Residue: A Dance Poem

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About the Author

Elana Lanczi, M.F.A., is an assistant professor in the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences Division of Performing and Visual Arts at Nova Southeastern University. She has performed internationally in both South Korea and Brazil and nationally with noted choreographers Sean Curran, Kati e Duck, Anita Gonzalez, Li Chiao-Ping, Lionel Popkin, Merian Soto, and Maida Withers, among others. Her own choreography is influenced by the investigation of contemporary dance forms and has been performed throughout Pennsylvania, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Florida. Lanczi holds an M.F.A in Dance from Temple University.

Residue: A Dance Poem was performed on January 30-February 1, 2009, in the Performance Theater at Nova Southeastern University.

"Residue Dress Rehearsal" video and all photos by Chad Moulder.

The following individuals were involved in the production of Residue: A Dance Poem:

Choreography, Video and Sound Design:
Elana Lanczi, M.F.A.

Dancers: Nefertari Bennett, Scott Difford, Elizabeth Gist, Titina Gist, Chayma Gomez, Britney Gooden, Monica Hererra, Arnold Lopez, Stephanie Ponce, Heidi Sampson, Damaris Sanchez, Jigna Shah, Meagan Sweeney, Catalina Triana and featuring Chetachi Egwu, PhD

Lighting Design: Dan Gelbmann, M.F.A.

Residue: A Dance Poem

by Elana Lanczi

Residue
To begin . . .

4
3
2
1
If Yesterday Were Today . . .
I Wish Tomorrow Never Happened. A Good-Bye Poem
To begin again . . .

As I reflect on the creation of this work, it is interesting to take a journey back to the beginning ideas and observe how they ultimately transformed themselves into an evening-length dance piece.

"Residue Dress Rehearsal," by Chad Moulder
(for best viewing, press "play" then "pause," and allow video to load fully before hitting "play" again)

Editorial note: video is missing from the full text

Part I: Concept and Inspiration

The dance was inspired by a close family friend, Victor Manuel Rosas, who was killed in March 2008. Victor's life was taken in an unexpected act of greed and violence at a moment in his life which held great promise and possibilities. He was in his early thirties, engaged to be married and an unlikely success. He owned his own furniture business and worked with high-profile clients such as Nissan in the bustling and complicated labyrinth that is Mexico City. Sometimes he was paid for his work with a new car and he was very proud of his fleet which happened to include one very nice, new truck. That this truck was at the center of the tragedy (he was robbed at gunpoint), struck me as both ironic and unfair.
It is quite a messy affair to try and sum up a person or their life. Stories only tell a fraction of the whole. No matter how detailed, they simply fall short. As I embarked on creating a dance based on Victor's life and death, I made several important artistic decisions which helped shape the final work:

1. I would not attempt to re-tell his story but rather work from my memories of who he was as a person.
2. I would not give stage time to the people who killed him but focus on the people he loved and who loved him.
3. I would structure the work around a poem but try not to worry if things were logical or literal as I went. Instead, I would build movement ideas from a collage of images, emotions and memory and weave them together in multiple ways throughout the piece.

I remember feeling sad when thinking about his mother and fiancée. I felt their loss at strange moments, often when I was riding alone in my car. I remember feeling upset that I did not have time to stop my busy life and fly to Mexico to say a proper good-bye. In many ways, working on the dance gave me a much needed sense of closure.

So here are some of the things that came up even before I set foot in the studio or rehearsals.

"If Yesterday Were Today, I Wish Tomorrow Never Happened." This was a phrase that kept creeping up on me and although I wasn't entirely sure it made sense, I could not let go of it. I started with this as a possible title and then tried to break up the dance (as I imagined it at the time) into distinct sections.

Here was the first draft written very quickly and without editing:

If yesterday were today . . . and tomorrow never happened . . .
To Begin
A Good-bye Poem
One Lovely Moment- Part I (water solo)
One Lovely Moment- Part II (love duet)
In An Instant
Residue
Again

The word "residue" jumped out at me once I wrote it down. I thought it was a stronger title and presented some interesting ideas to explore further. Also present in this first draft was the idea of something repeating itself, which I also found an interesting suggestion choreographically and I liked this idea of a beginning which has no end.

Lastly, the idea of "one lovely moment" grew out of an image I had of drinking water. I wanted to highlight those moments that make up one's life and often go unnoticed but are delicious for their utter simplicity. I had imagined that drinking water and a lover's duet might occur as small interludes within the larger work. The lover's duet remained part of the final performance, but my idea to incorporate drinking water (although played with in the first few rehearsals) was ultimately omitted.

Part II: Rehearsals and the Creative Reality

I worked on several sections simultaneously throughout the process and did not put the sections in order until the last few weeks before the show.

The first section I worked on was "To begin" a solo for Chetachi Egwu. We began by trading solo improvisations. I would improvise for one minute and then she would respond. We did several rounds of this and I observed a beautiful shoulder movement which became our starting point to develop the solo. An idea emerged that the solo would begin and end the dance and that Chetachi herself was representing a life force. The idea was that her energy set in motion what was to follow. We worked with a movement sequence which would repeat itself with increasing intensity along very specific pathways. As it developed, I also used the idea of a retrograde (a choreographic method in which a series of movements is repeated in reverse) so that the choreography would almost rewind itself and start over again from the beginning, which for me echoed the idea of a beginning with no end.

At the same time, I was working with a group of eight dancers on a section for which, frankly, I had no clear idea what it was or where it would end up in the final work. All I had was a starting point—a movement sequence which I taught to the dancers and began to build upon in rehearsals. However, as I worked with the dancers in the studio, I had an idea that while the movement could remain fairly abstract in nature, that the structure of the choreography in this section would reveal the content. The first idea was that movement could repeat yet somehow change as dancers left the stage. For example, a partnering phrase might lose a partner and become a solo—the same movement but with the second person missing. This concept became important to the development of the dance as a whole and I began to think of the entire piece in a new way. The image of things building up and falling apart became a central element in the work and this idea repeated itself in various ways. This repeated image reminded me of my own
relationship to Victor's death and what I imagined friends and family might also be experiencing. It also reminded me of the cycle of life and death itself and I felt it was a way to approach the subject that was not immediately obvious to the audience but worked like an undertow, quietly pulling the work along.

"To begin again"; Performed by Nefertari Bennett, Elizabeth Gist, Titina Gist, Chayma Gomez, Britney Gooden, Monica Hererra, Heidi Sampson, and Damaris Sanchez.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4 - Looking down from the stairs
This particular section came to represent the journey one takes in those last moments before death. This is a perfect example of how an idea can be transformed in the rehearsal studio and why I don't always feel the need to plan everything in advance or know the end result. It is a way of working that is process- rather than product- oriented, and can sometimes be unnerving for all involved. The section was eventually titled "To begin again . . . " and worked with spatial design that uses, among other things, two designated corridors to set up the moment when the dancers finally move beyond the stage and up the stairs. I made the decision to have the dancers move along the staircase out of an initial desire to have them closer to the audience. I also liked the final image of them all assembled at the top of the stairs looking down on the stage (see figure 4) as Chetachi returns to reprise her opening solo.

At the same time I was creating the beginning and ending sections, I was also creating a quartet, a trio, a duet (on video), two solos and two large group sections.

The quartet was built around the memory of Victor and his close group of friends which always teased, supported, loved and tortured each other as only best friends can do. The quartet "4" grew out of the movement idea given to the dancers to support and stay connected during a series of physically demanding lifts and partnering work (see figure 5). I also began to incorporate movement material from the beginning solo and ending group piece as a way to tie the choreography together as a whole.

As I came back to the idea of things falling apart, I realized that a logical order for the choreography would be the quartet (eventually titled "4") a trio "3," "2" the lovers duet (video featuring Scott Difford and Catalina Triana) and "1" a solo for Stephanie Ponce. This not only made sense to me in terms of structure but it also reminded me of a countdown to a big event, namely the large group section.
The section "3" paid homage to Victor and his quirky, playful sense of humor. Using Marx brothers and physical comedy as a starting place, this section still explored the important role his friends played in his life. This section was one of the most complicated and probably the hardest for the dancers to master.

Figure 6 - "3"; Performed by Stephanie Ponce, Meagan Sweeney, and Catalina Triana.

The video duet "2" represented the love life that was no longer possible. It was shot in color but as I began to edit the footage, I changed it to a grainy black and white to re-enforce the idea of something fading away. I chose an old song sung in Spanish. I wanted something beautiful and melodic and recognizable. I did this to give the audience a moment to breathe and enjoy what was a very sweet duet. We filmed it outside in everyday clothing because I wanted it to feel lived-in and hoped that the audience would see two people in love rather than simply two dancers.

The solo that follows, "1" is in silence and was built around the idea of someone moving for no other reason than because it felt good. In other words, not dancing to entertain, to work with the music or represent an idea, but just movement for the sake of moving. Again, this comes back to my original idea of simplicity and joy in something often overlooked. This solo also sets the build up to the group sections of "If Yesterday Were Today . . ." and is the calm before the storm because what follows the quiet solo is an energetic, playful and spontaneous dance built around the idea of a party.

The group sections were a strange animal and these were the hardest for me to figure out. What started out as one idea broke off into two distinct sections that somehow came together again later on in the process. One of my first and lasting memories of Victor is dancing with him at my wedding. It was fun and ridiculous and gave everyone a laugh. I remember Victor as a person who made me feel welcome and at ease and I wanted to extend that idea to the audience by creating an opportunity for them to come up onstage or at least feel like they could. So the group section which became "If Yesterday Were Today" began with a directive for the dancers to come up with a new version of the Electric Slide (a line dance often performed at weddings, parties, etc.).
It was important for me that the movement originated from dancers themselves in this particular section. I then began to break them up into groups and had them create more elaborate versions of the original. This went through many renderings but the final version starts with a group of two entering, followed by a group of three, then a group of four, then another four and finally adding members of the audience (see figure 7). This was another example of using the choreographic structure to re-enforce the overall idea and is a clear example in the choreography where things are "building up." The group section that followed used a table to heighten the idea of a party (see figure 1), and sets up the solo section "I Wish Tomorrow Never Happened" in which things begin to fall apart again.

"I Wish Tomorrow Never Happened" was started earlier in the process but found itself closer to the end of the final work. This was another section that developed a life of its own and began with a table. That simple idea became much more complex as we worked in the studio. The idea behind the dance was a moment of solitude, when the reality of loss is finally realized. As we pieced the entire work together what started as a solo became a frozen moment in time with the other dancers onstage during the solo (see figure 9). One by one, dancers melted to the floor leaving only the soloist moving in real time (see figure 10). Twice during the section the soloist's movements are picked up by another dancer (seen in figure 8), which for me represented a flash of memory. The solo ends with the soloist (Meagan Sweeney) lying down on the table. The other dancers have returned to standing and move quickly to the table and wheel her offstage. I left it up to the audience to interpret this image for themselves, since for me it represented many things at once.

"I Wish Tomorrow Never Happened"
The last duet before the ending section is titled "A Good-Bye Poem" and features the video footage seen in the first lover's duet "2." However, this time the images have been abstracted to the point that they are now only black and white shapes, further evidence that this relationship has faded further away from reality (see figure 11). In the duet, the dancers work together to fold a large piece of red fabric into a small square (see figure 12). This section grew out an image I had of the loved ones left behind to go through the clothes and objects, pictures of the deceased. Although not seen in the photos this section actually had three chairs onstage, thereby always leaving an empty chair. It was a simple duet and came near the end of the process but came together quickly. The video was not added until we got into the theater to begin designing lights and I felt that the juxtaposition of the abstract video with the duet and empty chair gave an added weight to the emotional content of the dance.

"A Good-Bye Poem"; Performed by Stephanie Ponce and Catalina Triana.

Part III: Closing Thoughts

While I have tried to provide insight into the ideas behind the dance and the artistic choices made, it is important to note that I have not delved into the intricate process of creating the movement itself. This is a whole other area of research involved in making the dance and involves developing a movement language and then crafting it into choreography for the stage.
This part of the process is the most time consuming and enjoyable but also the most difficult to navigate on the page. Dance is something which must be experienced (much like music must be heard or artwork must be viewed) in order to understand it fully. For this reason, I chose to focus on broad concepts and sources of inspiration rather than movement details and their development. Perhaps this is a topic to be explored at a later time.

Lastly, the piece took four months of rehearsals in the studio not including time spent editing video and music, selecting costuming, designing lights, posters, programs and publicity. Putting a show together from concept to stage is a large undertaking of creative energy and I was thrilled to be able to bring this dance to life on the stage of the new Performance Theater.