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Dancing Through Loss

by

Tracy M. Vogt

Presented in
Partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance

Hollins University
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Introduction

I'm writing this thesis in March of 2022, hopefully near the end of the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected the world's population for over two years. In the United States, 79.9 million people have tested positive for COVID-19, and 976,000 people have died. Mandatory lockdowns and quarantines have become a part of daily life. In a world where art imitates life, I'm sure there will be an insurgence of choreographic works dedicated to the pandemic and loss of life. Through my research, I will investigate the history and ways different choreographers have used their choreography to tell the stories of grief, loss, and mourning. Many people have never experienced the loss of a close friend or family member, but I have had many losses. As a professional dancer, I was able to process, mourn, and honor those losses through my physicality within choreographic works by these selected choreographers. Through this research, I aim to incorporate, evaluate, and create my artistic manifestation while acknowledging the history, process, and investigations of those that came before me.

One must first investigate how people process loss and death to understand grief and mourning. There is much research and conflicting ideas about how humans deal with grief and loss. One of the most widely known models is Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief. Kübler-Ross interviewed and studied patients given a terminally ill diagnosis and learned the ways they cope with the knowledge. In her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, she describes all patients' stages, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This book was groundbreaking at the time because it offered ways for those dealing with grief to understand and process conflicting emotions and

feelings while coping with grief. Although each person processes grief differently, she believed the stages were not chronological but typical to most people.¹ This model was created way before science and technological advances to study the brain evolved and explained how trauma affects the body and brain.

Due to advances in science, many different theories and studies have helped to inform modern thinking. In Peter A. Levine's book, *Waking the Tiger*, he explains how animals can more easily handle trauma than humans and how we can learn to process trauma. He explains that the neo-cortex part of the human brain is so complex that it sometimes will override some of our gentler instinctual responses, such as the discharge of energy to help in healing.² Levine states the instinctual cycle, and responses get frozen, creating the trauma to live within the body. He further explains that healing can begin by letting the body experience and move through those instances.

In Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.'s book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, he talks of how we are learning more information on how trauma resides in the body and brain through advances in neuroscience. Van Der Kolk's work primarily involves child abuse and domestic violence victims and soldiers who have PTSD and how grief and loss reside inside the body as a trauma. Van Der Kolk believes that psychological therapy and counseling are not the lone solution to the problem. He believes that through kinesthetic and physical activities including yoga, dance, and martial arts, patients begin to free the body to process the blockages created by trauma.

¹ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: McMillan Company, 1969), 250.

² Peter A. Levine and Ann Frederick, *Waking the Tiger-Healing Trauma* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books) 1997.

In the work of George A. Bonanno, in which he debunks and disagrees with grief being divided neatly into five stages, as the Kubler-Ross method suggests.³ Bonanno offers scientific research and case studies that indicate that no two people experience grief the same and don't always experience grief in stages.⁴ Bonanno explains the stages model "serves as a neat and tidy way to think about grieving."⁵ He believes that some bereaved people suffer from chronic grief, but others experience a more gradual trajectory of recovery and resilience. Although these prominent scientists believe grief, trauma, and loss should be treated differently, they all believe that grief changes and constantly evolves as if in motion. The correlation between grief and dance movement can be beneficial and therapeutic for those experiencing loss. I have found through my dance experience that the emotional and physical embrace and movement practice helped me process my feelings and emotions regarding loss.

Martha Graham, Antony Tudor, and the 1930s

To begin this journey, I will investigate and examine Martha Graham's famous solo *Lamentation*, which was choreographed in 1930, and Antony Tudor's *Dark Elegies* in 1937. *Lamentation* premiered at Maxine Elliot's Theater to music by Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodaly. I have chosen to begin with these works during this time period because, much like today, the United States and the world were in serious turmoil. The Great Depression and World War II were evident, and there was much despair and trauma across the globe. The dance world began to break away from creating ethereal and magical choreographies and started to create works about the reality of their own world

³ George A Bonanno, *The Other Side of Happiness*, (New York, Basic Books, 2019).

⁴ Bonanno, *The Other Side of Happiness*, 28.

⁵ Bonanno, *The Other Side of Happiness*, 28.

now. Modern choreographers broke away from classical ballet's use of story ballet about princes, princesses, and magical creatures and created more abstract works about the actual world they were living in.

Martha Graham broke away from her roots with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn's Denishawn Dance Company, which created works about exotic and far away cultures, and began to create works about subjects and realities she faced in her life. Graham's early work was often ridiculed and considered shocking and grotesque by critics, but she remained true to her own artistic expression and ideas. In her work *Lamentation*, Martha Graham explained that the work represented not human grief but grief itself.⁶ The soloist remains in one position on a bench the entire solo and twists and turns the fabric in an expression of intense grief and mourning. The costume is a tube of material, and Martha Graham explained "that it's as though you're stretching within your own skin."

Graham often told the story of a woman that approached her after a performance who had obviously been crying. Graham learned later that the woman had witnessed her nine-year-old son being killed by a car and could not cry until seeing Graham's work. The woman thanked Graham for helping her to see that "grief was honorable and universal, and she need not be ashamed for crying."⁷ In this work, the torturous and gut-wrenching emotions are shown by the tension of the body and the twisting and pulling of the fabric. She uses her signature movement, contraction, to fully express and embody despair. The contraction is the visual embodiment of the exhale, and at times throughout the work, the inhale or high release is used as a metaphor for exaltation. Graham also

⁶ "Martha Graham's *Lamentation*" | jplocao," YouTube video, 5:01, "jplocao" March 2, 2009. <https://youtu.be/Dn7lGuROMxQ> .

⁷ Martha Graham, *Lamentation*.

employs another signature Graham movement, spiral, to embody the inner turmoil that occurs within the body and mind while processing grief and loss. Through the use of these movements, the fabric and isolation of the solo dancer contained in one space, the bench, Graham implies that grief should be dealt with in oneself and is a solo journey to healing.



Figure 1. Morgan, Barbara. *Lamentation*. digital image. Martha Graham, 1930
<http://adancehistory.blogspot.com/2015/11/lamentation-project-superb-dance.html>



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Figure 4. Morgan, Barbara. *Lamentation*. digital image. Martha Graham, 1930
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British choreographer Antony Tudor used Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*) as his subject matter. Mahler chose the texts of the songs from a collection of 428 autobiographically inspired poems penned from 1833 to 1834 by German Romantic writer Friedrich Ruckert, who had lost his two children. Like Graham, Antony Tudor chose to use grief and mourning in his work *Dark Elegies*. Tudor's now-classic ballet premiered by Ballet Rambert at London's Duchess Theater in February 1937. *Dark Elegies* is not a "story ballet" about the death of children. Instead, Wayne Geisler explains that "Tudor created dances that enact an abstract, atmospheric ritual of commemoration, inspired by, but not limited to, the specificity of Ruckert's poems and Mahler's music."⁸

⁸ Elizabeth Sawyer, "Notes on Dark Elegies," *Dance Chronicle*, 28, no.1, (2005):1.

Both Graham and Mahler chose grief and mourning as the subject of their dances but also decided to keep the works as representations of feelings instead of actual stories of loss. In Elizabeth Sawyer's *Notes on Dark Elegies*, Sawyer explained that "Tudor chose the plural, "elegies," to indicate that people react differently to personal trauma. But a common link is that each mourner mainly feels cut off, utterly alone."⁹ Tudor often warned, "Nothing in my ballets is ever fully stated." He explained that his work was used to explore the universal nature of grief and isolation, not their specific source.

Graham and Tudor used general emotion and symbolism as inspiration for their work, unlike later choreographers in history. The United States was at the height of the Great Depression, and the future looked bleak to many during that time in the United States; thus, this universal symbolic and abstract approach helped most audiences understand the works. Although their works about such subjects were seemingly shocking at the time, their choreography's physicality and signature style made the works more palatable to the general population. Their explorations and expressions of dark subject matter led generations of choreographers to push the boundaries and explore these same themes and subjects in their own ways.

The works' physicality tended to be stoic and archetypes of grief as if frozen in time through a series of moving images. These stoic moments and physical images both solidified the representation of grief and deflected from the infusion of emotion or sentimentality. While Graham used the iconic tunic fabric to create the tension of loss, she avoided the emotionality of one person's reaction to loss. Graham and Tudor expressed the rigidity in which people lived and behaved in society at the time. I believe

⁹ Sawyer, "Notes on Dark Elegies," 2.

that Graham and Tudor were creating works about complex subjects, but society was much more conservative, and such topics were not discussed. These topics were not addressed and not reflected in the art world because the arts were seen as entertainment where one could go to escape the world's harsh realities.



Figure 5. *Dark Elegies*. Unknown photographer. Digital image. Possibly the original cast at Duchess Theatre.1937. <https://www.rambert.org.uk/wp-content/plugins/rpdb/media/work/1000x1000/Dark-Elegies-1944-Sally-Gilmour-photo-Peggy-Delius-Resized.jpg>

Talley Beatty

Talley Beatty used death as a subject in his 1947 work *Southern Landscapes*. This work was inspired by the 1944 best-selling novel about the Reconstruction period in the United States, *Freedom Road*, by Howard Fast. Beatty's work highlighted the Reconstructionist period in America and expressed the highly racialized disparities that

led to the destruction of a community in South Carolina. Beatty, a black choreographer, refers to the tragic influence of the Ku Klux Klan on the black and white community and the horrors and atrocities faced by the citizens. The first section, *Defeat In the Fields*, shows the anger and desperation through ferociously fast movements that workers in the fields experienced and ends the section with a barrage of gunfire.

Through my personal experience with this work, movements were often described by the Rehearsal Director as actual actions workers would do in the field. One entrance was described as "dig the hole with your heel, plant the seed with your hand, and cover the seed with your foot." Beatty often used everyday actions as inspirations for his movement vocabulary in highly stylized ways. He used the images of working, struggling, fighting, and finally succumbing to forces too powerful to overcome. Beatty's signature movement vocabulary included frenetic energy and lightning-quick movements wrenched from the dancers' bodies revealing the desperation and anger the subject matter implied.

The second section, *My Hair was Wet with the Midnight Dew*, was a dance depicting the desperation and anguish the community under siege felt that they had to bury their dead at night to protect themselves from the Ku Klux Klan. The work is a quartet of two men and two women with outstretched arms and trembling hands, underscoring the desperation and anguish the community members felt at the time.

The third and most widely known section, *Mourner's Bench*, is a solo for a male dancer on an eight-foot bench. The solo has been described as a tour de force and became a signature work of Beatty's style. The solo has been kept alive in various companies, including Philadanco, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Dayton Contemporary

Dance Company, and numerous reconstruction projects. This solo is about a man returning from recovering a body and reflecting on the ideas of hope and strength. The bench references the use of a bench in the southern Methodist church where evangelists would sit and offer their sins to find redemption through prayer. The music is a traditional spiritual, *There is a Balm in Gilead*, and incorporates his experiences of his dance studies with Katherine Dunham, Martha Graham, and classical ballet. The sustained and precarious balances exemplified the dancer's virtuosity and became an archetype for grief, loss, and redemption.¹⁰

Like Tudor and Graham, Beatty uses slow and sustained movements to represent again how many people deal with loss by representing the internal struggle that loss creates. In all three works by Graham, Tudor, and Beatty the central figure is isolated, and movements are filled with tension and often repetitive in a slow and sustained way. Tudor, Graham, and Beatty all choose to use somber music with dramatic accents to express the unpredictability and ongoing stages of grief and loss. Tudor uses other characters in long dresses and covered heads in bonnets onstage to create a sense of community of grief and acknowledgment of the inevitability of death. Tudor isolates the lone singer in the corner to create the isolation of each individual's experience of loss.

Unlike Tudor and Graham, Beatty ends his piece positively and upliftingly. The final sections of the work include the *Sitting Up Ring Shout* and *I Feel Like Traveling; I got on my Traveling Shoes* provide an uplifting and hopeful ending, unlike Fast's novel. From this, I take away that he felt that to make the subject matter acceptable, Beatty felt he must provide comfort and hope for the audience to deem the work successful and

¹⁰ Clarence Brooks and Baba Stafford C. Berry, Jr., "Talley Beatty's Mourner's Bench: A Conversation featuring Dr John Perpener," April 22, 2021. <https://youtu.be/TNCsAfMbk6I>.

entertaining. Having danced numerous works by Beatty, I noticed that he most always closed the work with a joyous celebration section .

These choreographers broke away from artists of the time by creating works about difficult subjects. Each chose to represent grief in abstract and generalized ways. The slow, sustained movements often resemble how funeral processions occur in somber and methodical ways and observed grief as an individual experience to be taken with much seriousness and reverence.

It is impossible to ignore the racial complexities in the United States during these times. Graham and Tudor were white choreographers free to create work of their own choosing because of their successes in the dance world. Graham was a lead dancer with Denishawn Dance Company, and Tudor was a lead dancer with the London Ballet. Talley Beatty was a dancer with Katherine Dunham when black dancers were not allowed to train or perform alongside whites. Although Graham and Tudor broke barriers by allowing black dancers in their schools, they had more freedom and privilege to create works. Perhaps Beatty in his works felt compelled to have his works with joyous sections to make the work palatable to all audiences.

Beatty created *Southern Landscapes* to explain and explore the realities faced by African American citizens in the United States. John Perpener wrote, "From an early age, Talley Beatty was aware that every aspect of African American life was dominated by the constraints imposed by entrenched racial practices that had long been a part of America's social and political infrastructure."¹¹ Beatty was a member of the Katherine Dunham Dance Company at age 12. Through his experiences with Dunham, he learned how

¹¹Brooks and Berry, Jr., "Talley Beatty's Mourners Bench: A Conversation."

Dunham used the stage to protest racial disparities in America. Beatty incorporated his early training with Katherine Dunham in traditional black movements, infused the highly styled Graham training he received into this work, and incorporated both cultures.

In a 1992 review of Beatty's work by Jennifer Dunning, Beatty explained he created the work about the Reconstruction period when blacks and whites worked together until the Ku Klux Klan came in and destroyed these communities.¹² Although he used his work as a protest, he also recognized that it must be entertaining and palatable to the mainstream, primarily white audiences of concert dance. Perhaps this is why Beatty ends the work on an uplifting and joyous note.



Figure 5. Lindquist, John. Talley Beatty in *Mourners Bench*. digital image.1948
<https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/themes-essays/african-diaspora/talley-beatty/>

¹²Jennifer Dunning, "Kicking Off the Slick: The Other Talley Beatty," *New York Times*, June 30, 1992.



Figure 6. Lindquist, John. Talley Beatty in *Mourners Bench*. digital image.1948
<https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/themes-essays/african-diaspora/talley-beatty/>.



Figure 7. Sanford, Eric M. Talley Beatty in *Mourners Bench*. Digital image.
1948.<https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/themes-essays/african-diaspora/talley-beatty/>.

Anna Halprin

Unlike Graham, Tudor, and Beatty, choreographers during the 1960s and 1970s began exploring choreographing through an experimental and improvisational lens. The postmodern dance era was born in which choreographers viewed dance through an avant-garde lens. Musicians, visual artists, and poets began to break away from traditional, stylized, and expressive working methods and developed an improvisational and

collaborative approach to the arts. Judson Dance Theater in New York City broke away from codified and stylized choreography and unidealized ways of using the physical body in ordinary ways. The company began with a series of workshops and later became a dance company investigating minimalism and collaborations between multidisciplinary artists to create the work. This fundamentally changed how dance was to be defined or understood. Everyday movements and actions became a dance, shedding the notion that dance must be virtuosic as in ballet or highly expressive and angst-ridden like Graham's work.

Anna Halprin was an American choreographer who extended dance boundaries through her postmodern movement to address issues she faced daily. In the documentary *Breath Made Visible*, she discusses how everyday life is a dance. Rather than put movements on dancers' bodies, Halprin believed that all bodies could dance. She felt that dance had always connected to the community, nature, and spiritual connections, so dance has a purpose. She believed that all people use different forms of dance to understand the mysteries of life. Halprin believed in the power of drawing visualizations for self-healing.

In a 1972 self-portrait, she intuitively created a drawing in which she drew a large black mass in her abdomen. Halprin met with a doctor, and it was revealed that she had colorectal cancer. She became fascinated with the relationship of imagery and movement to explain what was occurring in the body and went on to create more works about health and social issues, including the AIDS crisis and racial injustices. Halprin was initially treated with chemotherapy and surgery, but the cancer returned after three years. After the return of her cancer, Halprin decided to have a deeper purpose with her

dance and her guiding intention. She believed that she could arrest her cancer by creating a dance work, *Dark Side Dance*, incorporating the dark side and bright side of her illness. After her performance in 1975, her cancer retreated and never returned.

Halprin believed that one could use art to cope with brutal realities and use dance as a therapeutic tool. In her work, *Intensive Care, Reflections on Death and Dying*, she reflected on her visits to the Intensive Care unit with her husband as he was dying. This exploration led Halprin to develop the Five Stages of Healing. "One is confronting your primary issues, the other is having the courage and the strength to confront what you've identified, and then the third is to release, and the fourth is the change that comes about, and the fifth is integration."¹³

The movements in the work are directly correlated to the actual movements of her husband in the death process. She also incorporated movements to express her own feelings while witnessing his journey to death. The work ends with each dancer finally succumbing to death in their own unique way. Halprin believed that dance should be used as a vehicle to help in healing. In 1978, Halprin created the Tamalpa Institute to codify her explorations into the Life/Art Process method. Halprin believed in repurposing dance as a vehicle for social change and community healing. Halprin was not interested in the consumerism and palatable nature of her choreography and performances. She was more interested in the human connection between the dancer, audience, and personal healing through the work. Halprin was uninterested in the critical review of her work but was more invested in the therapeutic benefit of creating such work. Like Graham and Tudor, Halprin explored grief and loss with her postmodern avant-garde approach to movement.

¹³ Anna Halprin, *Dance as a Healing Art: Returning to Health with Movement and Imagery* (Mendocino, CA: LifeRhythm), 2000.

Through her use of pedestrian movements, Halprin brought a realistic and actual practice to choreographing about death and loss. Halprin wasn't worried that the piece was successful as a commodity but that she was satisfied and enriched by creating the work. Halprin used her choreography to help investigate and understand the process of death and dying, creating, and manifesting her own healing through the work.



Figure 8. Pierre, Raphael. Anna Halprin © *Intensive care, reflections on Death and Dying*. Digital image. 2000. <https://www.festival-automne.com/en/edition-2004/anna-halpriparades-andchanges-1965-intensive-care-reflections-death-and-dying-2000>.



Figure 9. Pierre, Raphael. Anna Halprin © *Intensive care, reflections on Death and Dying*. Digital image. 2000. <https://www.festival-automne.com/en/edition-2004/anna-halprin-parades-and-changes-1965-intensive-care-reflections-death-and-dying-2000>

The AIDS crisis

In the 1980s and 1990s, AIDS became a severe epidemic in the United States. At the time, the disease was regarded as primarily affecting gay men and intravenous drug users, so there were many negative connotations and feelings about the disease. Protests developed because of the lack of action and seriousness taken by the Center for Disease Control and many politicians because it was a sexually transmitted disease. It was also considered a "gay disease," so little was done to stop the crisis. AIDS was the number one threat to public health by the late 1980s. In the dance world, many prominent figures were lost to this deadly disease, leading to many choreographic works about the loss, grief, and mourning that many people were going through. Numerous popular, experimental, and avant-garde choreographers created works about the injustices felt by the stigma of AIDS and homophobia in American society. Many of the works reflected the fear and isolation they were experiencing during this time. As in the 1930s, economic

and social injustices and issues found their way onto the concert stage through prominent choreographers of the times.

In 1989, Bill T. Jones, a well-known contemporary choreographer, was commissioned to create a work for an ensemble of nine dancers to the first movement of Felix Mendelssohn's *Octet in E-Flat Major*. After losing his partner Arnie Zane to AIDS and being diagnosed as HIV positive, Jones created a work entitled *D-Man in the Waters*. This choreographic work paid tribute to and honored one of his beloved company members Damian Acuavella. Acuavella (nicknamed D-Man) was a longtime dancer with the company who was also diagnosed with AIDS. The work gave physical manifestation to the fear, anger, and hope for salvation the company was battling during the epidemic, watching their friend and coworker succumb to the disease.¹⁴

New York Times dance critic Jack Anderson was moved by the sheer physicality of the work, complete with diving, belly flopping, rolling energy of the dance, and the diversity of body types of the performers. The work was originally titled *The Waters*, but Jones decided to dedicate the work to Acuavella and even carried him onto the stage to be able to perform with the company one last time.¹⁵

The work is a feature of virtuosic movements. Defiant and athletic dancers roll, fly, jump, throw, and lift one another in celebration of community and confusion. Jones used the entire space and all dancers to keep the momentum of the work moving as water in a sea while keeping each other afloat throughout the turbulence. The sheer physicality

¹⁴ *Can You Bring It*, directed by Tom Hurwitz and Rosalynd LeBlanc. (Duana C. Butler, 2021). DVD.

¹⁵ Bill T. Jones, *Last Night on Earth* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1995).

of the work embodied perseverance and shared experience throughout the difficult times of the 1980s and the AIDS crisis during which many young dancers lost their lives.

In 1994, Jones choreographed *Still/Here*, which embraces and explores the feelings and thoughts associated with knowing that you have a terminal disease. He researched for almost a year through interviews, improvisation, and movement exploration of what having that knowledge feels like and created a dance work. Although Jones adamantly believes this work is not about AIDS alone, many people with the disease were interviewed as part of his research.¹⁶

In a highly controversial review, *New Yorker Magazine* dance critic Arlene Croce refused to review the performance, claiming it was "victim art and not worthy of her review."¹⁷ By Croce refusing to review the work because she felt it was embracing "victim art," Jones broke away from the consumerism of concert dance. There is much discourse on Croce's views and refusal to write a review, but it also underscores the stigma associated with making art about death. By creating this work, Jones, much like many post-modern choreographers of the time, broke away from their work being accepted by critics of the time.

Much like Halprin, Jones was using the work to create healing and understanding through his art, not purely for the performative entertainment of his audiences. He made the work to heal, accept and understand death and loss, not for the commercialization of his work. In a 1997 Bill Moyers interview about the work, Jones often spoke of the need

¹⁶ David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, Wisconsin University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Arlene Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," *New Yorker Magazine*, December 26, 1994, 54.

to understand how others were dealing with these issues to help him process his own feelings.¹⁸

Unlike Graham, Tudor, and Beatty, Jones did not wish his work to be palatable or generalized in dealing with grief and death. Jones was interested in the physicality, emotionality, and actualized personal stories of death. Jones interviewed and explored the movement patterns of terminal patients to create the movement vocabulary rather than beginning on dancers' bodies. He allowed the participants in the research to develop the work rather than him creating the work on them.

Jones' process of creating an artistic dialogue and collaboration between the choreographer, subject, and artists was a new way of exploring choreography unlike Graham, Tudor, and Beatty. Jones integrated his background of classical and postmodern dance while encouraging exploring and improvisation from the artists to the postmodern movement in the dance world that blurred the lines of concert dance in physicality and expression. This approach is in direct contrast to the choreographers I have analyzed previously and offers a time of exploration and collaboration between choreographer and dancer.

¹⁸ *Bill T. Jones: Still/Here with Bill Moyers* (2006, Films for the Humanities & Sciences), VHS.



Figure 8. Newman, Andres. *Still Here*. Bill T. Jones. digital image. May 22-23, 1995. Teatro Goldoni. Venice, Italy. <https://www.andresneumann.com/bill-t-jones-2/>



Figure 9. Jones, Bill T. *D-Man in the Waters*. Digital image. <https://artpower.ucsd.edu/event/bill-t-jonesarnie-zane-dance-company/>

Alvin Ailey

Alvin Ailey used grief and loss to inspire his choreography in his classic work *Memoria*. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater premiered *Memoria* in 1979. With music by Keith Jarrett, Ailey described the piece as a tribute to his dear friend and colleague,

Joyce Trisler, who passed away prematurely. He explained the work as a wrenching experience for him and created the work in two sections. Ailey wrote, "*Memoria* is about Joyce Trisler's life, my memories of her, my image of her. Although these are very abstract images, nobody has ever asked me what *Memoria* is about. People everywhere understand it. Making the dance was a very deep and wrenching experience for me."¹⁹ The work is comprised of two sections, *In Memory* and *In Celebration*. *Memoria* marked the first time Ailey combined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater with Ailey II and advanced students from the Ailey school, which continues to this day. *Memoria* has become a classic in Ailey's repertoire and is performed yearly at City Center Theater in New York City. New York Times dance critic Jennifer Dunning described the work as a bittersweet elegy that ends in a joyous celebration of Joyce's spirit.²⁰

In *Memoria*, the choreography, and movements are rooted in traditional and codified techniques, including classical ballet, jazz, Horton, and Graham techniques. The motion of the lead female character is sweeping and lush, representing the spirit of Joyce Trisler. Ailey's choice to use all members of the main company, second company, and students in the school exemplifies the cyclical nature of death and rebirth and how memory is passed from generation to generation. Perhaps Ailey's choice to use the younger dancers demonstrates how death and loss throughout the 1980s became more mainstream. The subject of death, grief, and loss became more discussed and analyzed because of ongoing research by leading psychologists, and people were more open to discussing the subject matter since so many were dealing with trauma and loss.

¹⁹ Jennifer Dunning, "Dance: Ailey's *Memoria*," *New York Times*, December 21, 1986.

²⁰ Dunning, "Dance: Ailey's *Memoria*."

In Ailey's choice to use upbeat jazz music and view death as a celebration of spirit, death as a subject became a memorial and testament to Joyce's life and energy, not just a grievance for the loss. Much like Beatty, Ailey's use of celebration as a metaphor for death also kept the work acceptable to the public. The use of technical elements from classical ballet, jazz, Graham, and Horton techniques kept the work entertaining as a virtuosic spectacle, upholding the consumerist and palatable nature of choreographies about death.



Figure 10. Kolnik, Paul. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Alvin Ailey's *Memoria* with Ailey II and students at The Ailey School. digital image.
<https://pressroom.alvinailey.org/alvin-ailey-american-dance-theater/repertory/memoria-6632563>.

Camille A. Brown

In Camille A. Brown's work, *City of Rain*, choreographed in 2010, Brown used her work to memorialize a dear friend she had lost to a debilitating disease. While discussing her work, Brown explains that she didn't know the friend was ill until he became paralyzed and passed away. Brown premiered the work in 2010 at the Joyce Theater with original music composed by Jonathan Melville Prat entitled *Two Way Dream*. Brown reimaged her work in 2019 for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at City Center Theater. In a Behind the Scenes video from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, she stated that she chose the title by using rain as a metaphor for the burden he was carrying and representing her tears. Brown further explained that her movement inspiration was the flow of water. She recalled a quote she was inspired by that talked of tears creating water, which then makes an ocean and the way the flow of the waves pushes you forward through grief.

Brown shared that the work was a way of processing the pain, grief, and anxiety she felt about losing her friend.²¹ The choreography is a polyrhythmic and eclectic mix of dance and pedestrian movements that represent the different emotions one goes through in dealing with loss. Brown collaborates with the bodies in the room to inspire and inform her choreography, much like Jones. The physicality and virtuosity of the dancer are explored and utilized, combined with Brown's use of musicality to express emotion. In my experiences working with Brown as a dancer with Philadanco in her 2009 work, *Seek Light*, I understood that Brown uses rhythm to express emotion and feelings. She collaborates and is

²¹ Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, "Behind the Scenes of City of Rain," YouTube video, 2:21, November 7, 2019.

inspired by the bodies in the room and draws from everyday physical movements to form her choreography about complex issues she has faced. Much like Jones' works *D-Man in the Waters* and *Still/Here*, Brown uses gestures and exuberant movements to accentuate the water flow and to embody emotions and feelings of dealing with grief and loss. The sense of urgency, turmoil, and community is evident in her work. Grief and loss are no longer viewed from a place of isolation and despair, as in earlier works discussed by Graham, Beatty, and Tudor, but as a way of connecting to others through movement. Brown uses the physicality of her work to process the emotions and feelings experienced by those grieving and acknowledges the commonality that everyone will face when dealing with loss.



Figure 11. Donaldson, Kirk. *City of Rain*. Camille A. Brown. digital image. October 20, 2016. http://anthonyalterio.com/portfolio_page/camille-brown-city-of-rain/

Choreographic Manifestation

I began this journey of my creative manifestation to express my own experiences with loss and death. In 2003, I lost my father, grandfather, and fiancé either to tragic accidents or succumbing to terminal diseases. In the years that followed I also lost my mother, nephew, and best friend. I created the work to honor those that I lost, but to also explain and express my own feelings and struggles through the losses. My manifestation is an amalgamation of my research and own personal journey through loss. Throughout my research, I have examined and explored how each of the choreographers dealt with the subject of death and loss and expressed it through movement. I discovered that the choreographers I examined fell into two categories: symbolic representation or the actual representation of death as a theme.

Tudor, Graham, Beatty used grief and loss to symbolize universal feelings and emotions. At the same time, Ailey, Jones, Halprin, and Brown choreographed about specific individuals they were grieving and mourning over and the journey to process and heal themselves. In my choreographic manifestation, I will utilize and combine the two approaches by generally using loss as a theme but also incorporating actual stories of grief and loss. I will employ and synthesize the different ways each choreographer found their movement vocabulary, collaborated with the dancers, and explored their own personal knowledge and healing through the work by also sharing and incorporating my own experiences.

After my studies and research into death, grief, and loss, I started my choreographic work, considering how different choreographers used and incorporated these themes into the physicality of their work. I have chosen to combine the virtuosity

and physicality of Graham, Tudor, Ailey, and Beatty but also incorporate the ways Jones, Halprin, and Brown created their work by drawing on individual experiences.

Much like Jones, I started my choreographic work by interviewing each dancer and exploring and understanding their own experiences with loss. I chose dancers that have lost close friends, family, or mentors so that they have a personal connection to the work. I have found that physical expression and association with the work are strengthened when dancers are given full information about the work. By expressing my own experiences along with their own encounters with loss, it allowed me to push my boundaries in different ways of approaching the subject and moving. I also felt that by sharing my journey I became vulnerable, which allowed the dancers to be more forthcoming and share their own experiences with loss and how to incorporate these feelings into a choreographic work.

Further inspired by Jones's work, I wanted to research and integrate the dancers' natural movements combined with the virtuosity and physicality of concert dance. Through these discussions, I discovered that each dancer seemed to resonate particularly with one of the Five Stages of Grief established by Kübler-Ross and further explored by Anna Halprin. I wanted the work to be a conversation incorporating the Kübler- Ross Five Stages of Grief contrasting with Halprin's Five Stages of Healing. By combining these stages as sections in the choreography, I am exploring the similarity and contrasting expression of both models.

I have chosen to use two female soloists and one male soloist along with a small group of five dancers as a Greek chorus to express the chaos and messiness that grief and loss encompass, and each dancer represents a Stage of Grief/Healing. Still, collectively,

they symbolize grief, loss, and community. They represent the community in which those that are dealing with loss must navigate through while dealing with internal trauma and loss while the soloists are representatives of my own stages of grief that resonated strongly throughout my journey.

The music and spoken word albums used for the work are from Laurie Anderson's 2018 *Landfall* and *Heart of a Dog*. I chose this music because Anderson uses loss as her subject matter in both albums. In 2015, Anderson lost her mother and her beloved dog Lola Belle and was grieving their loss and trying to find meaning and understanding. *Heart of a Dog* shares how different cultures, particularly in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, mourn and understand death and loss. Through her connection with Buddhism beliefs and practices, she incorporates Tibetan writings about death and loss to explore the process of healing and understanding through death. Anderson uses exact quotes from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to explain what Tibetan Buddhists believe happens after a person dies and how to grieve appropriately.

In Anderson's 2018 album, *Landfall*, she describes the effects of a major hurricane that severely impacted the Northeastern United States. Hurricane Sandy was the largest Atlantic hurricane on record, as measured by the diameter, that devastated the community in which she lived. Anderson collaborated with the Kronos quartet and collaborated on the album to process and express the loss, grief, and desperation she was feeling at the time.

Much like Graham's *Lamentation* and Beatty's *Mourner's Bench*, which incorporated a bench to center their works, I have chosen to use a chair to center my work. The chair represents the memory of those who have passed away and the memories

stored within that object. The chair is the work's central focus by exploring how dancers utilize and maneuver it in their sections representing the Stages of Grief/Healing discussed earlier.

Throughout my own grief process, I have found solace and comfort in the consistency of the ocean tides and the wonder of the vast ocean. The predictability and certainty combined with the push and pull of the waves remind me of the cycles of life and death and remind me to take a breath and appreciate the wonder. Much like Jones and Brown, I used the movement of water as inspiration throughout the work. I also incorporated Halprin's beliefs and thoughts that movement is the breath made visible further by incorporating the inhale and exhale and how the body holds tension throughout grief and loss. In my research, I found and began to understand how grief and trauma are processed within the body through the writings of Van Der Kolk and Levine and began to explore what those movements look like by giving the dancers key words to improvise with including grief, trauma, anger, and loss.

The opening section with music from Anderson's *Landfall* album will start with the Greek chorus physically representing the announcement of death and the certainty and permanence of the information. The work will begin with projections of ocean waves rising against a sea wall with an older bird trying to avoid the rising water. A lone dancer will be center stage, and the other four will be traveling back and forth in front and behind her setting the tone for the first section, *Denial/Isolation/Confronting Your Primary Issue*. The section will end with the three soloist dancers carrying the chair onstage, acting as pallbearers for a casket. The chair will be placed center stage, and the

first female dancer will begin her solo as the second stage/section, *Anger/Having Courage and Faith in What You've Identified*. The projections are shown below.



The first solo is one dancer's account of her feelings for all she missed about the person who passed away. The solo is to the song *Built You a Mountain* from Anderson's *Landfall* album, in which the soloist will climb over, under, and through the chairs as if trying to make sense of loss. The solo will end with the dancer walking away from the chair, the Greek chorus returning for a group section with the soloist, again establishing the anguish over the loss.

This soloist and I have a personal connection through loss as her mentor, Antonio Sisk passed away in 2009. Sisk was my best friend and dance partner for many years and after his passing I took over his teaching responsibilities in Atlanta, Georgia. I very quickly met this young dancer and mentored her for many years in his absence. When choosing dancers for my work, I immediately thought of her because of our personal connection through loss. She also had recently lost her best friend to disease at the same

age as her mentor and we talked extensively about her feelings. We collaborated to create the solo to incorporate both of our struggles we endured while trying to process the grief.

The third section, *Bargaining/Release*, is to *Wind Whistles Through the Dark City* from Anderson's *Landfall* album. The solo stays in a stationary lighting pool centerstage which the male dancer moves in and out of the chair using repeated gestures to symbolize the repeated attempts to change the situation and cope with the loss. The male soloist was chosen through our mutual connection to the 2021 passing of his Philadanco Rehearsal Director and mentor, Deborah Chase-Hicks. I was once the Assistant Rehearsal Director with Chase-Hicks and recently assumed her duties after her passing. This forged a bond between us much like the other soloist because we were both grieving the loss of the same person and we collaborated to create this solo to help us process and navigate our way through grief and begin healing. At the end of the solo, the other two soloist dancers meet him at the chair while the male soloist sits in the chair and the two other dancers stand on either side.

The fourth section, *Integration/The Change That Comes About*, is to Anderson's *Release of Love* from her *Heart of the Dog* Album. This section is a trio in which Anderson speaks of The Tibetan Book of the Dead and how "death is more often about you than the person who died."²² She ends the song by saying, "the purpose of death is the release of love." Each dancer has a solo in front of the chair and then returns to the chair until, finally, all three soloist dancers begin to do unison movement around the chair, symbolizing the common element and bond between the dancers: loss.

²² Laurie Anderson, "Release of Love," track 16 on *Heart of a Dog*, Nonesuch Records, October 23, 2015, compact disk.

The fifth section, Acceptance/Integration to Max Richter's *The Sorrows of Young Lacie* from his album *Black Mirror: Nosedive*, incorporates the trio of soloists. Our close personal connections through loss forged a bond between us so I felt compelled to join them in dancing this section. Throughout the section we stayed connected and took turns lifting and supporting each other throughout the section and finally moved the chair to the front of the stage facing upstage.

The next section is to Anderson's *Gongs and Bells Sing* from the *Landfall* album, which begins with the chorus dancers entering as if in a funeral procession and the final viewing and funeral service with the chair. The movements in this section will be significant, sweeping, and complete, like deep breaths and ocean waves. The dancers in the chorus take turns supporting and lifting each dancer as a group to symbolize the community and fellowship felt at a funeral service. Each dancer will then, one at a time, kneel before the chair in their final goodbye to the life that was lost and exit the stage.

The two soloists will also enter and repeat moments of their solos and kneel before the chair to symbolize their final goodbye to their loss and exit the stage. The remaining soloist dancer does a solo reflecting and lamenting on the different stages of grief and healing to Anderson's *Another Long Evening*. The dancer will repeat movements explored throughout the work and revive motifs and gestures from each solo before placing the chair as part of the audience to symbolize how loss is a part of everyone's life and the memories contained within the chair are held within our hearts and memories throughout the journey forward.

While creating this choreographic work, I filmed ocean waves for the background video in Daytona Beach, Florida. On my first day of filming, I noticed a lone chair sitting

on the beach near the break wall. I immediately recognized the irony and significance because I knew from the start that I wanted to use a chair in my work. I sat in the chair, began investigating movements, and suddenly noticed a single bird walking on the beach toward me. The waves were approaching the wall, so I was surprised to see this lone bird walking on the sand. The bird stayed with me for a while, then began to walk further down the beach. I watched the bird, worried he might get caught in a wave because they were much more powerful down the beach. I began to coax the bird to get him back to safety on the boardwalk. While I was encouraging the bird, a wave came up and took the bird under the water. I reached down and grabbed the bird and brought him to land. He seemed shaken but was unable to fly. I went to my room to grab some food for the bird, and when I returned, he had moved under a bench in the children's playground. I sat the food next to the bird I now called Harold, and he took three labored breaths and stopped breathing. Harold had passed away.

I have always had a connection to birds. My first mentor Leni Wylliams was a beautiful dancer who had a bird-like quality to his dancing. After his sudden and tragic death, his partner told me that Leni said he would leave white feathers to let you know he loved you. Throughout the years, I have had many difficult moments and lost many people, including my parents, best friend, and fiancé. The feathers symbolize hope in dark times, and through this process, I have found solace in those feathers. Somehow, I would always find a white feather in those dark times. When my former best friend, Sisk, danced a solo using a bench that my mentor danced previously, we always found a white feather backstage under the bench. The feathers have been constant, whether floating in the air or lying on the ground. This instance with my bird friend, Harold, once again

reminded me of Leni's feathers. I used footage of my encounter with Harold and actual white feathers at the end of my work. The feathers were gently flowing in from fans throughout my final solo.

Reflection on Manifestation

After presenting my choreographic manifestation, *Dancing Through Loss*, I have come to many conclusions and learned many surprising things throughout the process. Much like dealing with loss, I realized I had to be flexible to deal with constant changes throughout my journey. I had initially intended to use five group dancers in my work to represent the five stages of grief, but due to illness, I was forced only to use four. I was also informed that I would not be able to use the theater which meant I would not be able to use the video I had planned for the background. However, I believe the work still conveyed and maintained my original intent. Like Graham and Tudor, I chose to keep the work as a general representation of grief because I felt it kept the work more relatable to one's own experiences with grief.

The process through the creation of this work was unlike any other works I had choreographed in the past. I primarily choreographed on young students to showcase their knowledge and understanding of different modern dance techniques. I often chose themes or intention of my works, but nothing as heavy as the subject of loss. I have always created works that would be appealing and pleasurable to audiences as opposed to artistic expression. I had to break away from my technical approach to explore new movement possibilities that often felt strange and new to me.

I had planned to use the spoken words of each soloist throughout the work but chose instead to keep the work more focused on the physical representation of the Five

Stages of Grief established by Kübler-Ross and the Five Stages of Healing by Halprin. I believe this changed the work, allowing it to be more relatable and understood by the viewer. Although each dancer had shared and expressed their own very personal losses in the process, this allowed the viewer to reflect on their own experiences with loss and grief throughout the work. I feel this also provided some comfort to the dancer to not expose their personal discussions shared with me while creating the work,

The journey through this thesis process began with my own experiences. My biggest dilemma was whether I should dance the work myself. In the end, I decided that the process and final work was such a journey of self-discovery that I had to dance in the work. I also had shared and personal connections through loss to the other dancers so I decided to dance with them in the work. I also contemplated the ending of the work multiple times on whether the funeral procession by the group and two soloists should end the work or if my final solo should complete the work. After I finalized my decision to perform the work, I decided the work should end with my solo. It felt fitting that I would end the work by placing the chair in the audience to symbolize the commonality that grief and loss bring by all that experience it.

Through my studies of different choreographers and researchers, I learned that everyone deals with grief and loss in very different ways and integrates those feelings and emotions into their lives in diverse ways. Throughout my rehearsal process of this work, I found that each person had their own way of tackling the choreography and subject matter. I found that some were reverent and serious in rehearsals. While some dancers were unattached and aloof, relying on the physical framework and the choreography to portray the emotion and feeling of the work. I noticed this, especially in the moments

before we performed the work. Although some were focused and serious about the upcoming performance, others were joking, playing, or on their phones immediately before the show. They were all committed and passionate in the performance, but I wonder if their portrayal and connection to the work would have been strengthened if they had been more focused. I chose not to address the behavior of the dancers because I do understand everyone copes differently to this subject matter and denial can be a part of the process. I have learned through my research and process that there is no set of rules when dealing with grief and sometimes deflection is a way of grappling with serious subject matter.

I found dancing in this work and the process of creating the work much like my journey through grief and loss. While preparing this work, I went through definitive stages that often aligned with the Stages of Grief and the Stages of Healing discussed throughout my written investigation. In the beginning, creating work about loss seemed overwhelming, and I was just trying to create one section at a time without understanding how the work would come together. I also did not prepare my physical body to perform this work because I kept putting it off to keep up with my hectic work schedule. This process aligns with the First Step of Grief and Healing: Denial/ Confronting your Primary Issues. My second issue in creating the work was the Second section *Anger/Courage to Confront Issues*. My biggest frustration and hurdle with the dancers in my work was getting them to attend the rehearsals. They either had scheduling conflicts, poor time management skills, sickness, injuries, or simply didn't show up. This issue led me to change dancers multiple times, so I found my rehearsals became more about teaching the choreography to new dancers than investigating and exploring movement and

choreographic possibilities. Although I initially shared my experiences with my original dancers, I didn't feel the comfort of being so open and forthcoming with the newer dancers of my cast because I didn't know if they would follow through with their commitment to the work.

The third issue I had to navigate was disappointment in my original plans and ideas for the dancers in the work, much like the third stage of grief, Bargaining. When I spoke to the dancers, everyone was excited about the process and exploration of my topic, but over time their busy lives and schedules took precedence. I had to incorporate Ana Halprin's third stage of healing, Release, to continue forward with the work. I began to let go of the resentment and hurt I felt by the lack of seriousness and began to have rehearsals with whomever I could at any time just to get things done and the work finished.

The fourth issue I dealt with was the fourth stage of grief and healing, Depression/Change that comes about. Because I had spent so much time researching and investigating grief and loss, I began to become depressed that the dancers involved were not as invested as I was in this work. This was a very personal subject and journey for me, and I felt I had to find a way to express this to the dancers. I shared intimate stories and personal issues that came up while dealing with these losses and the process became very heavy for me. I felt like I was having to revisit the old wounds and traumas of loss by constantly speaking of the circumstances and deaths of my loved ones.

Ironically, the day before my presentation, I was notified that one of my dancers was seriously ill and could not perform the work. While on that same phone call, I was informed the theater I had reserved for the presentation was no longer available. The

dancers rallied to support me and the work. I believe that these two events, although extremely stressful, ultimately led to a successful performance even though I was unable to use the video footage I had created for the work.

I believe the final stage of grief, Acceptance, and the final stage of healing, Integration, were achieved in the presentation of the work. Through the chaos of events the day before the presentation, I had to learn to accept that these were the final circumstances I was dealt with. I had to trust the dancers I had chosen to perform the work and believe in my research and process, and not question or doubt why this presentation would end this way. Much like dealing with the loss of a loved one, there are always questions of why these things must happen the way they do, but what I've learned through grief and loss is that there are often no answers, only solutions and ways of learning and growing.

After finishing this thesis presentation and written investigation, I learned of a new book, *Finding Meaning, The SIXTH STAGE of GRIEF*, by David Kessler and Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. I look forward to reading this book, but in my own experiences with grief and loss, I have always struggled to find the meaning of the losses. Although it is never easy to deal with loss, I also know that some of these losses lead me to new opportunities and ways to grow. The path to healing is not a straight journey and there are many twists and turns throughout the journey. I believe this poem by Flavia Weedn I read at my father's funeral has brought me comfort and understanding throughout the pain. I included part of this poem in the program for my Thesis Presentation as well. I have found that remembering and honoring those that have passed keeps their spirit alive and makes us stronger in our own lives by allowing us to find our own strength and resilience

in such difficult times. I am thankful for the journey with so many beautiful people and I look forward to sharing my experiences with others in the future.

Some People

By Flavia Weedn

Some people come into our lives
and leave footprints on our hearts
and we are never ever the same.

Some people come into our lives
and quickly go...Some stay for a while
and embrace our silent dreams.

They help us become aware
of the delicate winds of hope...
and we discover within every human spirit
there are wings yearning to fly.

They help our hearts to see that
the only stairway to the stars
is woven with dreams...
and we find ourselves
unafraid to reach high.

They celebrate the true essence
of who we are...
and have faith in all
that we may become.

Some people awaken us
to new and deeper realizations...
for we gain insight
from the passing whisper of their wisdom.

Throughout our lives we are sent
precious souls...
meant to share our journey
however brief or lasting their stay
they remind us why we are here.

To learn...to teach...to nurture...to love.

Some people come into our lives
to cast a steady light
upon our path and guide our every step
their shining belief in us
helps us to believe in ourselves.

Some people come into our
lives to teach us about love...
The love that rests within ourselves.

Let us reach out to others
and feel the bliss of giving
for love is far richer in action
than it ever is in words.

Some people come into our lives
and they move our souls to sing
and make our spirits dance.

They help us to see that everything on earth
is part of the incredibility of life...
and that it is always there
for us to take of its joy.

Some people come into our lives
and leave footprints on our hearts
and we are never ever the same.²³

²³ Flavia Weedn, "Some People," in *Footprints on Our Hearts* (Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing), 1993.

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