

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: TIE SHOPPING WITH MY FATHER

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Tie Shopping with My Father is a five section dance thesis created to explore the sport of wrestling and how its influences on my life have affected my movement as a dancer. Researched for three years, the culmination of the project happened on September 25 and 26, 2008 and included five sections that explored loss, mannerisms of warm-up, relationships, biographical connection to the sport, and its spiritual implications. The results included a broadened sense of responsibility to provide honest, risk-taking art and a heightened knowledge of the sport of wrestling for the arts public.

TIE SHOPPING WITH MY FATHER

by

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Statement of Interest in Exploration of the Topic

The sport of wrestling has been an interest, perhaps an obsession, of mine from a young age. I had a wrestling mat in my basement and I even chose my prep school based on the quality of their wrestling program. Suffice it to say, I knew the sport and was its greatest advocate. Wrestling alone however, was not the impetus for my thesis topic. Fate would bring dance into my life, and it was not until many years after my obsession in wrestling started that I found the need to explore my questions about wrestling and dance through choreography.

Wrestling departed from my life for most of my college years, but my understanding of the art of dance and choreography multiplied exponentially at this time. One of the most important lessons I learned about choreography in my undergraduate years was that it was best to stick to what my experience is. To express what I know and ask questions about what I don't. Not all of my choreography has to include the answers to these questions, but the journey on which the creative exploration brings me will provide me with the material necessary to define my areas of confusion.

After college, wrestling became a major interest to me once again, and I followed it around the country and the world. I could not explain its connection to me, but it was a strong bond that I knew would be important. When I watched wrestling, I felt inspired. Consequently, I wanted to create things that defined the way it made me feel. I wasn't choreographing at the time, but my mind was processing and I saw movement, music, and costumes when I saw wrestling.

Then came my application to graduate school, unexpected and exciting. Each school's program described a final thesis project where I could present an evening-length

work on a topic of my choosing. So, I started thinking. What would I dance about if I had one more opportunity to choreograph about my passion and who I am? The only thing that I could think about was wrestling. And as I started to create an original work for the auditions, I was given my father's wrestling room as a practice space. Wrestling is what I found. It is what I felt. It was the only art I had thought about for five years, so it was what my body wanted to dance about. It was certainly what I knew, my experience. I had plenty of questions about it; how does it contribute to who I am? Is it art? Why does it affect me emotionally? And others.

Finally finding a position at a graduate school had only given me permission to continue on my journey of exploration. I knew that I would need time - like I do with all of my choreographic projects. I would need to have the time and the years to live through the thesis topic in order to produce more questions. I would throw myself back into the world of wrestling and physical dance side-by-side with one another as I had never had the opportunity to do before. I knew that there were a few areas that would relate to me more than others and those were the ones I chose to investigate.

First, the history of wrestling both in America and internationally had a great deal of significance to me in grounding my research. I wanted to honor the sport of wrestling, but also make sure that I didn't remove the emotion from my choreography. History was a jumping off place. Secondly, the mannerisms and physicality of wrestling would provide a physical composition to my dancers/athletes that I would continually reference. Next, I would need to jump into relationships. I could not avoid the sticky, uncomfortable place just because I had struggled with it in the past. I had to look at my

relationships with the wrestlers in my life or else so much of my personal history would not make sense through my movement. In conjunction with the aforementioned research areas was my need to understand the mentality of a wrestler. I needed to begin to try to define why wrestlers process emotions as they do and why they relate to others as they do during competition. Is it a reflection of me or others? Lastly came the big, fat, “dance” questions. Where does dance fit in? Or am I relating dance to wrestling? Am I relating dancers to wrestlers? Or is the only relation in me?

Aside from all choreographic questions, came the challenge to present a night of my work as I would want it to represent me for a thesis project. I had never been responsible for technical aspects of my work, nor had I ever organized a budget, taken responsibility of a cast of twenty or so people, and I certainly never had to create more than twenty minutes of material that told the same story. I was lost in these areas. Relying on other people’s experience was the only savior where these insecurities were concerned, and looking for help in all places and all dilemmas was a constant necessity for me.

I began the journey of exploration on my thesis topic more than three years ago. Most of what it required for me was a leap of faith and persistence above all. I loved what wrestling and dance had given me and I could think of no better way to honor them and the people that gave me these gifts than to express what their common denominator is: me and all that I am.

Review of Literature

The most expected outcome in the research phase of my thesis project was that sources would be hard to find. Wrestling is not a popular sport in the United States, and sources in foreign languages were of no use to me, so my search for literature of the sport of wrestling and its psychological and sociological effects produced thin results. Most of my research came from personal experience and a gut feeling. However, I found a number of particularly interesting and useful articles and books that added depth to my choreography. Beyond the mindset of a wrestler, these sources introduced a sense of history and confirmed my personal experience so that the research seemed more than just a “silly woman’s” point of view. The research proved that I have experienced this sport well beyond the typical passerby and am qualified as an artist to present it with honor, depth of knowledge, and skepticism all at the same time.

When my quest for sources began some three years ago, I focused on books. What I found was mostly statistical sources, and although this is an interesting hobby of mine, it hardly produces inspiring art. But, one of the sources that came about from this initial search was *Wrestling: A Pictorial History* by David Hofstede. Mostly a picture book, and having a primary focus of professional wrestling, I used very little of it in my final project. However, the beginning of the book and a few places throughout discuss the early history of American wrestling, which often blends the amateur and professional genres. It talked about George Hackenschmidt and Frank Gotch, two pioneers of American wrestling.(2) My interest in these characters is what led me to my next book and by far, the most in-depth historical resource I found.

The Magnificent Scufflers by Charles Morrow Wilson is not a large book and is the most dated of all of my research, with a copyright date of 1959. However, it was the gem I needed to teach me about the early history of American wrestling, which explains so much about the personality of wrestling in America versus other countries. This book became the pedestal upon which much of my other research grew including interviews I conducted with wrestlers I knew in my own life. Although I had been around wrestling for a long time, this one piece filled in a number of gaps that I had been missing for much longer than the three years I had been working on my thesis. I found out that wrestling was a sport that came to America from Irish farmers; it started in the state of Vermont and grew into the national pastime, long before baseball was invented. The first form of wrestling was not the form we see today, called “folkstyle”; it was a slightly different form - “collar and elbow”.(8)

Wilson discusses the champions of each era of early wrestling in detail. He talks about their personas and what they were said to be like “on the inside”. He tells stories about their amazing feats, which make wrestling legends like Dan Gable seem less than impressive. He describes the iconic matches that lasted for eight hours, a day, or two days at a time - until someone was either dead or dying.(8) This book was inspiring and insightful. It led my choreography down unexpected roads and gave the past a voice in my work. It gave wrestling a connection to any human being, which was the connection for which I continually searched.

One particular section of text eventually led to an entire section of movement where I discuss the wrestlers in particular, bringing them out on to the mat, talking about them and describing their physicality.

From this background the first outline of a portrait of the typical Vermont collar-and-elboweer begins to emerge. Like as not, he was a farmer. He was often of Irish descent and often a Catholic. Physically, he was on the small side as a general rule- general enough so that the champions who were more than, say, 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighed more than around 150 pounds were remarked upon for their size. He had been wrestling as a pastime since first days in the schoolyard, and he was competing with grown men for a few dollars in side money when he was fifteen.

He was strong in the shoulders and arms and was nimble as a cat, and usually he was a magnificent dancer-(8)

The portrait of a wrestler hasn't changed much in the last two-hundred years. This is part of the reason I love this sport and part of why I knew it would carry over to my audience. I knew that the wrestlers in the project would fit this description and, although a stereotype by the public, very much a truth. I felt that my audience would recognize this and instantly connect to what was happening on stage.

Two of the other books I read in the process of research were *Beneath the Armor of an Athlete* by Lisa Whitsett and *Pinned* by Alfred C. Martino. *Pinned* was a fictional novel about two wrestlers in New Jersey training for their road to the State Championships. Both come from different backgrounds and different personal conflicts, however they have the same heart.(3) Coming from New Jersey, I am pretty sure that this book was less fictional than it states. I have heard this same story so many times and I have known these wrestlers. *Beneath the Armor of an Athlete* by Lisa Whitsett was the only book I read about women's wrestling. Lisa Whitsett is part of that first generation

of women wrestlers who were able to be competitive in their own right. The book is not just about Lisa Whitsett's struggles on the mat, so it did veer slightly off topic for me.(6) Both novels allowed me the opportunity to absorb myself in the wrestling culture and mind set. However, the books were mostly narrative; contributing inspiration to the final product but lacking direction towards any solid choreography.

The other book that did provide choreographic material, along with inspiration, was *A Season on the Mat* by Nolan Zavoral, a book about the 1996-1997 season of Dan Gable's Iowa Hawkeyes. Nolan Zavoral shows us inside perspective of Dan Gable, known as one of the most emotionally-closed coaches ever known. If I received nothing from this book but a glimpse into Gable's soul that would be enough, but because it is a book that follows a team throughout a season, I got to see the development of a team of wrestlers and know each member individually. The book allowed me to experience the wrestler's reactions to the world's toughest and sickest coach and, in turn, his reactions to them. Many of my suspicions of Dan Gable were confirmed and it seems amazing to me that there actually is a character as big as his stories. In addition, Zavoral also focuses on Gable's relationship with his family. Familial relations of the wrestler and coach were of great interest to me in my thesis, but were very hard to find in literature.(9)

Zavoral goes into whole sections where he is describing a warm-up or talking about cutting weight. I pulled numerous sections from this book to have my dancers read in early rehearsals when creating material.

“The fact that nobody has died within anybody's memory- I think part of that is because the athletes are in such phenomenal shape to begin with,” St. John's University's Elton said just four months before two college wrestlers, in the throes of weight cutting, died

within four weeks of each other. “In the middle of weight cutting, if a wrestler had his temperature and pulse and blood pressure taken, and an electrolyte reading, he might be put in intensive care with an IV.”

That is, if he’d already cut enough weight.(9)

Readings like this were used to invoke thoughts on improvisational material that would eventually be used in the warm-up section, “The Beginning”.

There were sections where Gable rants about overall toughness and a section where Zavoral talks about the sport of wrestling as other wrestlers view it in general. There is a section where Bobby Douglass, also a very famous wrestler and coach discusses how wrestling is like dance.(9) These connections were my own personal inspiration when creating material. One of my goals in creating my thesis was not to have people understand the connection between wrestling and dance, but I did feel it was important for me to see that I was not the only lover of wrestling who saw the connection this way. And it only deepened my understanding of what I was doing which, as a result, did connect wrestling to dance for some audience members.

One of the benefits of doing a dance thesis on the sport of wrestling was that it stands out; people rarely forget my topic of research. My topic stayed on people’s minds and so I had other researchers helping me find material. This was the case with both of the news articles I used as sources. Neither became a primary source for information, but again, both contributed to the overall atmosphere of research and presented fresh perspectives from which I could pull material for choreography. The first article was “Girls Who Want to Join the Team Find a Welcome Mat”, which is about a local high school wrestling team that was increasing in popularity among girls.(5) The second was “For Wrestlers, a Swelled Sense of Pride”, which was about how cauliflower ears notate

self-identity for a wrestler when defining their own kind and hard work as if theirs was a unique tribe.(7)

The last two resources that contributed to my work were internet articles that I did specific topic searches on. More than the inspiration they provided, they affirmed the thought that I am not the only one who values the sport of wrestling for much more than wrestling; that the sport contributes to who I am. The articles had similarity to each other in that they were both spiritual. This was not what I was specifically looking for, but was an interesting outcome. This spiritual aspect is what I decided to investigate in my final piece entitled “Reverend”. “Wrestling with your Kids” by Mark Brandenburg says,

It’s extremely important to wrestle with your daughter as well as your son. When you avoid wrestling with your daughter, you run the risk of showing her that you don’t believe she’s capable of handling it. She can handle it, and by doing it you show her you think she’s strong and capable.(1)

And in “Wrestling with God, Don’t Forget to Dance.” by Reverend Michael McGee it says,

In our churches we need to be a community of ministers who will help heal one another in our grief and loneliness, who will grapple with the demons and angels within ourselves and society, and then dance together in celebration of our common humanity.

May you be such a community of ministers, wrestlers, and dancers.(4)

I was sure that there would be a spiritual aspect to my piece because it is about me and I am a spiritual being. It is sometimes difficult to express spirituality through dance without it seeming “religious” or “preachy”. These articles, along with my tremendous respect for dance and wrestling, were the impetus for a spiritual approach in my choreography. “Reverend” was successful in showing the spiritual journey which I have

been led down by these two disciplines. The information in the resources also allowed my choreography to show that the grappling is not complete in my spiritual journey. Because of this, there is no resolution to my thesis – it was simply an exploration of an idea.

Methods of Inquiry, Research and Rehearsal

With my preliminary questions posed, I dove back into the sport of wrestling by attending matches at the University of Maryland. I started making general observations of movements, gestures and behavior that seemed interesting and sport-specific. I was far from many of the answers I was looking for, but the matches were a starting place. For whatever reason, I focused on wrestlers handling loss. I started researching the greatest loss I can remember in recent times of Alexander Karelin to Rulon Gardner in the 2000 Olympic Games. I read interviews of Karelin and how the loss had affected his life. I watched wrestlers take the walk from mat to mat wall and studied how their bodies expressed a sincere amount of pain.

When I entered the studio in the spring of 2006 to start my first solo, “Vals Boston”, I wanted to express nothing more than absolute honesty in the movement. I had a story, I had movement, and I had a clear vision of what this piece would look like. Movements were sunken and painful. An extreme focus on exhaustion was created to emulate the post competitive athlete. This was a solo that was worked on for three years. It would later become the opening section of the five sections in the final work. I was not concerned with what this piece might achieve in terms of movement; integrity and purity were my greatest challenges. How do I convey loss in a way that isn’t dramatic, but realistic? The process of creation with this piece was consistently about finding the balance between emotion and physicality.

Soon after the second draft of the solo was created, I started down the road of the next work, “Tie Shopping with My Father”. This duet was created at a time in my life where intrinsic and extrinsic challenges were strongly influencing the movement I

explored in my choreography. I not only started attending practice with the University of Maryland wrestling team and doing interviews with wrestlers and coaches that I knew, but I went through a life-changing moment in my dance. My choreography became influenced with indecision and insecurity. Along side of those emotions came a greater sense of risk and independence. I had a new desire to speak my mind where movement is concerned. The effect of the interruptions were three very different attempts at this duet which attempts to convey the uniqueness of wrestlers' relationships, the effect wrestling has had on my relationship with my father and other sociological effects that wrestling has had on my life. What started to happen in the creation of this piece was the beginning of the biographical statement that this work eventually made. And more than anything, this piece made me face a number of uncomfortable topics including the rifts in my relationship with my father. I had to become vulnerable enough to experience discomfort for some time in the hope that the movement represented in the final work would speak to all sides of the story, not just the one I hoped would seep through. My choreography would only be valid with all sides represented because the truth is that I haven't figured out any of these relationships. Confusion and further inquiry would not be a far reach.

At the same time I was working on the duet, I began work on my first group section. I wanted this piece to revolve around the mannerisms of the wrestling warm-up. I would use all of my experience sitting in those boiling hot rooms for seasons on end and try to allow my audience to experience the intensity that is created when a team of wrestlers mentally and physically prepares for competition. My greatest challenge would

be to change the environment of the dancers in the piece so that we could learn and create in a space where different standards had been established. I started by having conditioning classes. We wore sneakers and pushed our bodies beyond a comfortable place where we would have a change in physicality. Our shoulders would slump, our pelvises would drop and our chests would sink. And when we were at this point, I allowed the dancers to start to engage in a form of wrestling. We played games where we grappled and stared each other down. I needed my dancers to understand the extreme conditions under which wrestlers must compete. When we started to learn movement, we only ran the piece once we had finished our conditioning class forcing us to participate when our bodies wanted to stop. I do think that the environment change was successful. My rehearsals with my dancers were unlike other rehearsals they had attended in the department of dance. When we joked around with each other, we locked up in a wrestling form. We treated each other like teammates, not like dancers. There were some unique aspects to our rehearsals that carried through to all rehearsals for the entire work from that point forward. The greatest challenge was getting a group of dancers who could commit to the length of the project and finding women who were not afraid to try something different.

We also did a lot of talking and work shopping. We discussed the idea of “tough”. Who did they think was tough? Did they see themselves as tough? Physically, what were they afraid of? We watched hours of video of men and women wrestling at all levels. We attended wrestling matches together. We even went through conditioning sessions with a visiting artist and lecturer who discussed mental preparation and

endurance in athletics. He talked to them about what tough is and why people give up. The difference between mind and body was made clear to them and I tried to help them understand that where my project was concerned there were things to learn about wrestlers as human beings. Wrestlers can contain certain characteristics as if they are their own breed of human and this information could inform the dancers' characters throughout the piece.

When my first group work was over, I started producing the movement for my second group section, entitled "Reverend". I knew I would want this movement to encapsulate the effect that wrestling has had on my life, my dance, and my person. It would honor the sport, the art, and all that I have learned. And more than anything, I would risk using a choreographic tool I had never used before. Some years ago, I had learned that visual art can be one of performance arts' greatest collaborators. I am afraid of visual art as a medium. However, I knew that I wanted some very distinct pictures during this section. I wanted snapshots of my feelings; frozen moments in time where I pulled movement out of them. So, I gave my dancers an assignment.

We had been working together for some time at this point, possibly a year or more. They knew so much about the sport of wrestling and how it influenced me. They also knew a lot about me in general; my humor, my loves, and my insecurities. Their assignment was to find images in any type of art, fashion, photography, advertisements, that reminded them of the feelings and thoughts they had of wrestlers, wrestling, and the word "tough". We had twenty or more images when it was all said and done and I chose three that resonated with me most. These three pictures became three separate scenes.

They were the snapshots from which I built movement. There are overlays and underscores of spirituality, hurt, insanity, romanticism, and beauty. This assignment produced clear and direct choreography as it was placed in space. And each image, although only three were used, made sense to each dancer in the work which was a desired outcome, but not one I could have expected.

The final solo that I worked on for the production was titled “Stories of Why” and was a half-hearted attempt at expressing my connection with the topic. It received the least amount of attention mostly because of time constraints. It was poorly rehearsed and sold short. However, I think it carried weight and did provide an explanation for most audience members who may have been confused by other biographical moments in the dance. It was a sketch of a childhood doused in wrestlers and all things wrestling. It was a tribute to my parents, my teachers, dance and wrestling. Life is not always silly fate. I am the dancer I am because of the person I am. I am the person I am because I was surrounded by people who are risky, independent, courageous, tough, and flawed. I am surrounded by wrestlers and people who love wrestling. So, “Stories of Why” set out to tell the story of me.

There would be different questions as the pieces came together in order of performance. And unexpected dilemmas appeared as we came closer to performance week, but a solid foundation was in play and there were elements worth building on. I had created a voice for myself and my work. Next came the elements that would make it sing.

Performance Results; Successes and Lessons

Only three weeks out from the performance date, I introduced eight more performers to the thesis. They were student athletes on the University of Maryland wrestling team and I was sure that they would tie the five section work together. Production elements were falling into place and out of place, including a last minute scare to dance without a wrestling mat as our floor.

I have choreographed in sections before. This is my method when creating movement. I see things in sections, perhaps unrelated to other facets of the topic and I see the sections as fragments of thought. My one self-imposed challenge for performance was to connect the fragments so that there were no blackouts. Whether the fragments still existed or overlap occurred, there had to be a through line in movement, lights and landscape. This mind would be fragmented, but it needed to keep rolling from thought to thought.

So, once the wrestlers were at rehearsals, I could finish connecting my thoughts. Practicality would invade dance movement and what was abstract would become a little more finite. Beside struggling with the difference in administrative organization and eating habits between artists and athletes, the process went smoothly with enthusiasm from both parties and a willingness to learn and share. I am not sure I would ever do a piece with a group of organized athletes again, mostly because the grocery bill is expensive. But, it was a once in a lifetime experience for everyone involved and I do think it put me in some uncharted waters. I had allowed my voice and my past inform my audience and my work. It was a risk in choreography, one where I took a movement

vocabulary that already existed and used it literally. I didn't change it or manipulate it or mold it; I simply asked the question, "Can this movement be art just as it is?"

The performance of my thesis, *Tie Shopping with My Father*, was September 25 and 26, 2008 in the Kogod Theatre at the University of Maryland Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. The floors and the walls were covered in mats. There were five sections performed without blackout and a constant through line. *Tie Shopping* had eight performers including myself, three live musicians, eight wrestlers and two sold out shows. I put my audience right under my performers' noses. There was no escaping and no hiding in this show. I elevated and introduced my favorite sport to numerous people with a focus on the art I see in wrestling and the dance it creates in me.

A peer of mine in the graduate program was talking with me about the performance a few weeks after the show. She had finished her own thesis and we were discussing the shared experience. She told me she cried when the performance was over and after some laughter, I inquired why. She responded that when she was creating her thesis there were things she wanted to say, rumblings in her stomach that always got stuck right at the bottom of her throat. She couldn't spit out the final word. She was crying because she admired that I achieved this in my work. I spit out what I wanted to say without restriction.

Producing a thesis concert and a night of my work has confirmed a lot of my fears while putting so many others to rest. I've learned lessons regarding budgets, cooperation from performers, and receiving help from others who have gone before you. I've learned not to worry about what my audience receives from my work. I can not control reactions

to my choreography or work to steer them in one particular direction. I would be lying though if I didn't say that I received two reactions that made me feel I had done my work as an artist.

The first was from public reviews of my work. In general, people seemed to understand and come away with a few things. First, that I knew the sport of wrestling and was simply honoring it. Second, that sport can be art all on its own; I don't need to compare or contrast it to movement in dance. And lastly, that my statement was very personal and I wasn't afraid to allow the audience to get to know me. The second of these reactions came from all of the wrestlers that had seen the piece. Every one of them expressed to me, "I got it. I understand everything except the first piece." At which point, I would say, "It's about loss." Like water over a damn, their face showed total satisfaction at the fact that it all made sense to them. This was my greatest success.

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