

Inclusivity in the Performing Arts

Center for Integrative Studies

Senior Capstone Project Reflection

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Senior Capstone title: **Are They Safe?**

Thanks to the interdisciplinary focus of my individual major, I was able to explore the intersections between dance, theater, gender and sexuality studies, and race and ethnic studies. Even though my capstone was heavily based on choreographic work, the preparation leading up to it as well as the contextualization required for the piece really demonstrated to me the ways in which inclusivity can be attained in the performing arts through different disciplines. Working on this capstone project has been an interesting experience for me. The pre-production process was incredibly cathartic, while the production process was a bit more hectic and emotionally draining. The role of choreographer took a myriad of challenges, such as artist blocks, microaggressions, and scheduling conflicts.

When I mention the pre-production process, I refer to the planning and structuring of the piece. Part of the planning process involved not only the music or the movement that I wanted to employ, but also the logistics behind casting, rehearsals and the audition. I reached out to my dancers back in October 2023. I reached out to a total of 10 people — friends and peers who I have danced with before. I was very intentional with having a POC cast, however, since I had not had the chance to meet the freshman or sophomores, I did not know who the new POC dancers in the department were, so I decided to reach out to white dancers as well. Some of them dropped the piece even before rehearsals started, since their schedules were too demanding. Others dropped the piece after our first rehearsal, again, due to availability conflicts. Once times were defined, I proceeded to reserve the studios, which had to be booked on February 13, after faculty and guest artists had defined their own needs. We also had marked down our audition date to be March 8, 2024. We had a total of eight rehearsals before the audition.

The structuring of the piece suffered multiple changes. Originally, this piece was envisioned as a 10-minute piece. Within these minutes, I planned to have a piece of music (section 1), a short verbatim piece (bridge), and another piece of music (section 2). The music I chose were the songs “Tocarte” by Jorge Drexler and C. Tangana as well as “Temes” by iLe. For the verbatim piece, I interviewed some of my closest friends at St. Olaf; my latinx friends who have lived the female experience in Latin America. I edited their interview responses into an audio, which was very exciting, but based on the tight timeframe we had to choreograph everything, it was unrealistic. Instead of using the interview responses, I utilized a recording of the names of the femicide victims, which is what the piece needed. It was an incredible bridge

that connected both pieces of music and smoothed the transition from one piece to the next, as it smoothed the transition between innocence and joy to femicide. Likewise, it is a powerful and heartfelt tribute to those whose lives have been stolen. Nonetheless, this decision affected the length of the piece, it was not 10 minutes, it was less. So, the piece, once again, was restructured. I decided to add a new section, an original monologue by my friend Paola and I. To prepare for this, we read the short story “Preciosidad” by Clarice Lispector and from there we held a writing session. We then combined our lines and created the monologue. This brought the piece to 12 minutes, which is beyond what the initial proposed time was. My choreography got cast in the Companydance Spring Concert, but due to the length of the event, the piece had to be condensed to 6 minutes. In order to accomplish this, I made the decision to take out the monologue.

I knew from the beginning that I wanted to choreograph the song “Tocarte” by Jorge Drexler and C. Tangana. This piece narrates through swift and witty rhymes the desire for human touch. I was incredibly interested in this concept, but mostly in the female-to-female connections. In a patriarchal society, it is rare to see women-loving-women relationships that are not sexualized or fetichized. I wanted to play with this idea, because women can be sexual beings out of their own desire. They owe sexual pleasure and intimacy to themselves only. Likewise, I started reflecting on my own identity, what intimacy means to me. Growing up in a Latin American context, specifically a Costa Rican one, I realized that I had experienced sexual repression due to religious and patriarchal expectations that were engraved in me from a very young age. I was a girl, a child, yet the society that I lived in, sexualized my body even before I had consciousness of it. Therefore, I wanted to create a world in which I could see little girls running and playing — being girls — without feeling the repercussions or expectations of a patriarchal society.

I worked on the structure and movement coding for “Tocarte” during my time in Costa Rica in January. I had a terrible creative block, and I had a lot of difficulty creating the movement that was going to accompany the music. This block led to multiple breakdowns. The way in which I moved forward was by speaking to fellow choreographers in my town, who I am lucky enough to call my friends. I started training with them, listening to their advice — trusting my abilities — until the movement came pouring out of me. It was a combination of my background as a jazz dancer combined with my bachata and Costa Rican traditional dance knowledge. I also wanted to celebrate or showcase a typical childhood in Costa Rica: children

playing in their neighborhood, showing off their “look at this” and overall innocent joy. It is important to mention that I also wanted to incorporate a partnered dance phrase, which was very difficult to choreograph on my own. I got over this challenge with the help of my friend Kenneth Araya, who is a wonderful choreographer from my town, and a dear friend that I grew up with in dance. He helped me create the movement code for the phrase and figure out the counts. His help was invaluable.

The second song that I decided to choreograph was “Temes” by iLe. This piece of music is a chant of protest, it questions the legitimacy of patriarchy and its multiple contradictions, such as, if patriarchy controls women, why do men fear women? If women’s voices are subjugated to men’s, then why are men scared of women speaking up? This was such an interesting concept to me, because it reminded me of all the things I am angry about the patriarchy: I cannot walk alone at night, I cannot wear the clothes I want due to fear of being catcalled or followed, I cannot trust men at a first glance. Growing up in Costa Rica, it is an everyday fact that girls and women are put in dangerous positions, because men — relatives, strangers, friends — have the power to be creepy and get away with it. Women experience violence since they are born, from physical to emotional and psychological. Some women do not even get to live a long life, because they are killed. This is a reality that women who do not grow up in Latin America can understand. How could they, if this is not the reality of their countries? Feminism in the United States feels very eurocentric: their issues revolve around equal pay, reproductive justice, not being slut-shammed. Being at St. Olaf for the past four years and witnessing the indifference towards intersectional feminism has been debilitating. I felt both affected by the problem and being part of the problem. So, I decided to contribute to the feminist movement by creating a protest dance that recognizes the murders of millions of women and the fear that we live with.

I started choreographing this piece at the beginning of this semester. I knew I wanted to utilize my knowledge of modern dance for this piece. This was definitely less thought-out in terms of structure, but more fluid in terms of movement coding. I knew I wanted this piece to be a stark contrast from the opening section. To accomplish this, I utilized some of the phrases I used in “Tocarte” as a motif, so they were essentially adapted to the new piece of music. However, this piece tries to highlight the isolation that women feel within patriarchy, so I needed to find ways to evoke the feeling of loss and solitude. I achieved this by incorporating throwing motions and moments of stillness. These throwing motion movements symbolized the loss of

innocence and life. Stillness was achieved by having one dancer on stage completely still, giving the audience a short moment for reflection. This also contributed to the contrast between the first section and the second section (community versus individualism).

It is important to mention the working process for the verbatim piece. I knew I wanted to collaborate with my Latinx friends on campus. In total, I interviewed 10 people, including myself. The questions I asked were:

1. What are you afraid of?
2. Have you ever been afraid of a man?
3. What angers you about patriarchy?
4. What would you like to yell at the world?
5. What would a world where all women were free look like?
6. What do you like most about yourself?
7. Who is a woman that inspires you?
8. If you are comfortable, I would like to record you screaming.

I compiled their responses and uploaded them to the audio software Audacity. I created an audio clip with what I thought were their most relevant responses. The track was about 1 minute long. I was not really sure what the movement for this section was going to be, because I did not know what their responses were going to be like. I am a choreographer that heavily relies on sound cues to create movement, so I was unsure as to what was going to be created. However, after the piece got cast, I was informed by the dance department that I needed to condense it. Therefore, I decided to cut out this audio and instead created a new track with the names of victims of femicide. This helped me shorten the piece significantly, while also working as a bridge to smooth out the transition from the upbeat drums in “Tocarte” to the mellow guitar in “Temes”.

After the movement-coding and pieces of music were defined, I moved on to designing the costume alongside Rebecca Bernstein. I was very inspired by Costa Rican traditional skirts, not only are they beautiful and playful, but also the movements that originate from them extend past a dancer’s kinesphere. I wanted a skirt that was similar, because an actual Costa Rican skirt would have been too difficult to handle with the specific movement that I was working with.

Thanks to Rebecca's help, I was able to find flowy skirts that were perfect for the piece. Additionally, these skirts worked as imagery for freedom. Not only do the dancers energetically move them around, but they also helped to the idea of infantilized versus weaponized, it planted the general idea that the girls that were dancing were comfortable with their bodies. I also wanted to incorporate a costume element that was allusive to the purple and green handkerchiefs used by feminists in Latin America. The purple handkerchief represents the call to a stop to gender-based violence and the green handkerchief is a call to the legalization of abortion. I knew I did not want the dancers to wear actual handkerchiefs since I thought they would be "too on the nose" and distracting, so instead, we reimagined these as ribbons tied in their hairs.

Even though I had explained the meaning of this piece to the dancers through different examples and concepts, the dancers could not fully connect to the piece, because 1) they are not from Latin America and 2) the lyrics of the songs were in Spanish. I knew I needed a new approach to contextualize the piece. To accomplish this and based on the suggestion of one of my cast members, I wrote biographies of victims of femicide from Costa Rica. The cases that I chose were ones that hit many headlines and were sadly, almost barbaric and incredibly violent. The victims who I wrote about were Allison, María Luisa, Luany, Yuliana, María Trinidad, and Karolay. I wrote their biographies in "I" statements. Writing these biographies was incredibly disheartening and emotionally draining, since I did not learn anything about their lives, only their deaths. After their biographies were completed, I dedicated an hour from our rehearsal to read their biographies. This is the method I followed: I asked the cast to pick a name from a clump of papers and whoever they got, they would read their story. After every story was read, I asked the dancers to write their respective women a letter which included the dancers' aspirations and promises for the future. After this activity, we had a small decompression activity in which we drew and talked about more light hearted topics to get out of the heavy mood. I believe this activity helped the cast better embody the piece, as it created a more personal connection to the content.

It is important to recognize two of the major issues I experienced: microaggressions and scheduling conflicts. The first time I experienced microaggressions was during our first rehearsal ever. Before we started the rehearsal, I gave my positionality statement as a person and as a choreographer. I explained what the piece was about and explained my working style. I specifically mentioned that I am not a person that follows counts, but rather sounds. Most of the

phrases I choreographed were based on the music. I believe that when I explained these, various of my cast members — majority of them white — unconsciously used this against me. They made a lot of questions that I could not answer because 1) I did not have counts and 2) I had never visualized the piece with more than one person. They were asking questions about arm and leg positioning, shapes, and the end product that were not yet defined, because I had never seen the movement reproduced by someone else that was not me. I was very hurt and upset by this, I questioned whether I wanted to do this at all, but I ended up justifying their behavior. It was not until I met with my dance faculty advisor, Brianna Johnson, that I realized that what I had experienced were microaggressions. I was especially hurt, because the majority of these dancers I considered my friends, but this experience made me realize that they cannot understand an experience they have never lived. Sadly, there is a lack of cultural sensitivity and there is a lot of white privilege. These are key definers in the way dynamics unfold in the department and within the dance studios. I addressed these issues with faculty, the Dance Department during one of our department meetings, and my dancers during one of our rehearsals.

The second major issue I experienced was scheduling conflicts. This particular semester in the Dance department has been incredibly busy, which caused many overlaps to occur with my own rehearsal schedule. For example, there was a dance intensive with guest choreographer Cynthia Gutierrez, which compromised some of my dancers schedules and my own schedule as well, since we were all part of this piece. There was also an instance where we had to interrupt our rehearsal due to a gas leak in CAD. We had to evacuate the building. Likewise, this semester, St. Olaf College was the host school for the ACDA conference, which took out two more rehearsals. Lastly, our rehearsals were also compromised by the tech week and performances by Veselica Dance Company. Overall, I think we had half less the rehearsals that we were projected to have throughout the semester, but we managed to create something clean and beautiful despite the adversities.

On April 26, I held my capstone symposium with my peer Sophia Schillinger. Having the symposium a week before the concert was an incredible idea, not only did it help me distribute the academic load, but I think it also gave the audience a completely different experience when watching the piece live. I also had a great moment of reflection derived from two questions in the audience, their questions were the following:

1. If you had the chance to redo this project, what would you do differently?
2. How would the piece change from working with people from Costa Rica? Would you do it?

Both of these questions were ones that I had not thought about before. The first question made me realize that perhaps I should have worked less in the structure and more in the movement. I realized that being so focused on the chronological arc of the piece was one of the reasons I had an artist's block. What I would do differently is to play more with the movement-coding, hold more improvisation sessions and record them. I think from this creative flow, I could have discovered new movement combinations. The second question took me by surprise. I would love to work with Costa Rican dancers to develop this piece. If I did, I know for sure the piece would be interpreted in a completely different way, because these dancers speak the same language as the songs and they live in the place where all these atrocities occur. I think it would become more personal and I think it would shift away from the "performance" aspect of it. I believe this piece would become a site-specific project in a public place, which would transform the project into a protest.

This past weekend was the Companydance Spring Concert, which was the first time I participated (and the last). I think the overall energy during the concert was incredible, before every performance we would hug. The dancers gave a stronger performance every night and I felt very proud. I think one of the best experiences was when I joined the performance from the wings. Whenever the dancers had to do vocalizations I joined, I cheered for and with them as well as I screamed from the sides. I realized that I just wanted to be there with them. Likewise, the last performance night, I had the realization that even if this dance is remembering the women and girls who have been killed, I cannot bring them back to life. I could not help but cry, it is hard knowing that life continues even when our community experiences a traumatic event. But I also feel inspired to keep raising my voice and to try to make the world a safer place for women and girls to live in.

Overall, I loved this process. I focused on the good: 1) it was my creative direction, 2) I was using music by people who inspire me, and 3) I was proudly sharing where I am from. Inclusivity is achieved not only through DEI statements and land acknowledgement statements. It is achieved through an everyday, conscious effort of celebrating each other's differences and

recognizing their presence in the room. I am very proud of what I created, and I think the piece was positively received. Most importantly, I am happy that I get to contribute to the feminist movement in my own creative way.