The Search for Sophistication: Using "Sinatra Suite" to Support New Choreography

Murphy Reinert
Abstract

I became interested in American choreographer Twyla Tharp's *Sinatra Suite* (featuring dancers Mikhail Baryshnikov and Elaine Kudo) when I watched a recorded performance of it while in high school. The piece is a mix of ballet and ballroom, while showing an amorous vignette between the two dancers. Throughout the years, this dance has resonated with me, especially because of Tharp’s suave presentation. Specifically, Tharp infused sophisticated glamour into romantic turmoil all of which resonated on stage to the popular music of Frank Sinatra. Returning to this inspiration for my Honors in the Major thesis project, I choreographed my own work that is influenced by the arc of a intimate relationship and are danced to mainstream, lyrical music.

This project incorporates historical, contextual research into choreographic sketching, thereby moving beyond Tharp’s work to form my own conclusions about personal relationships in today's society. Many student choreographers do not attempt to make a dance grounded in pop culture because of an unspoken stigma that popular dances are not “art.” Situating my choreography in investigative research will uncover ways that I can in fact create a sound choreographic work while still speaking to my generation, a group that has grown up in an age of pop culture identity. Currently, there are many outlets for dance to reach modern audiences, especially on television. My project hopes to draw from the popularity of these televised phenomena and transform it into an artistic, theatrical experience that is both culturally relevant and easily approachable.
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF VISUAL ARTS, THEATRE, & DANCE

THE SEARCH FOR SOPHISTICATION
USING SINATRA SUITE TO SUPPORT NEW CHOREOGRAPHY

By
MURPHY MICHAEL REINERT

A Thesis submitted to the
School of Dance
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with
Honors in the Major

Degree Awarded:
Spring, 2012
The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of Murphy Michael Reinert defended on April 25, 2012.

Dr. Jennifer Atkins, Assistant Professor of Dance
Thesis Director

Dr. Penny LeNoir, Assistant Professor of Mathematics
Outside Committee Member

Gerri Houlihan, Professor of Dance
Committee Member

Patricia Phillips, Co-Chair of Dance
Committee Member
Context/Background:

Twyla Tharp’s *Sinatra Suite*, premiered by American Ballet Theatre (ABT) at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. in 1983, was performed by Mikhail Baryshnikov and Elaine Kudo.\(^1\) The work stems from another piece of Tharp’s (her *Nine Sinatra Songs*) which she originally created for her company.\(^2\) *Sinatra Suite* is performed to music, recorded in the fifties by the famous crooner Frank Sinatra, when it was “the last time we assumed as a culture that of course men and women lived together and loved for a lifetime”.\(^3\) The piece has been performed continuously since its debut almost 30 years ago. Tharp’s journey to its creation, though, starts further back in time.

Throughout most of her career, Twyla Tharp struggled to find her identity in the dance field. Growing up in a Quaker family, Tharp dealt with her family’s religious ideals and morals, such as being told to marry a man she slept with, even though she was not pregnant.\(^4\) While growing up, she was intent on dancing and when she attended college, she ended up transferring from Ponoma College in California to Barnard College, where she soon became entrenched in the New York City dance scene.

While living in NY, Tharp began to take as many dance classes as she could. Tharp dove into ballet, jazz, and modern techniques, ingesting as much training and exposure as she could. In 1963, while still at Barnard, Tharp became a member of the Paul Taylor Dance Company, but after some time she began to question “Paul’s desire and ability to make anything more than


\(^3\) Tharp, *Push* 273-274.

\(^4\) Tharp, *Push* 60.
easy, pleasant, decorative work.”⁵ This led to her being put on a “trial by fire” by Taylor because she refused to be fired.⁶ It was this unyielding mentality that set Tharp on her idiosyncratic choreographic path.

Tharp’s movement aesthetic is comparable to a chameleon. Her vocabulary changes on a piece-by-piece basis, though there is always a Tharp “stamp of approval.” Her work on the film Amadeus, for example, involved her setting historically accurate pieces from Mozart’s era while her work in Sinatra Suite highlights a contemporary social ballroom feel. Though her pieces are all distinct in tone, Tharp is unique in that “she doesn’t pick out ‘jazz’ or ‘country western’ as a novel peg on which to hang the old familiar dance apparatus.”⁷ Her bending of aesthetics defines her approach and is why I am drawn to her work. She has been influential in showing me that choreography does not have to be single-sided.

Tharp’s work on Sinatra Suite stemmed from her piece Nine Sinatra Songs. However, it was her continuous partnership with Mikhail Baryshnikov that inspired her to stage this work. She and Baryshnikov danced a duet to Frank Sinatra music a few years prior and their partnership endured extreme criticism, where they were “vociferously booed at a Ballet Theater gala.”⁸ Many works from Tharp’s repertoire have involved Baryshnikov. She created Push Comes to Shove, the choreography for the film White Nights, and a few other works. Their collaborative energy has proved beneficial to both of their careers. Her work in Sinatra Suite is a piece that highlights a relationship arc through the dancing and music.

---

⁵ Tharp, Push 77.
⁶ Tharp, Push 78.
⁸ Kisselgoff, “Dance: ABT.”
The story of *Sinatra Suite* is about a couple who dance within a ballroom aesthetic, moving to the music of ‘ol Blue eyes. During the performance, the couple dances through five songs: *Strangers in the Night, All the Way, That’s Life, My Way, One for my Baby (And One More for the Road).* Sinatra was around in the performing arts world for over six decades. He was a renowned recording artist and actor. His musical accomplishments include winning 20 Grammy’s for his works. During the era that the songs used in *Sinatra Suite* were recorded, Sinatra recorded more than a dozen albums for Capitol Records many of which became staples of his repertoire. After Capitol he would go on to start his own record label, doing music he wanted to do as an independent artist. Sinatra and Tharp’s artistic journey are similar in being part of a larger group, before finding themselves in their personal direction.

While dancing, their relationship unfolds almost in direct correlation to the music. They start out slowly, as if on a first date. As the music progress the couple moves right along into slight knocking of heads in who is leading the movement. We then see the male dancer get physically “rough” with his partner in *That’s Life,* which is reminiscent of hard times in the relationship. This arc leads to the break-up of the couple, and the male dancing alone, seemingly remembering their past with nostalgia. Throughout all of this, Baryshnikov and Kudo appear sophisticated during the whole dance.

Though people enjoy the choreography for *Sinatra Suite,* critics often have a hard time giving the performers their own spotlight. Herman Cornejo, a principal dancer with ABT, who

---

11 Ibid.
performed the male role on the opening night gala for the 2011 City Center season, “can’t consistently banish the shade of Mikhail Baryshnikov” however “his most pure dance steps and positions turn into images of sheer drama, elegance and charm.”\textsuperscript{12} Alastair Macaulay, dance critic from the \textit{New York Times}, talks about Marcelo Gomes’ performance in Baryshnikov’s role as saying “the end-of-affair emotions, both desolate and grateful, are astoundingly real.”\textsuperscript{13}

Alongside its longevity, the relationship arc is something that draws me towards using the piece as basis for further work.

\textit{Sinatra Suite}’s success is owed in part to its connection the audience feels with it. The eloquence of the costumes, the crooning of Sinatra, or even the sweeping movement Tharp created are relatable to the viewer. Her showcasing of the relationship cycle on stage is where many viewers have been in their own lives. Close to 30 years old, this piece will continue to speak to every generation with all its offerings. It is because of this that I have chosen to use \textit{Sinatra Suite} as the jumping off point for my own choreography.

\textbf{Rationale:}

This project is important because it involves approaches to choreography that students seldom attempt. Undergraduate students rarely combine historical background and themes of a classical work to create their own modern interpretation. Throughout my choreography classes here at FSU, no student has been challenged openly to create work in this context. We have been given assignments where we use nature as influence, and there have been teachers who ask us to

\begin{flushright}

\end{flushright}
retrograde and invert our movement phrases. Choreographing in this method will allow me to delve deeper into the background of Tharp’s work so I can get an idea of successful relationship showcasing for the final project. Utilizing a staple of American choreography to create a work that can be viewed by all people, no matter what personal experiences they bring with them, is the end goal that I hope to reach in the Spring semester showing.

**Significance:**

This thesis work will allow me to bridge the gap between a historic, under researched, seminal work and the current dance field. Connecting a historical approach to choreography is something not accomplished normally without setting a classic work of repertoire (works by Nijinsky for instance). Translating the themes from *Sinatra Suite* into my own choreography will allow me the opportunity to voice my views on relationships I have gained throughout my life. It will enable me to show what a relationship means to me, as a homosexual college student, and share this with a general audience. With many current choreographers approaching relationships (metaphorical and physical) in their work, I want to tackle the relationship arc and showcase what it means to myself. With the news outlets all talking about popular culture relationships, from shows such as *The Kardashians*, *Basketball Wives*, and *The Hills*, I want to show that relationships necessarily have an expiration date.

**Description of Project**

---

Under the umbrella of postpositivism, I will incorporate methodologies of gender/feminism and recreation. Through these methodological approaches, I hope to uncover how *Sinatra Suite* is successful in showcasing the relationship arc.

Feminist inquiry cannot be accomplished without looking at all genders present within a work. To simply look at one sex or another without regard to both would be biased in nature. Notable dance scholar Jane Desmond argues that feminist inquiry looks at the historical context of gender and investigates how the connotations of gender affect the outlook on human culture.\(^{15}\) It is by using this gendered outlook that I am able to dissect exactly how the partnership between Mikhail Baryshnikov and Elaine Kudo transpired throughout the piece. Some questions I will ask myself during the creation of my own work: “How does dancers relationship on stage appear to the audience?”; “What does the movement offer to showcasing the gender of the dancers?”.

The mood of the partnership *a la* ballroom aesthetic was a sticking point for Tharp. In talking about *Nine Sinatra Songs*, Tharp noticed that she “still wanted the beauty of the ballroom form, the shared participation, but the yin and yang of it, the balance of it had to be different for the Eighties. The man’s role still made sense- strong, supporting. But the woman’s was demeaning” however, it was not going to be that simple for Tharp.\(^{16}\) She wanted to make the partnership an equal match “woman did her share of the work and it was sometimes, she not the man, who knew what came next.”\(^{17}\) When Baryshnikov and Kudo dance *Sinatra Suite*, you cannot help but notice that the two of them put equal amounts of charisma into the work, while still making it look effortless like ballroom is supposed to.


\(^{16}\) Tharp, *Push* 273.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
The methodology of recreation is the backbone of the entire thesis study. Dance scholar Helen Thomas, states that a recreation is “concerned to capture the ‘spirit of the [original] work’.” Recreations, reconstructions and revivals are all utilized for bringing works back from “the grave” that may be considered lost. The processes for these are: research, preparation of research, and the final phase is rehearsal/production. Top questions that arise from recreation are what information does the audience need to know about the process and what information does the researcher need to take into account for his rehearsal? It is with these questions that I am attempting to know what can make my own work successful in the Spring semester.

Researching *Sinatra Suite* under the microscope of gender/feminism and recreation is something that will enable me to fully comprehend Tharp’s piece. It will give me the information necessary to work successfully during the choreographic process. Learning all I can about the aspects of this piece will further enhance the my own work as I rehearse my dancers guiding them towards a final goal.

**Procedures**

This thesis project incorporated two phases. First, I conducted historical, contextual research into *Sinatra Suite* especially looking at how Tharp created a technically sophisticated work that remained accessible to the audience. Second, I choreographed my own dance work. By drawing themes from the source material I will, through contemporary dance and popular music, form my own conclusions about personal relationships in today's society.

---

19 Archer and Hodson, “Ballets Lost...”: 101.
My project began with a historical research component, asking how *Sinatra Suite* came to be and why it is still relevant today. I have viewed the only recorded performance of it, as well as traveled to New York City to see the ABT perform the piece. While in NYC, I conducted further research in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library to further delve into my background research. Finally, I studied the Sinatra songs that Tharp used in order to see what emotions they evoke and to determine the choreographic relationship between music and movement. That has assisted me in choosing my own music. Additionally, I had an interview with Nancy Raffa, the current ballet mistress for ABT’s staging of *Sinatra Suite*. This interview helped to provide several insightful thoughts on the piece, such as why the piece is still loved to differences in performances.

When I began to create my work in the Spring semester, I used my research as a choreographic foundation. I worked with two female dancers to showcase the dynamics of a personal relationship, while finding a movement vocabulary that appeals to a wide audience. I incorporated a variety of steps from the ballet, contemporary, and partnering techniques into my choreography, as these are what I have been trained with. I also used choreographic devices, such as inversions, retrograding, and symmetry, that I have learned here at the School of Dance in my choreography classes.

My music choice will incorporate select songs from the recording artist Adele. I have chosen her songs because she is someone who speaks to my generation. Her song “Hometown Glory” is about her visiting hometown, reminiscing about her life there and its connection to her life now. Another song “Rumor Has It” is about her ex-boyfriend’s affair on her and showing she has moved on while he has not. She is a multi-award winning artist and a Grammy winner and her current album “21” is already quadruple-platinum. Her work speaks to me by allowing me
the opportunity to embrace the stories of love, friendship and family that she sings about. Sinatra was known for singing about love and the times, and Adele is following in those steps as a modern-day crooner.
Bibliography


