

DEMOCRATIC DANCE: EXPLORING PUBLIC
DANCE AS A CULTIVATOR
OF CIVIC VIRTUE

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the School for Classical & Contemporary Dance
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 7, 2018

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ABSTRACT

Based upon citizenship theory, that within a deliberative democracy citizens must have certain civic virtues, I explored the development of these virtues within an ensemble of dancers. Displacing ourselves from the studio space where hierarchy of dance teacher to student is a daily ritual, these explorations will occur in non-traditional spaces around TCU's campus. This project recognizes physical explorations as research and thus employs the term 'dance laboratory' rather than 'rehearsal.'

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There is no doubt that dance can be used to express political perspectives. It can be a tool for propaganda, a voice for opposition and protest, and a tool to consolidate power. My research investigates if dance can cultivate uniquely democratic virtues. I begin with an examination of citizenship theory explaining the importance of the virtuous citizen to a well-functioning democracy. A primary obstacle to a virtuous citizen is civic indifference; dance will be brought forward as an implement of citizen development. Next, an examination of contact improvisation provides historical evidence of the potential for dance to foster democratic ideals. Finally, I discuss my phenomenological research project investigating the potential for dance as a public art to cultivate democratic virtues.

Before delving into the research, there are a few terms I would like to clarify. Citizenship Theory is a theory of democracy that emphasizes the importance of the quality of the individual within democratic institutions. According to this theory even the most perfectly structured democratic institutions will fail if the individuals within them fail to meet a certain level of virtuosity. This leads me into what characteristics are valuable to the efficacy of a democracy. Political Scientist William Galston identifies four categories of civic virtues in his work *Liberal Purposes*: General virtues, economic virtues, social virtues, and political virtues. Political theorist Will Kymlicka's analysis of Galston differentiates between Galston's general and economic virtues—characteristics that support any regime type—from the social and political virtues that sustain democratic regimes.

The social virtues of independence and tolerance reflect the tensions between the individual and the aggregate in democratic society. Independence is self-sufficiency that

provides an environment for mutually beneficial exchanges and interactions. Galston's definition of tolerance negates the presupposition that tolerance means that society must have a neutral conception of "the good life." He argues that persuasion of others to alter their concept of the good should be based in education rather than coercion.

The political virtues involve a disposition and a developed capacity. The first is the disposition and capacity to engage in public discourse. The second is the disposition and capacity to narrow the gap between principle and practice.

In my research, I explored how public dance could foster these tendencies and abilities. In this research, "public dance" is conceptualized in terms of location and accessibility. This idea can be contrasted by concert dance, dance that takes place in the theater or in a traditional proscenium stage. What sorts of dance maximize the democratic potential of dance? Historically, the term "democratic dance" has been used to refer to contact improvisation because of the structure and culture embedded in the dance form. The first explorations of contact improvisation, were experiments of running at another person and attempting to suspend the instance of falling and directing gravity.

Democratic ideas of community and equality—closely related to democratic virtues of tolerance and those required to effectively engage in public discourse—are fostered through contact improvisation. Dance scholar Cynthia Novack notes the dance developed into a folk form in which everyone learns and explores on a level playing field; there is no differentiation between experts and beginners, performers, teachers, and casual participants. This tradition continues today, people of all experience levels dance together in contact improvisational jams.

Through a process of qualitative and phenomenological data gathering, I along—with a core ensemble of five dancers—explored how the elements of contact improvisation and

displacing dance from the studio to public spaces might further tap into the potential for dance to foster democratic virtues. Displacing the dancers from the studio space where hierarchy of dance teacher to student is a daily ritual, these explorations occurred in non-traditional spaces around TCU's campus. This project recognizes physical explorations as research and thus employs the term 'dance laboratory' rather than 'rehearsal.' The dance laboratories involved physical movement—always recorded on video—followed by written discussion and reflection.

The ensemble of five was comprised of fellow undergraduate students at various stages of their degrees. Research in dance laboratories, always concluded with a brief reflection of the dancers' experiences both through discussion and prompted journaling.

It was important to destabilize the laboratories, to remove them from the ritualistic and habitual. Laboratories were irregular in both time and space. Laboratories were held outside of the traditional studio space. The dance studio—with barres and a wall of mirrors—is imbued with traditions of class and rehearsals that enforce a teacher-student authoritarian chain. Holding laboratories in open, neutrally powered, spaces recognized the dancer's individuality and agency. Additionally, I found that dancing in the public spaces challenged members of the ensemble as it juxtaposed the intimacy of physical exploration with interactions with friends and peers passing by.

Times of laboratories were irregularly scheduled so as to avoid developing a sense of habit. Within the dance laboratories, improvisational scores were explored, experienced, and observed. The dance laboratories were experimentations with established improvisational scores and derivations of scores. An improvisational dance score is set of guidelines or movement parameters that can involve a goals or tasks that narrows the focus of the dancer(s).

In selecting and crafting the movement explorations, I sought scores that specifically involved cultivating relationships between the dancers, recognizing them as a collaborative member of a group, rather than isolated individuals. In the early laboratory responses, one ensemble member frequently used the word “risk” in describing actions that may have made the score more successful. A reading of her journal, along with video analysis, evidences her development over time as she embraces actions she may have first called “risky.” Another ensemble member, later in the process, noted how she went in and out of noticing there was an audience. She questioned whether she was dancing for herself or for the audience, and how she should react to those passing by.

The laboratories culminated in multiple performances of a thirty-minute improvisational score performed in public locations on TCU’s campus. The locations were Sadler, Frog Fountain, Founders Statue, with more forced interaction from passersby. Displacing the environment sensitive score to multiple locations, adaptability, negotiation, individuality and tolerance.

Early in the process, the dancers were less comfortable pushing the boundaries of the score. This discomfort dissipated over time as the ensemble more fully explored the boundaries of their individual agency. After one of the first full run throughs of the entire improvisational score, one of the dancers notes how the ensemble collaboratively problem-solved in the moment:

“In our moments of unsureness or hesitation. . . we were lent to more creativity . . . we [found] our own rules as we went along.”

This research focuses on the impact dancing in public had on the participants. Because of the difficulty of gathering data from observers—especially when the majority of witnesses watch

in passing—I chose not to focus on the potential impact of dance as a public art on those who witness it juxtaposed with their every day.

Although outside of the scope of this study, further research may illuminate the possibility of public dance's democratic potential on the observers. Further research may substantiate the hypothesis that public dance, as a tool of formative politics, has the potential to reach and impact a populous of people regardless of the political identifications or level of political indifference of the individual.

Public dance, especially when infused with elements of contact improvisation and characterized by responsiveness to its environment is democratic in its simultaneous promotion of tolerance and individuality. Promoting the agency of the individual, dancers must individually operate within the score and be able to respond and to the others with whom they are sharing space. Dancers maintain their sense of self and cultural identity as they relate to their surroundings. Public dance is democratic as the dancers narrow the gap between the principle of their goal, and the practice of what physically occurs.

Public dance has important democratic potential. My research supports dance as a democratic tool for the participants, and looks forward to research on the potential impact of public dance on witnesses. Dance as a tool of civic community could be used to address the increasing polarization and civic indifference across the political spectrum in the United States. Public dance, as it is understood in this research, has the ability to support the democracy through cultivation of democratic virtues within its practitioners.