently from each other and it is this difference in movement and shapes that makes this piece

interesting. Their varying shapes adds a dimension of reality that would not be there had they all looked and moved alike. Allowing them the right to be the people they are in the bodies they are with the capabilities and challenges they face made this piece so much more than it could have been had I only let them do it my way.

As a choreographer, I often throw movement to the dancers and let them interpret it on their own bodies. I hand them an outline of movement, and then make clarifying decisions based on what works on the bodies in the room. Often this requires a more mature dancer to teach a younger dancer how to manipulate the movement. I also played on the strengths of the older dancers in terms of musicality and remembering sequences of movement. A choreographer's most invaluable assets are dancers who use the guidelines they are given to make the dance happen on their bodies while also assisting other dancers who may be struggling.

This process of allowing the dancers to interpret the movement occasionally led to confusion and frustration on the dancers' part. However, once they got beyond the idea that the choreographer is always right and stopped some pre-determined version of the movement, the dance became all theirs and theirs alone. It was important to me that the dancers learned this concept of owning the dance. I needed them to do it in their own individual ways, because seeing my way performed repeatedly on five bodies would be boring and shallow.

When I chose the two dancers who would share the part of the soloist in the first section I did not choose them because they looked alike. One of the dancers is six feet

tall and slender with a tendency toward long lingering movements. The other dancer is 5'2" and shaped, to put it politely, like a Hersey's kiss. Due to time constraints the movement was created and set on the taller dancer first. As we taught the movements to the shorter girl, adjustments had to be made to accommodate not only her size but her natural quick impulse. She would look at me with a worried expression fully aware that when she did the movements it looked nothing like the taller dancer doing the same movements. Weeks passed before she accepted the version she was doing as a valid interpretation of the movement. Dancers are not accustomed to being allowed to adjust the movements to suit their bodies. Once the shorter dancer made that shift in thinking she was able to fill the movement out in an unforced and realistic manner.

Because of her short, round torso this dancer found the moments of length and reach difficult. The solo has a twisting movement that is repeated in multiple positions. In order for the movement to look complete, she had to not only twist one way with the upper body but to also think of twisting the opposite direction with the lower body. As she dangled over the edge of the table, her length is shorter than the taller dancer's because of the amount of counter balance required. The taller dancer was able to hang her legs over one side of the table to keep from falling when she arches over the edge of the table. We had to adjust the movement on the shorter girl by adding a different shape to the arms and swing in the head to keep the moments of dangling from dying due to her shortened length.

Additionally, each of the dancers added to her interpretation of the movements



because of the other's natural tendencies. Working together they each created a unique and complex emotional moment. Initially the taller dancer created an image of sorrow that felt like a dark hovering cloud. The shorter dancer's version came across as a mild anxiety attack favoring the brisk movements. By borrowing from each other and adding an element of vulnerability created by the close proximity of the singer they added to the layers of emotion and were able to speak more deeply with their bodies. Sorrow, after all, never manifests itself in one formulated manner. The important part wasn't that she do the movements just as I or the other dancer had demonstrated or described but rather that she fill them out with her own physical structure and thought process.

As I began work on the piece, I started primarily with the dancers in the large group sections. The most difficult to dance is the section featuring the song *Ain't Got No/I Got Life*. In the opening lines of the song expressing what she doesn't have, Nina Simone takes a direct and demanding voice with a good measure of anger. Coming from the isolated darkness of the solo this sense of emerging from the down trodden is expressed with a repeated falling and getting back up motion from the dancers. Because the tempo drives the dancers to fall and get back up with a great deal of speed, they struggled in rehearsals. The dancers wanted the pianist to slow down and I wouldn't let her. Changing the tempo would have detracted from the impact of the piece. They had to find a way to move faster and maintain a level of precision.

As a teacher and a choreographer I avoid using phrases like "breath support". I

tend to think of them as generic and an abstraction for what really is taking place in the body. What I believed was inhibiting them was misplaced tension in the body. Younger dancers, particularly those with years of ballet training, often develop a nasty habit of misinterpreting the direction to engage the abdominal muscles. Instead of using the muscles surrounding the pelvis and controlling the spinal actions dancers will contract the muscles around the lower ribs and thus constrict the movement of the diaphragm making it difficult to breath. This also has an effect on the range of motion in the arms and head. If a dancer is spending energy trying to constrict the movement of the rib cage it carries outward and affects the range of the arm movements. The dancers in this piece simply didn't have time or energy to waste on this kind of tension. If the ends of the movements were to be reached they had to allow for a freedom of movement and release.

Once the dancers let go of the unnecessary tensions they began to flail in the movements. To gain back some of the clarity, we shifted the focus to directionality. Even as we incorporated the singer into *Ain't Got No/I Got Life* we emphasized the directness of this section. As the lyrics progressed into words about what she has got, we shifted the direction from one of the upper extremities, a thrusting out of the arms and hands, to one that emphasized the subtle shifts in the hips. The dancers and the singer move from a front to back direction demanding something from the audience to one of a left to right motion contained in themselves.

In the opening section I worked very hard to minimize the initiations from the

pelvis in favor of movements of the upper chest. I simply didn't want the solo to be read as "that" kind of table dance. In the beginning of the second section, we still left out any sort of motions initiated intentionally from the hips. However, as the second half of the second section takes place the movements purposely move downward. In the lyrics, Nina Simone is not backwards in her acknowledgement of the female body. She sings, "I got my boobies. . . I got my sex." It's here that I begin to press the emphasis on the feminine. The arms move from a forceful directness to a curved swing. The dancers repeat a wrapping action from the first section only this time with a lingering tempo and a sway in the hips and shoulders. With the lyrics running through a list of body parts and this sense of self recognition, I reminded myself of the slogan from the Dove soap commercials, "Love the skin you're in."

Progressing into *Sugar in My Bowl* the shift continues and is reinforced. This section recognizes a degree of womanliness that through the centuries and decades has been denied, scorned, hidden, occasionally embraced, and more often than not thought of as mystifying to men. I love that fact that a woman, a black woman, singing at the height of the civil rights movement felt she could sing about wanting a sexual experience. I was very aware of how I wanted to approach the movements in this dance. I wanted to do it justice as an authentic form of female sexuality rather than an episode of *Sex in the City*. This isn't a song about wanting to be sexy for someone else's pleasure. This is a song about making herself happy. It's when she puts on the silk thigh highs and lipstick because it makes her feel good. This level of confidence does not

come easily to most women. Putting it into movement in a way that read as Victoria's Secret pink rather than Red Light District red proved exciting and far easier than I anticipated.

I carefully chose the dancers in the trio *Sugar in My Bowl*. I knew two of the dancers from this piece from having worked with them before and the third I had chosen specifically because of how well her personality fit this section. Once the movements were choreographed, I spent some time working with the dancers to find the personality of the piece. Two of the dancers came into a sensual and sultry personality quite easily. The third had a harder time. I knew this dancer possessed the attitude necessary for this piece. The problem was the other two dancers had such strong attitudes and confidence that they used not only for this piece but also on a daily basis. She kept trying to imitate the other two dancers' personalities. Eventually we had a long discussion about what her version of this dance should be. I purposely made it a trio not a solo because I wanted multiple interpretations of feminine sexuality present. I needed her take on it as much as the other two. Once her version emerged as unique and honest to her personality, *Sugar in My Bowl* became one of the most exciting moments to watch.

The dance continues with a swing in the hips and curve in the arms making them much more prominent than in the previous sections. We also added a deeper sort of contraction that curved the torso and carried through to a softening in the legs. Many portraits, sculptures and photographs depict women standing with their weight shifted

to one leg. Whether this is an accurate portrait of femininity or not it is one that our culture recognizes and did not contradict our agenda. We decided to use that prolifically in this section of the dance. Ultimately, we created a dance that isn't overtly sexual but gives an answer to those who would deny or cry vulgarity when confronted with feminine sexuality.

## Chapter Two: The “Sunday” Dilemma

I spent many a thoughtful moment agonizing over including *Sunday in Savannah* as part of this piece. Ultimately, the decision to include it brought me back to the process of individual change I try to illustrate in the work. There is a common saying about changing the things I can and accepting the things I can't. Some things simply cannot be controlled by human power. No matter how fast, how smart or how strong people make themselves, as King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes time and unforeseen occurrences befall us all.

Here in lies the dilemma. Because certain things cannot be controlled, what can be controlled? Human actions account for something. Clearly, this dance work includes an emphasis on taking independent action without concern for what others think. It begins with a woman being left alone. She goes through a process of reestablishing her self-esteem and then eventually progressing beyond the impact of her loss. Sometimes individuals need more than what they possess alone to make substantial life altering changes.

As I thought about the progression of this loose narrative, I realized there needed to be a moment when my central character is influenced by and ushered into action by the world around her. She couldn't evolve in a vacuum. As I worked up the setting and movement for this section, I wished to create the impression of melting from one group of movement to the next. I also wanted to see a spiraling taking place.

The spirals are to convey the feeling of pulling out and drawing inward, while the melting shows a sense of feeding from one point to the next. In using a church-like setting, a congregational atmosphere developed.

I purposely left out references to the spiritual realm in favor of focusing on the humanistic. Yet I feel the belief in the existence of a spiritual realm fits perfectly into *Sunday in Savannah* as something to be relied on when the physical fails. The nature of that spiritual realm is presented here as part of the Christian belief system, because that is my faith of choice. However, I hope the audience sees a more open interpretation in the dance. As Nina Simone sings *Sunday in Savannah*, the Southern Christian church emerges as a community of people rather than simply the house of God. The concept of religion provides a rallying point and a bridge between individuals. Through God, all things are possible. Faith motivates people to work together to feed the hungry, house the homeless, provide help for the poor, and care for sufferers of ailments both physical and spiritual. When there is nothing left to prepare or prevent and the storm comes anyway, they come together to pray to something stronger than themselves. Give us the strength to accept the things we cannot change.

Aestheticism as well as emotionality feeds artwork. I've often wondered if those cave paintings found in Southern France were not someone's attempt at making their home nicer or some naughty teenager's way of wasting time. The leaping deer does not represent anything righteous or spiritual. They just looked pretty, felt right and were fun to draw. From a purely aesthetic viewpoint, *Sunday in Savannah* calms the audience

and prepares them for the finale. It looks pretty, and it feels right. There is a level of passion inherent in the music and in the soulful “amen” at its conclusion. To deny any sort of passion would be dishonest. Nina Simone chose to sing this song because of that passion. I couldn’t minimize that out of the piece. The last few moments of the dancers grasping and pulling inward heighten the strength of this section and paint a beautiful and passionate picture.



### Chapter Three: Terrible Endings

The piece begins with an ending: He's gone now, it's over. But by the time the piece ends, there is a new beginning. It's the morning. Dawn is breaking through the trees after a cold night. Portraying that idea and also bringing a sense of closure to the audience proved to be most difficult. As much as I feel that *Morning of My Life* is my piece, I do consider the audiences in making my decision. Art is a two way street. It is about expression, but is also about perception.

As a general rule, my dance pieces have happy endings. Dancers get to smile, bounce around the stage, and enjoy the movements I've created for them. I wanted to share that joy with the audience, to make them want to join the dance. Laugh and the world laughs with you, and that sort of thing. My finale creates this moment. At one point, I pair the dancers to dance with each other. Despite my internal cynicism and insistence that people are shallower than they would like to appear, I do possess a positive outlook on life. My closest friends even think of me as an optimist. I want my audiences to experience this positivity as well. With that goal in mind, I allow my nameless main character to defeat her challenges and set out on a new path.

I usually have very high standards for my work, and I feel the last ten seconds of *Morning of My Life* are inadequate. I admit I simply couldn't find the right ending to do the piece justice. The dancers and I tried several different ways to portray this proverbial moment of setting off down the yellow brick road. We rejected the notion of

a tableau almost immediately. This is a piece about moving forward and the ending should have illustrated that. We may have failed in attempting to say what we really wanted, but I believe we did the best we could with this particular set up.

I could've said that I wanted the audience to decide the true ending for themselves, to leave room for interpretation. The harsh truth is I lost interest in this piece. As I've said, this dance work grew for years before I started setting it on dancers. And in the end, all of my visions for the piece were fulfilled. Unlike some artists, I do not view my artistic creations as my children. I make them to express and entertain, not to possess them and obsess over them. I've made this piece and now it's finished. Like my main character, I am ready to move on.

## Chapter Four: People, Processes and Tequila

When I chose my own dancers, I realized I chose each of them for something different. I am aware of how cliché that sounds. Some were chosen wisely. Others did their best as it was at the time. All of them regardless of experience or technical ability possessed a willingness to explore, experiment and occasionally trip and fall. We were all looking for a new experience and I think we found it together. Integral to this experience were the singers and pianists involved in the process.

I wanted the dancers and musicians as well as myself to learn something by begin a part of this piece. If I am proud of nothing else from making this thesis concert, I am proud of how much these young dancers, singers and pianists have learned along the way. In truth, I could devote a paragraph to each of the young artists involved in this work and some of them I have discussed at length. The musicians, however, deserve more attention.

One of the many overachieving goals I set out to meet with this piece was to bring together students from the various performing arts departments to create something. I initially chose the University of Maryland to receive my MFA from because of the close proximity between the music, theater and dance departments. Imagine my disappointment when I realized they so rarely worked together. The students from all three departments contain much creative energy and willingness to work with each other. The dancers and choreographers spend too much time isolated in their own

hallway. Not extending an invitation to these other fine artists amounts to inexcusable laziness. No matter what this dance work was to be in its final form, I wanted live music to be significant to the piece.

In seeking out musicians I had no specific image in mind. Again, I was looking for willingness rather than a preconceived idea. I found that attitude in my pianists readily enough. During the course of making this work one pianist decided to take a jazz class to better understand what the dancers were doing. Unfortunately she was unable to continue working with us due to other obligations. Another pianist was awed by the way the art of storytelling, directing and dancing come together to make a new dance work. She expressed that she had always wanted to play for dancers and was extremely nervous to begin with due to her lack of experience but was overjoyed at being a part of this process. Repeatedly I asked for her time and input and she happily obliged my needs, the dancers' needs and the needs of the singers.

The two ladies I chose to sing the songs are about as different from Nina Simone as possible. There are maybe five women in the world that can sing as low as she can. Neither of my singers could reach the bottom end of Simone's range. Additionally, they are both white. One is trained as an opera singer. The other is trained in a more musical theater background. Again it was the willingness of these ladies to take this risk and do something outside of their norms that endeared them to me as singers. Because I am limited by lack of experience in what direction I can give singers, they took it upon themselves to seek more efficient aid. For the songs that have been recorded by

different artists they each sought out other version to help them learn the songs. They tell me that it is very difficult to learn a song with Nina Simone singing it. They also asked their vocal coaches and theater faculty to help them when I could not.

The singers had multiple conversations with me about the sound we wanted for this piece. *My Man's Gone Now* in one version or another is written with a Southern accent. When Ohio girls try to imitate that sound it doesn't work. They sounded fake. The audience can tell when the sound is faked the same way they can tell when a dancer fakes a movement impulse or initiation. They had to find their own motivation for each song with the frame work I was creating. Ultimately, one singer sings *Sunday in Savannah* a half an octave higher. One singer lays on the piano and makes more contact with the pianist than the other. The other singer makes more direct contact with the dancers. Just as I had to spend time with the dancers explaining the need to find honesty in moving their own bodies, the singers needed to sing with the honesty of their personal and unique voices. Discussion after discussion and months of figuring out what each singer needed to fill out their version of this main character created the depth of this piece. Even though we had started with Nina Simone's versions altered to fit her agenda, we had to find our own versions of the songs to fit our situation and feelings about the music.

My singers found an outlet that allowed them to teach dancers how to truly hear music. Initially the dancers, singers and accompanists struggled with who should be in charge of the timing. The pianist, being trained to accompany singers, was waiting on

the singers' cues. The dancers weren't sure who to listen. The singers tried to not mess up the dancers' timing by altering the rhythms too drastically which made the music seem flat. Ultimately, we all agreed that the singer should set the pacing of each section but the pianist would set the timing of the transitions between sections.

This meant the dancers had to listen constantly to the shifts in timing and rhythms inherent in live music. They couldn't ignore or expect it to be consistent every time. The dancers met equally creative artists and learned a new way of talking about the work they were doing as theatrical dancers as they started to hear more of what in music made them want to move in a certain way. Many of them for the first time in their dancing careers were forced to really hear the music instead of just listening for the downbeat.

Undeniably, I must have drunk too much tequila to think that combining so many different artists would be easy. Collaboration requires hard work, but collaborating in an environment that does not openly foster such cooperation takes even more work. Scheduling conflicts aside, encouraging an intellectual and emotional investment from everyone involved requires massive amounts of energy from the person in charge. That being said, the rewards of depth and ingenuity that are evident in the final piece far outweigh the work involved. I don't anticipate ever again having such resources available to me. But if I should ever have the fortune to find them again, I wouldn't hesitate to down a few shots of tequila and make the effort.

I accept my limitations as a choreographer. Having artists other than dancers

involved in this piece helped it evolve into something greater than what I first imagined. And I think such collaboration could add endless dimensions to other dances. In this age of multimedia, multiculturalism, special effects, and internet, it is dancing alone that has fallen short of audiences expectations. They want more. I want more.

## Chapter Five: Interpretations and Conclusions

My audiences have no hope of perceiving the forethought and effort I and the other artists involved put into this piece. I don't want them to know. Each audience member brings their own prejudice, their own background and stories with them to the performance. Not holding the audience to my interpretation allows for a multiplicity that encourages a personal connection to the work. If a dance work is completely focused on the choreographer, the audience cannot meaningfully connect to the piece.

At the same time, there is a fine line between mystique and obtuseness. Dancers and choreographers like to think they possess a higher form of communication. But if no one understands what you are saying, it is not an effective form of communication. Poetry is a good example of communicating through art. Many people, particularly students forced to analyze classic poetry for school assignments, claim they don't like poetry because they don't understand it. I feel the same about the state of modern dance. I feel bad for those poor people paying their hard earned cash to witness a dance to which they cannot possibly relate. A poet or a choreographer can be making the most profound statement with their art, but the point is lost if no one else can understand them. However, art that aims for total clarity and understanding loses its innate power. Dance, poetry, and minimalistic paintings center on metaphor, so allowance must be granted for multiple interpretations.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote in his very last book that American music makes foreign countries love the United States, and that jazz music remained one of the few reasons



he still got up in the morning well into his 80's. He wrote that other countries don't hate us for our freedoms like so many politicians would like the populace to believe. Rather, they hate the United States for its arrogance. It is arrogant for artists to believe people will flock to see their work simply because they created it and claim to be making an important statement. It's also arrogant to believe the audience will understand every message the artist hopes to convey. And it is arrogance to believe that audiences will want to pay good money to see dance works that won't entertain, or at least connect with them.

Human beings are more savage than cerebral; we react with emotion more often than reason. Just ask the advertising industry on which aspects of humanity they place the focus. Or look at how the movie industry operated during the great depression. I have no interest in creating dances that comment on war, poverty, world hunger, or any other grand statements about world conditions. I believe that most people are already in such despair, particularly in these tough times, that they aren't interested in seeing such things either. The average person looks to art to uplift them, to provide escape. Sometimes you just want that happy ending.

I worked with these artists to center allowance and acceptance as themes for this work and to find that happy ending. We made changes for the voices, bodies and experiences of the people creating this piece and made room for challenges, mistakes, alterations and variations. I can't help but think of a conversation I recently had with

one of the faculty members at the University of Maryland. We agreed that in the end, it may not be what you thought it would be and things might not turn out exactly like we plan but the morning will come anyway and you will end up on one path or another until the opportunity arises to chose another path. Working to encourage artists to work hard and try an approach that doesn't deny or negate what they are as physical and emotional individuals lead us to a very successful dance piece. We set idealism aside. In the end they didn't need to all look alike or sound alike or even think alike to create something with a very deep soul. We just needed to be honest, unabashed and more than a little courageous.