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### Taking Student Artists and Audiences to the West Side: Exploring the value of creative adaptation in an arts context through a case study of "West Side Story"

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SUNY – Buffalo State  
International Center for Studies in Creativity

*Taking Student Artists and Audiences to the West Side: Exploring the value of creative adaptation in an arts context through a case study of “West Side Story”*

A Project  
in Creative Studies  
by  
Rebecca G. Bateson-Brown

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Science

December 2020



## Abstract of a Project

*Taking Student Artists and Audiences to the West Side: Exploring the value of creative adaptation in an arts context through a case study of "West Side Story"*

This project focuses on the practical application and conceptual acceptance of deliberate creative adaptation within the purview of the performing arts and arts education. More specifically, it centers this conversation around stagings of the iconic musical *West Side Story*, as my role as a choreographer and arts educator is used to further explore, examine, and emphasize these topics through the documentation of my production planning process, choreographic creation, and ultimate execution of performance material for a local high school production of the show. As such, this project builds with greater specificity off of my previous investigations of "adaptation" as an ideological concept and physical practice within a comparative arts - creativity context. An accumulation of anecdotal evidence, performance product, literary review, colleague critique, and personal reflection are presented. Elements of chief importance could best be framed as the relationship between innovation and novelty in conjunction with artistic repertoire and identity; the struggle for balance and boundaries between innovation and tradition when working with iconic performance pieces; innovatively addressing classical demands through alternate means; and finding opportunities for unique and novel interpretations without compromising artistic integrity. Additionally, all this is overlaid with the perspectives and potential opportunities of greater accessibility and engagement in arts education.

Key words: adaptation, deliberate creativity, performing arts, arts education, artistic integrity, innovation, intent, novel interpretation, *West Side Story*,



Signature

12/9/2000

Date



SUNY - Buffalo State  
International Center for Studies in Creativity

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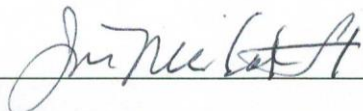
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Project Advisor: J. Michael Fox

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Candidate: Rebecca G. Bateson-Brown



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## **Forward**

To begin with, there is a distinctly non-tradition design approach to this project. As creativity scholars, I hope this is something that may be appreciated by its intended audience - or at the least indulgently over-looked. While I stop short of apologizing, I do offer explanation. First begun over five years ago, this project has stopped and started multiple times and gone through numerous incarnations. Though to be most fair, my creative work and application didn't stop - merely any noteworthy writing and recording of it. The result is a staggering mass of accumulated anecdotal evidence, performance product, literary review, colleague critique, and personal reflection.

How, then, to coalesce these many divergent parts into a convergent whole? How to arrange this into a cohesive thesis? My answer: to embrace it as it was, for what it was - a true chronicling of my journey through the creative process to produce my master's project. As such, writing style, tone, and tense differ throughout this work, varying from academic discussion to personal narrative and from impartial recordings to impassioned declarations. I have opted for a light editorial hand in presenting this material. Though there was some concern for clarity and flow, I felt the more pressing need was for honesty of intentions, accuracy of actions, transparency of process, and the relevancy of reflection.

All materials were assessed and included with this in mind. They have been arranged in a loose chronology that follows the progress of my project. In brief outline, this paper presents: the selection of a topic, background research and theory on the topic, a review of personal work on the topic, the creation of a distinct performance product with regard to the topic, reactions to said performance product, and a comparison to related performance products. Samples of my finished performance products, as well as post and prior works of a similar or supporting nature, are included in an appendix.



## **Topic Selection & Identification**

### **Consensus of Direction**

“In creative work it often seems that there is an aesthetic principle appearing to organize the random creative impulses.” ~ J.G. Young (1984, p. 258-259)

The master’s project is intended to be the cumulative expression of the graduate student’s tenure, definitive of their individual experience and summative of their specialized knowledge. It is an opportunity to showcase the skills you’ve acquired, while further honing personal practice and adding to the collective set of the discipline at large. The field of creativity, like its general nature, is multifaceted; its theories are diverse; its uses are widely varied; its incarnations are myriad; and its effects are far-reaching. Moreover, it is indisputably grounded in both academic fact and functional practice.

My time in the Creativity Studies program has both broadened the scope of my understanding of this through exposure and narrowed its focus through detailed, relevant, and applicable examples. It has also solidified my appreciation of its well-supported effectiveness. Through my coursework and subsequent experiences afforded by it, I have been able to identify certain aspects of the creative discipline with which I have an increased awareness and ability. When coupled with my personal influences and professional capabilities - as a dancer, choreographer, director, and arts educator - clear areas of creative interest and expertise formed. It was these areas that I have both a continuing curiosity in and affinity for that I intended to concentrate on.

This principle served effectively to cut through an array of initial ideas for further study. Therefore, though the possibilities were many, I found the selection of a topic for my master’s project in a general sense to be fairly straightforward. In particular, I envisioned myself capitalizing on the strong ties between creativity and the performing arts with opportunities for effective application of leadership. I had already identified a critical link between these fields and their related aspects, with particular focus on the mutually informative and supportive relationships between “deliberate” creativity and “artistic” creativity. Likewise, I had already shown the application of

creative leadership to be quite complimentary to the adapted use of select CPS models and tools in performing arts environments. I wished to build on both these accomplishments.

Significantly, I also envisioned myself focusing my work on aspects of high personal interest within this designated area of intersection and accomplishment. Innovation is of great personal creative interest to me, especially with regard to its relationship to adaptation. While not distinct opposites, there are distinguishing processes and accompanying benefits to each approach – sometimes one does not need to fully reinvent the wheel (innovate), just make modifications (adaptation). A clear connection between these two approaches exists with unique dimensions in the performing arts. The subtlety of definitions, overlap of actions, and related associations provided much to work with, and I was profoundly drawn to it.

Elements of chief importance could best be framed as the relationship between innovation and novelty in conjunction with artistic repertoire and identity. A central rudiment to this is the struggle for balance and boundaries between innovation and tradition when working with iconic performance pieces. This includes innovatively addressing classical demands through alternate means, as well as finding opportunities for unique and novel interpretations without compromising artistic integrity. The aspects of re-staging, adaptation and individuality figure prominently within this statement of focus.

Among them, though, adaptation is key. I had previously investigated “adaptation” as an ideological concept and physical practice within an arts context as it is informed and augmented by theory of deliberate creativity. The prevailing attitudes, accepted practices, and popular critique of performances were examined to good effect within the realm of classical ballet. Though fruitful, I believed there remained much that could still be done on this subject. There were many opportunities to experiment with applications in varying degrees and contexts. In particular, I was intrigued with fostering a greater emphasis on the use of adaptation within the purview of arts education and exploring the acceptance of adaptation in additional performance genres.

### Concept Distilled

“ . . . creating a work of art constitutes a problem finding process . . . ”

~ J.W. Getzels (1976, p. 153-154)

Guided by my personal vision statement (Appendix A), I increasingly refined the selection of a topic for my master’s project. I knew where I wanted to focus, how I wanted to employ CPS tools and theory, and even why I wanted to do so – but the details of what final form this would take eluded me. So, I sought solace in academic fundamentals of the program.

The steps of the FourSight Model – Clarify, Ideate, Develop, Implement – expand beyond either the mere creative act or idea, rather including both by tracking and guiding the progression from a problem that proceeds the idea all the way to the action that will address it. I appreciated this with a greater sense of relevancy as I searched to select my optimal project and pondered the format of its eventual completion. Relatedly, I reflected on the Thinking Skills Model's recognition of cognition and linked affect, which in my opinion is important to better appreciating the necessary interplay between thought and action in CPS. Within this model, I was partial to the concepts of Diagnostic Thinking and Mindfulness. These present potential connections to FourSight's first step - Clarify, as both relate to assessing and examining a situation prior to beginning. I believed that this was a crucial part of effectively employing CPS. As Getzels’ (1976) work on “problem-finding” shows, ascertaining the correct issue to address using the creative process has understandably huge impacts on its effectiveness. Getzels’ work particularly resonated with me, which is unsurprising as he is one of the first scholars to identify a strong relationship between creativity and artistic people. Given my intersecting, personal roles as dancer, director, and arts educator, I found tangible evidence of this relationship in my daily personal and professional life.

Reflecting on Getzels work with creativity and artistic individuals and returning to my problem of selecting a discrete and determinate master’s project topic, I realized that I was trying too hard to create a completely new undertaking to fulfil my project

needs – what I should have been doing was reconsidering the current tasks that I was already committed to or involved in to see which could be converted to meet appropriate goals and guidelines of my project. It truly was a matter of finding the right problem. **Once I readjusted my thinking the perfect project quickly emerged: the choreography of *West Side Story*.**

The upcoming high school musical at Buffalo Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts (BAVPA) for the spring of 2016 was set to be *West Side Story*, and I was already engaged as the choreographer (Appendix B). Though this was an extra-curricular activity, as a teacher in the building, I would also be covering a good deal of material pertaining to *West Side Story* in my regularly scheduled dance classes. As a full-length production that was seminal in its field and signature of its creator, this work met the majority of my determined criteria. Other standout characteristics included its employment of dance styles outside the genre of strict classical ballet and its ties to iconic cultural trends of a particular period. Additionally, it required that I work within the set confines of the existing show to craft a renewed version rather than a separate derivative new piece. Moreover, it afforded excellent situational and environmental opportunities as its creation was positioned in an educational setting yet with pre-professional public performance expectations. Creating the choreography for BAVPA's staging of this show was an ideal vehicle for my thesis on the viability of creative adaptation from both a conceptual and practical standpoint in a performing arts context.

Having identified and established all this, I was able to ultimately distill my master's project topic statement to: **creating an extended-length performance product that utilized and embodied identifiable creative adaptation theory and practice representative of a new approach to presenting iconic repertoire in an educational arts setting as shown in my choreography of *West Side Story*.**

## **Background Research & Theory**

“If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original.”

~ K. Robinson (2009)

### **Preliminary Perceptions**

Adaptation is a recognized practice of deliberate creativity. Adaptation also exists as a practice of artistic creativity within a performing arts context. As such, one might assume that there would be clear commonalities and opportunities for mutual shared growth and development between the two fields in this topic area. However, the perspectives and subsequent approaches of each differ notably. The details of “adaptation” vary with personal experience, intended application, and domain-specificity among other factors. With these come different connotations, values, and judgements. These discrepancies are addressed through an exploration into the nature of adaptation in creativity literature and examples of practical artistic application of adaptation in the field of dance. In reconciling these disparate views and value judgements, one is able to better perceive the relationship between “adaptation” in both these connected fields of artistic and deliberate creativity. Moreover, some thought-provoking questions arise regarding the increased application and acceptance of adaptation in the field of dance and how this may impact the furthered continuance of this performing art.

### **Principles & Prevailing Attitudes on Adaptation**

To those in the field of creativity, adaptation is a divergent practice that is often used in the Ideation phase of CPS. Though it can be used independently to generate ideas, many will be most familiar with it from its use in the tool SCAMPER – Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put to other use, Eliminate, Replace. Based on foundational work by Alex Osbourne which was later organized and aligned to the mnemonic by Bob Eberle, questions aimed to stretch people’s thinking under the category of “Adapt” include: “What other thoughts does this suggest?”, “What else is this like?”, and “Does



the past offer a similar situation?" (Miller, B., Vehar, J., Firestien, R., Thurber, S., & Nielsen, D., 2011, p. 32-33). Used in this way and in conjunction with other CPS tools and processes, adaptation is a fairly functional and value neutral practice.

However, those in the arts view adaptation somewhat differently. To begin with, adaptation is a contentious term, being both a description of a process and an end-product art-form (Balodis, 2012, p. 3-4). Any confusion stemming from this is compounded by the number of less-precise terms that are often used interchangeably with it – ie. retellings, interpretations, re-workings, re-envisionments, etc. Given these and other things, it is surprising how little systematic, sustained attention has been given to the topic of adaptation (Buckley-Archer, 2011). Critical literature on the history, theory, and practice of adaptation focuses for the most part on that of the stage adaptation of novels and, similarly, that of the film adaptation of various literary texts – saying little about adaptation theory in a general sense (Sherry, 2014). In some ways, though, the prevailing cultural attitudes towards novel-to-film adaptations have defined the less-specific adaptation theory, itself (Buckley-Archer, 2011, p. 197). Fortunately, these ideas can easily be extrapolated to the arts-related realm of dance and subsequently to choreographic application.

Regardless of which aspects of adaptation one examines, there are clear links to creativity. It has been said that the “notion of creativity is inscribed at the heart of adaptation as a practice” (Babbage, F., Neumark Jones, R., & Williams, L., 2010, p. 3). Likewise, it has been noted that creative processes take place during adaptation, and there are also a number of theoretical and creative functions of adaptation (Sherry, 2014, p. 126). Along with this are the assertions that adaptation is a valuable developmental tool in creation (Buckley-Archer, 2011), and that adaptation is both a creative and critical act (Babbage et al., 2010). It is this component of critical review that makes adaptation both such a valuable and controversial tool.

The arts disciplines are fraught with predominantly negative attitudes towards adaptation and a preoccupation with authenticity and fidelity to the source material. Awareness of ethical considerations and obligations to the source text and its author

and audience are typically of paramount concern in a discussion of adaptation (Balodis, 2012). Even so, conversation often becomes passionate and moralistically charged, with words like “betrayal”, “violation”, and “desecration” (Buckley-Archer, 2011, p. 195). Emotion and sensibilities aside, though, when one speaks of the practice of adaptation, much of the process is assumed to be the study of the differences between the source and its end-product (Balodis, 2012). Viewed in this way, adaptation is essentially derivative and often seen as synonymous with addition or subtraction with regards to an original work (Buckley-Archer, 2011). It is here that the joint concept of creation and critique comes into play. From this perspective, the practice of adapting in a creative arts context has a greater connection to the other closely related components of the SCAMPER CPS tool which pose questions in line with this type of thinking, such as: “What else can you use instead?” (Substitute), “How about a blend?” (Combine), “How about a new twist?” (Modify), “What might other uses be, if changed?” (Put to other uses), “What can you do without?” (Eliminate), “What other arrangements could be used? (Rearrange) (Miller et al., 2011, p. 32-33).

Yet, this correlation supports more lines of inquiry than it answers. With this connection to creativity redoubled, one wonders if there is an additional creative purpose of making the adapted material one’s own and going beyond its obvious link to the original (Babbage et al., 2010). If an adaptation seeks to achieve some degree of autonomy from its original then it must involve some degree of innovation (Babbage et al., 2010). Even so, the question remains if one can judge an adaptation by its independent success (Babbage et al., 2010); or, are the two versions – original and adaptation in co-existence – always to be used as a judge of the other (Buckley-Archer, 2011, p.195)? Rather than viewing them in competition with one another, can one not look at the source material merely as the jumping-off-point for a new work and hence appreciate the connection between them and the value it adds to each? More recent study of the topic argues that the theoretical discourse has moved on from outmoded notions of fidelity to original sources; the practice of adaptation is now thought of more as a method of reinvigorating art-forms and inventing new ones (Balodis, 2012).

In relation to this investigation of adaptation, it is important to mention the related area of adaptive behavior. Adaptive behavior allows for individual change in order to succeed in a given environment. Although not specifically covered in the body of the creativity literature on adaptation, the flexibility to replace a nonconstructive behavior with a constructive one is a valid creative skill. Moreover, there is a collusion around the idea of critical thinking and creative thinking skills that lead to success in daily life much in the same way adaptive behaviors are characterized.

It is not difficult to see the underlying link. In a confluence of definitions, it may even be posited with little extrapolation that such adaptive behavior when put in an arts context may in fact fall in line with newer trends to embrace adaptation as a means of renewing and replacing the artistic repertoire with more accessible pieces. Hence practicing adaptation in the production of artistic works may be an adaptive behavior that will enable the continuation of the genres. This highlights the ways by which adaptation can successfully allow art forms to update themselves to a modern environment and viewership. Given that, one may well wonder the role that adaptation and adaptive behavior play in this circumstance as an agent of creative change. In such situations, adaptation may seem to be a perfect fit. It provides an element of innovation but does not totally lose the connection to or context of the original.

### **Adaptive Behavior and Adaptation in Dance & Musical Theatre**

Dance is an art that is steeped in tradition, but its place in the panorama of contemporary cultural society remains. The genre of musical theatre movement is relatively new in the rich history of the larger field, yet it is no less significant. Its achievement and acclaim have been hard-won, but its relevance persists. Unsurprisingly, professionals in the dance world hold a number of unique views on adaptation, many of which seem contradictory and convoluted in both nature and application and are biased with negativity. Though it runs the gamut from deeply traditional to highly ground-breaking, the field of dance and the musical theatre

movement genre, in particular, do exhibit adaptive behaviors when viewed holistically as an entirety. There is the recognition that the domain is growing and changing and that adjustments must be made accordingly.

However, while adaptation may be growing in acceptance as a practice applicable to the entire discipline moving forward, this is not necessarily the case when it comes to the individual works and productions that the genre deals with in tradecraft and performance. Respect for traditions often remains of paramount importance. In many circles, there is a deep-rooted reverence for established works in the classical cannon and a continued commitment to the chain of knowledge and oral traditions that are responsible for preserving and passing down iconic material. Foundational principals and defining elements of individual movements and larger stylistic trends are sanctified in the traditional repertoire through the inclusion and immortalization of seminal works. The repertoire, hence, becomes the repository and representation of said movement fundamentals and accompanying artistic statements in performance.

And yet, there is only so much existing material in the traditional repertoire. As such, there is the understandable acceptance that new works will be added over time as the discipline progresses. In recent years, there has been a greater push in this direction. Original works are essentially viewed favorably, or at least not automatically unfavorably, provided they meet certain generally-acknowledged conventional criteria of the field. New works are, in some ways, a recognized natural occurrence and simply viewed as expanding the body of work in this genre.

By contrast, the adaptation of already existing works is viewed somewhat differently. Expanding the breadth of available works in this way is far less accepted – despite the fact that “the idea of taking a familiar classical work and give[ing] it a different look is not new, even in the ballet world” (Abad-Carles, 2014). Classical ballet is renowned in the field for its strict conservatism and adherence to tradition, yet even here allowances can be made. Their repertoire frequently shows evidence of slight alteration for affect or stylistic consideration. Though the classics are in some ways standardized, there are at the same time “many, many versions by many, many

companies” (Weinstein, 2008, p.36). Each company may have subtle variations that reflect their own personalized style or incorporate a company-specific signature. Still “no matter which version you watch,” certain quantifying components and qualifying characteristics of said classics are present (Macaulay, 2014). The same could easily be stated for any number of Broadway shows and touring companies.

When one talks of adaptation, however, it is generally indicated that one is talking about something bigger than mere stylistic differences. Adaptation involves changes of a much larger scope with greater effect on the production of the overall work, the viewing of it, and its reception. Though adaptations may focus on a specific aspect of the work or take a particular approach, this encompasses changes to the work as a whole on a larger scale. With this comes the fear that vital components of the work will be removed or made unrecognizable, and thereby be lost to further retellings. As such, though the practice does exist, adaptation is viewed with distinctly less favor, particularly with well-known works and those designated as “classic.”

The key to overcoming this reticence may lie, to an extent, in a careful analysis of the classic works, themselves. More specifically, it may be situated in the complex determination of what makes a given work a “classic” or “seminal” and as such unique and inimitable. For example, what are the essential elements and defining features that are immutably linked with its identity and continuing existence? And, how does an adaptation respect these characteristics, once acknowledged, while also appreciating and instituting the new?

Inquiry along this line of reasoning draws attention to the critical importance the role of intention plays in adaptation practices within the dance world. Study in other related arts areas strongly indicates that the intentions that motivate the adaptation are impactful to both the creative/artistic process and the creative/artistic product (Guler, 2015). In turn, the role and level of artistic integrity in the creative/artistic product varies in relation to intention, purpose, knowledge, and contexts (Guler, 2015). From this, it could be additionally inferred that intention is a key factor in finding an acceptable balance between integrity and innovation. Discerning the ways in which

intention weighs the scale involves a twofold question: Is the intent of the original work/artist retained in the adaptation? and What is the intention/motivation behind the adaptation?

Both are imperative, yet the first question can quickly become murky and drawn into debate even in much less invasive and change-based means of revisiting older works than full-blown adaptation. Take for example the practice of re-staging, which can be most simply defined as presenting a given performance again or differently (thefreedictionary.com). The generally held purpose of a re-staging is to further the “consistent through-line” of classical knowledge in a very practical application that gives full exposure to a work and ensures that “the essence of [certain] masterpiece[s] is passed on” (Holder, 2013, p.50).

However, it has been asserted that “classics . . . can be diminished in generations of restaging” (Holder, 2013, p.48). For those with experience, “it is not easy to watch the gradual sterilization of a work” (Holder, 2013, p. 48). Take for example, Kurt Joss’ 1932 modern dance masterpiece, *The Green Table*. Through various re-stagings, “bit by bit, the alterations began” until in the current incarnation of the piece, notable changes have been made to signature motions, personal movement characteristics, and lighting (Holder, 2013, p.48). In the estimation of those involved in the original creation and early performances of the piece, this dramatically changes the audience’s experience of the work and disregards Joss’ initial intentions. Similarly, current re-stagings of Jerome Robbins’ 1958 ballet, *N.Y. Export: Opus Jazz*, are “mounted with an approach that [in the opinion of some] is diametrically opposed to [Robbins’ original] demands in the studio” (Holder, 2013, p. 49). Given that the selected topic for this project – *West Side Story* – is a Robbins’ work, this bit of insight was particularly relevant. Such occurrences are held to be irresponsible and disrespectful, as the integrity of the original work and the intentions behind it are not retained. If such attitudes are held against re-staging, one can well imagine the disapproval and disdain in which the more changeful practice of adaptation is held. This makes the second question to be considered regarding intent - What is the intention / motivation behind the adaptation? - all the more meaningful.

Adaptation for adaptation's sake alone is frowned upon. Deviation from an original work needs to be deliberate, as well as well-reasoned and supported in order to garner acceptance. Rationales for adapting classic works fall into two main categories – practical and artistic. Adaptation for practical concerns is much more accepted. Common considerations often include budget, cast size, crew experience, rehearsal demands, and production run-time; they are generally aimed to accommodate specific bookings and venues or at making the works more sustainable in the current socio-economic conditions.

By contrast, there are those within the genre that engage in adaptation of the classics primarily for artistic concerns. These range wildly and often by personal whim, yet assertions of over-familiarity, individuality, aesthetic trends, and modern audience appeal are all frequently cited. Adaptation driven by artistic concerns typically present bolder breaks from past versions and tend to be viewed as shocking and scandalous. Strong singularity and separation of an adaptation from its original material places it in some ways beyond the shared starting genre. This dissociating practice is somewhat common. Works which test the bounds of classicism are viewed with skepticism and disfavor; they may even be relegated to the nebulous category of random reactionary works. As such, adaptation solely for artistic exploration is not wholly accepted. Sometimes one can merge the concerns of both practical and artistic considerations. While at other times, the necessary considerations of one force the other. Most times, though within the dance realm, adaptive intentions that stem from the practical gain greater acceptance.

Another matter to consider when examining the practice of adaptation and its acceptance in the dance field is that of the persons involved in the endeavor. Who institutes the adaptation is of a fair bit of importance, as is the question of who actually accomplishes the adaptation. Both can have a dramatic impact on perception and, therefore, reception. For example, it is accepted that original artists/choreographers have the purveyance to adapt and remodel their own works in any way they choose. In

fact, it is a convention of sorts for artists/choreographers to do multiple works or re-workings of the same piece that are variations on a theme. The original artist/choreographer may commission someone to revisit one of their works in much the same way.

By contrasting thought but similar resolution, if a person of renowned professional accomplishment, critical acclaim, and public recognition adapts a classic work, this is generally accepted. Sometimes, these re-workings then reside in the repertoire alongside their original counterparts, distinguished merely by a notation of the year in which that version premiered. However, more current naming convention dictates that said person's name is attached to the adaptive work, thereby distinguishing it from the original. Or alternately, a slightly adapted title is sometimes used to refer to a prominent individual's more adapted version of a classic. Perhaps it should also be noted, that certain classic works are more prone to retellings and high-profile individualized adaptations than others. It is, likewise, more accepted.

### **Advocacy for Additional Applications of Adaptation and Acceptance**

While these trends are recognized, many adaptations are now being staged by young, avant-garde, choreographers/directors. Are their versions and visions of classic works not to be accepted in the publicized professional sphere merely because their creators have not yet been? In relation, are there no other avenues and circumstances where adaptation could gain greater acceptance and serve additional purposes in the field of dance?

The current literature on adaptation suggests several answers to these questions and others. First, it is contended that the term "adaptation" and its associated connotations needs to be radically rethought (Sherry, 2014). In relation, there is a desire to re-examine traditional paradigms with a view toward establishing new criteria that better define and assess adaptations in a rapidly changing cultural context (Buckley-Archer, 2011). Said paradigms, as they stand now, significantly restrict people's perception of the potential applications for adaptation, especially those aligned with



positive outcomes. For example, people “fail to understand how adaptation . . . might be used as a way of developing innovative techniques of classroom pedagogy” in an arts context (Sherry, 2014, p. 127). Yet, the possible advantages of application to the performing arts in this instance are clear.

Though not as elitist as in years past, the images of dance and musical theater are not always easily accessible to the mass public. This can make it difficult to successfully attract young viewers and participants. Likewise, students practicing elements of classicism and learning the classics may find it difficult to maintain their focus or even to appreciate the importance of such things when faced with the discordant onslaught of modernism prevalent in today’s society. But rather than cloaking itself in rigid traditions and cloistered practices, the genre of musical theatre dance needs to embrace the benefits adaptation offers.

The inclusion of adapted works in performance, adaptive behaviors in production and procedure, and adaptation as a creative learning tool in the studio may provide the perfect means to generate the interest and relate-ability necessary to engage the new population of youth who will perpetuate the genre. As it has been pointed out, “[s]uch evolution keeps [dance] . . . from becoming museum pieces” and keeps it “alive and culturally relevant” (Lewis, 2008, p. 32). In this way, a better understanding of adaptation can benefit and enhance general learning in an educational setting and provide a fundamentally important role in the future of the arts and creative industries (Sherry, 2014).

## **Personal Preparation & Prior Works**

“Create the conditions ...that make possible meaningful experiences...”

~ R. Burnham (2001, p. 67)

### **Motivating Examples**

Much of my inspiration, like the research included, originates in the realm of classical ballet. Yet, in what may itself be termed an adaptive action, I have admirably transposed & extrapolated from it to arrive at the convictions I have with regard to the use of adaptation in larger dance world practices. Much of it was formational to my approach to *West Side Story* and the initial creative choreographic choices I made. I began the planning of this project with several examples that served as sources of personal insight and information forefront in my thinking.

Keeping in mind the important distinction between practical and artistic adaptive motivation, I first concentrated on the practical. A standout in this space was Carolina Ballet’s “out-of-the-box version[s]” of classics that artistic director Robert Weiss “has tailored to fit . . . his budget and his 31-member company” (Weinstein, 2008, p. 34). Case in point, Weiss re-staged *Swan Lake*, “with only nine swans in the corps de ballet” where there are traditionally at least twenty (Weinstein, 2008, p. 34). Though critics’ “first reaction was ‘How is that possible?’,” they have come to realize that Weiss “has a great way of condensing the [classical] ballets but still getting the whole story with all the depth and all the different perspectives” (Weinstein, 2008, p. 34). Since *Swan Lake*, Carolina Ballet has also staged similarly adapted versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Carmen*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*. Significantly, though, Weiss “makes it clear that despite his tinkering, he’s a huge fan of full-length classics as staged by venerable companies” (Weinstein, 2008, p. 35).

This was in many ways, something that I was similarly hoping to accomplish with *West Side Story*. I wanted to customize the show to best effect within BAVPA’s parameters. As a school production the size and conglomerate demographics of the cast would be largely predetermined by the study body population. Opposite to Carolina Ballet’s strategic shrinking, I was looking to expand the cast number called for

by the original, primarily to utilize a larger portion of the student talent pool and give additional interested students the opportunity to participate. Between 5 – 15 supplementary characters were created, as well as unspecified extras for ensemble work. The characters were “named” following the stylistic conventions of the script – ie. “Savage” for an added Jet gang member. Students were allowed to have input and ownership in this process through several artistic CPS activities.

Besides quantity, I also was very aware of the need to accommodate differing characteristics of the cast as compared to that of the original. A predominant feature of the original casting was the strict racial groupings of the gangs – the Caucasian Jets vs. the Puerto Rican Sharks. The cast was also male dominated; with the exception of Anybodys all the gang members of both contingents were male. Given the make-up of BAVPA’s students, I knew that both these casting “requirements” would need to be adapted. As an inner-city school, it has a large minority student population; the school also has a larger than average female to male student ratio. This as a necessity was reflected in the casting of racially mingled and co-gendered gangs - both the Jets and the Sharks had a mix of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian members as well as several females. Such tailored adaptations, though essential and with recognized positive intention, could have a dramatic impact on the production.

It was at this point that practical considerations of adaptation began to inform my artistic rationales for adaptation - which was not a bad thing, as it was noted numerous times in my research that intention is a key factor in finding an acceptable balance between integrity and innovation. Sometimes one can merge the concerns of both practical and artistic considerations. While at other times, the necessary considerations of one force the other. It was unclear which was to be the case here, but the interests of intent were combining.

As I considered varied artistic approaches for adaptation in concert with the identified practical modifications, I was struck by the example of choreographer Matthew Bourne. In his reimagining of Tchaikovsky's famous ballet, *Swan Lake*, Bourne chose “to use male dancers and bring out [the] swans aggressive, muscular side”, while

also focusing on the “power and violence in the music that doesn’t come across in classical productions” (Tims, 2013). Though self-admittedly not from a ballet background, Bourne nonetheless recognized the enormity of the break he was making from past versions of this classic tale. “Lots of people couldn't accept the concept of male swans” (Tims, 2013). Emboldened rather than discouraged by this, Bourne determined “that because [he] was taking on such a familiar work, [he] had to come up with something original, with its own identity, for modern audiences” (Tims, 2013). This model aligned well with the adaptations I was proposing for *West Side Story*: crossing gender norms of casting with female gang members; and exploring a deeper and perhaps darker side to the gang violence and portrayal of teen angst freed from the more superficial crutch of color. Even the focus on use of music is of relevance, as Bernstein’s score is every bit as iconic as Robbins’ movement and just as traditionally interpreted.

Similarly, I was aiming to craft a version of *West Side Story* that not only fit the physical characteristics of our cast but also fit their personality. I wanted the choreography of this staging to reflect their spirit and sensibilities, to generate the interest and relate-ability necessary to engage them and their audience. I was looking for ways for my student cast to be able to show their individual modernist identity within the larger artistic identity of this iconic show. I was further inspired in this by the example of Mark Morris, choreographer and company director of Mark Morris Dance Group, who has built something of a reputation for himself in the ballet world, despite - or perhaps because of - the fact that he holds a number of unique beliefs about the importance of dancers’ individuality that are somewhat contrary to classical conventions. He’s “not looking for identical models of the same thing,” and this shows in his works, as does his commitment to exploring potential and showing the full extent of one’s capabilities - whether in reference to the dancers or the story they are engaged in telling (Rizzuto, 2015, p. 76). In many ways, I shared a like outlook and wished to perpetuate this perspective in my adaptive choreography for *West Side Story*.

### **Scaffolding of Relevant Samples**

Buoyed by these professional examples and with some acknowledgment of both practical and artistic intent, I continued to refine my vision and plan my implementation. I found myself fairly well-situated for the task. A brief review of my prior works related to my master's project topic reveal how I had been building towards this end. Gleaned from my past Creative Studies experiences and solidified by my artistic practices, I felt I was developing a niche of sorts in the personalization of creativity tools and strategies to arts educational settings. The previous year I had successfully employed a variety of components and differing aspects of creativity throughout the process of mounting a high school musical. This application included: an analysis of the 4P's as they presented in this situation; CPS tools applied to the audition process, stage plots, choreography, and costuming; clarifying characters and concerns with adapted use of CPS models and tools; and teaching creative process and content together with TIM and CSS (Appendix C). Stemming from this, I had prepared a number of arts educator materials with an emphasis on using deliberate creativity in conjunction with artistic creativity (Appendix D). I shared these materials with select faculty members at BAVPA over a series of professional development sessions. In doing so, I established a groundwork of creative arts policy in the building and garnered colleagues' support, some of whom I would be working with on the production of *West Side Story*.

I was also utilizing creative skills and activities in my arts classroom with increasing regularity. Specifically, I had done several projects that dealt with variations of adaptation and choreography. While these were completed with smaller groups, shorter performance pieces, and different goals, they provided invaluable related experience. The success of them also served to strengthen my resolve in the benefits of adaptation in the appropriate setting. Adaptation provides the perfect means for enacting and accomplishing numerous learning goals. This is best accomplished through a variety of means that aim to draw connections and parallels to familiar matters in the student's environment, showing a similar acceptance and appreciation

for students' culture, and incorporating elements from students' situations as appropriate and available.

For instance, last fall, following the viewing of MetOpera HD LiveStream, I lead students in an activity with Clarifying Character that was intended to check students' understanding of the material and allow for them to dig deeper into their differing levels of knowledge about *Otello*. Building off that, we did an activity with SCAMPER to start exploring alternate envisionments and interpretations of the content and themes to make them more appropriate and applicable to the project group. Through this process, which manipulates and reimagines the familiar, students were provided clear avenues of exploration for potential artistic pieces. Emphasizing the use of variation & adaptation, I encouraged students to envision how they might personally fit into the story and incorporate personal interests in the performance piece (Appendix E). The end result was a joint-choreographic work entitled "Green With ..." that portrayed the many manifestations of jealousy told through the lens of the females in the relationships. Set to pop music and styled with a mix of classical, contemporary, and hip-hop movements, it was very much an updated and accessible derivative adaptation of the traditional tale.

For another example, last spring I created and students performed "Coppelia's Toyshop Revisited" - a 2-part piece which juxtaposed an excerpt of the classical ballet *Coppelia* with a more modern and contemporary infused re-imagining of the tale. Students had expressed interest in performing a "music box" or "ballerina doll" themed piece. This interest was capitalized on to create a linked unit of study and resultant performance piece connecting traditional examples of the concept of dolls in ballet to more modern incarnations. Students learned character appropriate movements in the classical ballet movement vocabulary, then experimented with translating them into more contemporary terms and phrases. Important connections between genres and styles were highlighted. The effect of changing traditional production elements, such as music and lighting, was also explored. In addition, the experience allowed students to re-examine old works in a new light and let their voice be heard in the retelling.



### **Creation of a Distinct Performance**

“There are two ways of being creative. One can sing and dance. Or one can create an environment in which singers and dancers flourish”

~ W. Bennis & P. Ward Bierderman (1997)

### **Holistic Staging**

In my opinion, the original *West Side Story*, and particularly the pre-packaged production materials that accompany a license to perform it, paint the very real issue of racial gang violence with the sparkly brushstrokes of 1950s and 60's showbiz. When considering this show in a 21st century context and an urban high school setting, the glamour paint from that earlier era became an outdated overlay of pointed toes and jazz hands on top of a rough surface of violent reality. In adapting it, the goal was to reach deeper to the core issue of the story and to translate the universal truths of it into a more approachable and meaningful experience and expression for both participant and observer. What had previously been a strict distinction of culturally and visually identifiable racial differences became a precise commentary on the sometimes arbitrary boundaries of territory and the random but deep associations that come with proximity.

While I had already defined a number of specific modifications aligned with the identified goals and intents, it was the students who brought the issue of showbiz simplification to the forefront. Many students' lives had been touched by real gang violence. To them it was a grave, personal issue and the dated, inauthentic depictions bordered on the offensive. Cheerily chassé-ing and jeté-ing across the stage while your turf was invaded or your buddy got beat up was absurd. Similarly, as high schoolers these students were living through a number of the tumultuous, frustrating, and fearful teen passions portrayed in this story – the trials of first love, defiance of authority, social acceptance, and changing identity. Yet, these interactions and social situations with a so-called street vibe were laughable to them when presented with prances and pirouettes. They couldn't take the show or their participation in it seriously in its original incarnation.



The students could appreciate the show for its place in history but struggled to see a place for it in the present or a place for themselves in it. The students' views pushed the production team to think about what gang violence and teen life looked like in a true and contemporary way - to discard the original ideas of obvious racial groups and stereotypical adolescent angst and instead consider more nuanced gang makeups, relationships, and culture along with subtler expressions of teenage emotion and street savvy that more accurately depicted their personal life experience. The production goal became to adapt a well-respected but unrealistic classic musical into a relatable story of timeless conflict between young adults in a modern context.

This adaptation goal was particularly evident in the movement quality of the show. Because the original production was choreographed by the famed Jerome Robbins, the dancing in *West Side Story* is almost always set using the meticulous choreography notation included in the leased production materials. By recreating Robbins stylized movements as accurately as possible, most productions retained the dated "golden-age-of-musicals" glamour of the show whether intentional or not. The decision to change the choreography was the first step in the overall adaptation of the show. Many other updates and alterations followed to sets, costumes, lights, etc.. - which were not the specific focus of this project. With *West Side Story*, though, the choreography was so integral to the show, it in many ways set the tone of the whole production.

The production team had committed to putting on a unique, creatively modern, and authentic rendition of the show. This objective, when revealed to the students, was eagerly embraced. Students were enthusiastic to start exploring alternate variations and interpretations of their characters and why they moved in particular ways in the production. Leveraging personal ownership and message, I encouraged students to envision how they might fit into the story and to experiment with movements that felt comfortable and authentic and could be expressively and effectively employed to tell their stories. I explained and emphasized the use of creative adaptation in this movement-oriented context. Several processes that I had used previously to good effect

were utilized to aid in this, including: clarifying characters and concerns with adapted use of CPS models and tools; and teaching creative process and content together with TIM and CSS. Similarly, SCAMPER – Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put to other use, Eliminate, Replace – was employed in conjunction with study of the original. The questions aligned under the categories of this mnemonic proved fruitful, allowing students to re-examine this iconic work in a new light.

With these tools and strategies, we together reimagined the familiar to make it more appropriate and applicable to the needs of our cast and larger production goals. From all these activities and movement explorations, I distilled and developed dance concepts in combination with both the cast’s generations and the original choreography; I was able to successfully synthesize a distinct movement vocabulary and new signature motifs that would be used to visually tell our version of *West Side Story*. The choreography of this staging of *West Side Story* reflected the cast’s spirit and sensibilities and let their voice be heard in the physical retelling. Through the movements we created, I planned for my student cast to show their individual modernist identity within the larger artistic identity of this iconic show.

### **Individual Choreography**

Like the original, the adaptive movements manifested themselves differently throughout the work, while allowing the production to still have a cohesive feel. Each dance number within the show had its own characteristics. The particular demands and distinguishing features of each vary based on the characters in it, mood of the scene, tone of the song, and overall placement in the arc of the story. Included below are brief breakdowns of three notable samples from my choreography of *West Side Story*.

#### **“Prologue” / “Rumble” -**

The “Prologue” or opening of the show introduces the scene, the basic plot premise, key themes and mood, and the main characters of the rival gangs and the

tension between them all through movement. It is a critically defining moment of the show, as is the other key fight choreography section – the “Rumble.” However, the pointed toes and pirouettes of Robbins heavily ballet-influenced original no longer communicated the authentic seriousness of gang identity and violence. Instead, new movement vocabulary was created to show two groups of ideologically different kids with tough and violent tendencies. Flexed feet in sneakers, clenched fists, and stage fighting were used to lay the foundation for the reality of urban gang life. Qualities of motion were harsher, sharper, and more grounded. Gone were the soaring leaps and swooshing chassés; kicks and leaps when included were low, angular, and aggressive.

Movement motifs were specified to each gang group which complimented each other and came together like puzzle pieces to fill the stage with perfectly fit dance conversations and altercations. The intensity was high and the intricacy of design was extreme; the balance between dance steps and fight moves was exactingly maintained. These numbers were workshopped for an entire month before they were set as students learned to trust and work with their fight partner, to perfect both dance and fight choreography and seamlessly meld them together, and to craft personal improvised character movements that completed down-focus moments of the piece.

**(link provided to see Performance Product Sample 1)**

**<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uzGmAHABemkw4VdMQoMBPvT3ND3Fb2y/viiew?usp=sharing>**

“America” –

“America” in the Robbins production was a moment of mocking and ridicule that coded the Sharks as ethnically different and characterized their low standard of living. In short, it acted as the foil to “Cool” by showing the Sharks as the loose, low-class, trouble-causing foreigners. Furthermore, in the original, “America” was an all-female number which was in alignment with the larger show agenda of giving more attention to the measured masculinity of the Jets gang and the illogical femininity of the Sharks. However, the conscious decision was made here to give equal attention to both

gangs, both genders, both sides. For this reason, the song “America” became a moment of light-hearted frivolity in the aftermath of the tense scene in the gym. In this conscious reimagining of the show, “America” and “Cool” still act as foils, but with the coded class commentary instead showing how different groups of urban youths deal with the same stressful situation. The cultural elements of the song remained but instead of highlighting the borderline offensive lyrics and snarky infighting between the girls, the new staging brought the male Shark members into the number and created a recreational and flirtatious group mentality blowing off steam in their own way. Movements were Latin inspired but influenced by a forced theatricality and a performative bravado as the group teases and shows off for each other. Staccato salsa stomps, arm flairs, and hip flourishes figured prominently in the choreographed steps; the introduced male/female dynamic was strongly played upon.

**(link provided to see Performance Product Sample 2)**

**[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PtJL2xEGKowSGa\\_zB3evcXu55pSkjhVh/view?usp=s\\_haring](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PtJL2xEGKowSGa_zB3evcXu55pSkjhVh/view?usp=s_haring)**

“Cool” –

“Cool” was originally a beatnik-style number that coded the Jets as a more literary and socially affluent gang by belonging to the Kerouac concept of melancholic downtrodden youths who hated society but were not at their core juvenile delinquents. The original movement corresponded to this, incorporating sleek snaps, long slides, and quick pops in a battle to remain aloof and depict a stylistic image of calm under pressure. These movements no longer struck the right tone. In the clime we had created, being “cool” wasn’t about striking a pose or looking the part – it was about personal reactions with possible life or death consequences.

Accordingly, the choreography was adapted to be less dated and more related to the lyric message of the song. The dancing became more social and period a-specific. Rather than being fashionable for the time, there was a strong focus to communicate the importance of keeping your head in crisis and your emotions in check as well as the

difficulty of doing so. Bodies were held rigidly tight, tension evident in every carefully regulated movement, only to then burst into random uncontrolled motions before again recovering. Deceptively slow static moments were alternated with dramatic explosions of energy, and a mix of unison and solo steps combined to portray collective anger and personal frustration. Patterns moved and grouped around the stage - flicking, dropping, hitting, and freezing - as the dancers' movements mimicked the gangs' internal efforts to both maintain and regain emotional control.

**(link provided to see Performance Product Sample 3)**

**[https://drive.google.com/file/d/183n80ZoiTEujQ39UmttZ5h6ar4D2\\_AS7/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/183n80ZoiTEujQ39UmttZ5h6ar4D2_AS7/view?usp=sharing)**

## **Critical Review**

“Creativity is as much a decision about and an attitude toward life as it is a matter of ability.”  
~ R.J. Sternberg (2006, p. 93)

## **Colleague Feedback on Artistic Adaptive Practice at Large**

Having completed the majority of my work on *West Side Story*, it was time for a bit of reflection and feedback. Views on the practice, process, end product, and underlying theory as I presented it were solicited from BAVPA colleagues – some were simply peer arts teachers in the building, whereas others had held roles on the musical production team of *West Side Story* and were thereby more involved and informed of the subject.

Unsurprisingly, the individual whose outlook and understanding aligned most closely with mine was Andrew Kottler, a BAVPA Theatre Arts teacher who served as the director of *West Side Story*. We often find ourselves on the same page when it comes to ideas of innovation and novelty in conjunction with artistic repertoire and identity, especially as it pertains to adaptation, re-staging, and individual re-tellings. Yet, we do have a couple areas where we diverge a bit.

(Edited from a personal communication, April 13, 2016)

Andrew Kottler does not believe there is a single more vital decision in the artistic process than the choosing of a piece. It is especially important when working with a culturally diverse population, and even more important when working with teenagers. The key question then becomes: What choice can we offer to our population that will help them grow artistically and individually? I believe an answer to this is creative adaptation. To a degree, Kottler concurs. As a teacher, he feels process is at least as essential as product. Leave no doubt, product is very important. If the final aim falls anything short of excellence, the process will suffer. But again, teachers are aware of the impact the process can have on a student’s development. How you approach a work will have a different affect. It may not hit the students with the same soul-level “gut punch” a more developed method may offer, and there is the danger of mounting a show that doesn’t have the depth to truly engage them.

Kottler and I share a consistent concern that our students wouldn't be able to enter the "universe" of the production and fully appreciate what the work has to offer. It is the job of arts teachers and directors to help them find connections and relevancy. That's the intensity and beauty of the artistic container creative adaptation can offer. To this point, he was struck by the words of a student cast member of the production who said, "Mr. Kottler, I've found my voice through this show." That's such a layered statement. The impact these experiences have on our students cannot be minimized. For a student to state that he "found his voice" is profound. And indeed, watching this student expand through the process, was exciting for both him and us. When talking about staging, and adapting, and re-telling, the true name of the game is to offer students a container in which they can grow. Everything else is a by-product.

Another point that Kottler stressed is that one should be comfortable "not knowing." Not knowing can be scary, so most folks avoid the hell out of it. They plan a show before rehearsals ever start, or they spend egregious amounts of time trying to decide what to do when the actors/dancers are not present. But, he prefers how Michelangelo worked: *I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free. Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.* Discover is the key word here. Creating performing arts without discovery strikes Kottler as a dead process. Yet, discovery can feel vulnerable. "Knowing" is perceived as a mark of strength and vision and leadership. "Not knowing" can be perceived as confused, weak, and inept. But when one truly engages a piece of art from a perspective of "not-knowing" then you can find innovation. In further support, Kottler offered this quote by Lao Tzu from the Tao Te Ching: *Not-knowing is true knowledge. Presuming to know is a disease.* Great art lives in the world of "not-knowing."

Why bother directing or performing a work of art, if you're not willing to truly engage and wrestle with a piece? That is when creativity is truly applied. Anybody can look at Youtube or watch an iconic production and attempt to copy it. There is no employment of creativity at any level in this activity. It could be considered the equivalent of learning by blind rote. Iconic performances can serve as springboards for our own artistic leaps, but once in the air, the original piece holds no further guidance. How can it? The original piece did not incorporate the students that you are working with, the stage you are working on, the set, etc. There's only one thing to do.....chip away, day after day, and the answers will present themselves. Of course, one can refer back to the original

piece for ideas and guidance, but the only thing that really matters is the piece of clay sitting on the stage in front of you. That's where you will find answers.

In Kottler's opinion, when I stylized movements around our students' abilities and their personalized interpretations of *West Side Story*, I was doing exactly what he is trying to express. I had taken the talents and thoughts of our performers and carved the stagework and choreography around their individuality. What good would resorting to an iconic performance do? Our students' personalization and adaptation were the answer, not anybody's idea of what the scene should look like. Often the answer to what a particular piece "should" look like "re-staged" lies in the present production/cast.

To critics of this opinion, Kottler states that these people are so attached to their sentimental connection to "what was" that they are unable to incorporate "what is." The audience does require clarity of story and character. But for those in the audience who are looking for some kind of memory to be rekindled due to previous experiences with a show, their needs take a backseat to the unique visions of the performers, personal story telling needs of the piece, to the truer intent of the work, and to the overall obligations of the present production. Essentially the question to be asked is: How to reconcile a unique approach with the traditional requirements necessary for a particular show?

Kottler claims that in my adaptive approach to *West Side Story*, I chose to serve my students first, the storytelling -in spirit /intent/ theme- through movement next, and all the other expectations last. Certain signature works have societal expectations and, in some cases, legal demands that the show be done within particular parameters. Yet, at times, it is well worth being open to any interpretations, manipulations, additions, or subtractions from the original show in order to take a reasonably iconic piece in a completely unique direction. It's not just "being unique," though. It's "being true." Our students are at their best and grow the most, when they are able to discover their own way through a piece. They are able to take a personal ownership over their performance that is powerful for audience and actor alike. Doug Zschiegner the Associate Director of Niagara University Theatre Department spoke to Kottler after a performance of *West Side Story*. His quote said it all, "This is West Side Story." He was right. It was ours. We molded it out of our own clay, and it showed.

Nicole Jones, head of the Dance Department at BAVPA, also reflected on the topic of creative adaptation in the educational arts environment. Her comments centered



generally on the balance of innovation and boundaries of integrity when working with artistic repertoire of strong identity, rather than my particular work with *West Side Story* though she had served as an assistant director on the production. However, her thoughts were more conservative and somewhat less than favorable about adaptation.

(Transcribed and edited from personal conversation, April 11, 2016)

The ability to innovate is quite a difficult task for many young students. In order to get a student to be innovative we must supply the tools necessary for them to reach that goal and the models to achieve it. This being a difficult task for many adults, it is not always something that is accepted by students because of the fear of failure that resonates within them. All educators within the field of dance and other arts should teach our students how to explore both innovation and novelty through creating, performing and participating. Jones deeply appreciates the importance of creativity and thoroughly approves of creative practices. She acknowledges that students should be encouraged to explore every angle of their art form; there should be no lesson or idea left unturned.

In Jones' opinion, being innovative and producing novel ideas are most seen when teaching composition or improvisation skills. There is also a time to be innovative when teaching your own original choreography. Learning from our pioneers and forerunners of modern dance is vital in educating a well-rounded artist/dancer and can provide opportunities for creative artistic growth. However, she strongly feels that when recreating or re-mounting the work of said forerunners we must do so accurately. I countered "accuracy" with "authenticity", and questioned her: What about when the work is itself innovative - boundary breaking in its very identity?

Jones responded that showing her students such signature pieces as Alvin Ailey's, *Revelations* has exposed them to just how innovative people have been and can be. *Revelations* and the well-thought-out statement it depicts have become Ailey's master work, synonymous with his name and style. There is a significant story he has told, a significant part of history - not only his history but within the history of modern dance and the world. She firmly believes it would be wrong for somebody else to alter, change, or take credit for his work. The integrity of his piece must remain intact. It must be portrayed just as he wanted it to be. I persisted with a variation of my counterclaim. But what if it is actually the core message of the piece to be relevant, meaningful, and accessible to those viewing and participating in it? And if it no longer is so - it is okay, someone's

responsibility even, to update it in the integrity of the spirit it was created in and intended for? Certainly at least the possibilities of this could be explored in the interest of creative learning?

Jones maintained that even with student experience and learning goals in mind, we must accurately re-stage the works of others. When recreating signature work in an educational setting, it becomes an *étude*. An *étude* is the study of one's works and typically turns into *excerpts* which are small sections of a larger scale piece. In doing this, it is vital to stay true to the choreographers' exact intent of the piece. You must do extensive research on the history of the piece, from the story in which it is being told, the motivation behind it, the precision of the movements, costuming, and sets all the way to the lighting. Not one piece of information or history should be unturned.

As a dance educator, however, Jones did acknowledge that she might alter or change an extremely complicated movement or sequences of movements to compliment the abilities of her students. Knowing the group of dancers' limitations is a non-negotiable; being confident with their skill and performance level is a must; and ensuring they can execute the choreography in ways that still stays true to the original is vital. Any adaptations must be done in this context and so that the movements are as accurate as possible without changing the significance of the piece. Her personal preference, though, is to always stay as true as possible to the original work when re-staging.

It is Jones firm stance that balance and boundaries must be kept in perspective when recreating significant work. We must pay homage to those who came before us and have set such an unyielding playing ground. Yet, the ability to find balance can at times be a challenge. Jones recounts that there have been many times where a study has been completed and her dancers have never been able to perform it in front of an audience because the integrity of the piece was on the line. This caused me to ponder: Could this ever be the case with my adaptive works, like *West Side Story*? Could they be interesting academic exercises and excellent theatrical experiments, but ultimately unperformable because they were too far removed from the originals in visually manifested observation – even if in intent and spirit they were true? And yet, who truly defines or renders judgement of its integrity?

Jones concluded with the opinion that respect for the artists' choices should remain intact; making such choices to change or alter one's work is risky and typically should not be done, but at times is acceptable when teaching. Bottom line, we must not change or alter the choreography so that the integrity of the

piece is lost. As arts educators, we should only be recreating signature/master work as a learning experience. I would argue that creating an adapted version of *West Side Story* was the ultimate learning experience.

The third person I sought feedback from was Alexandra Swonder, a fellow dance teacher at BAVPA. Her response was insightful and fairly middle of the road. She could appreciate some objective benefits to the use of iconic repertoire with adaptation for a student population and an educational experience. She had, in fact, attempted some small-scale application in her classroom. Though she had obvious concerns for respect and integrity, she tended to concentrate on the practical intents and implementation and the incumbent questions these raised. Again, my work with *West Side Story* was not focused on specifically.

(Edited from a personal communication, April 13, 2016)

For Alexandra Swonder, the discussion of this topic begins with why one should learn and perform iconic pieces. Her answers are many. This practice fosters an appreciation for the history of the performing arts and the knowledge of where dance comes from. Significantly to creativity, one can't break the rules or boundaries and move forward with new innovations or choreography until one knows what the original and past works are. I happen to agree with this – you must know and learn about what has already been done, so you can make an informed choice to diverge and support why you are making different, unique choices.

Other reasons Swonder cites are to challenge students' own artistic work and technique. By affording students the opportunity to set higher goals through exposure to master pieces, they may strive to do more challenging works or more challenging parts within them. Such exposure also grants students the knowledge to talk intelligently about dance within collegiate and professional circles. Lastly, participating in a study or performance of an iconic artistic piece gives students pride that they were chosen to do so. The experience creates a sense of community and shared confidence, engendering the idea that students can do what the masters and professionals are doing if they work hard.

Swonder's last rationale point offered an important perspective. It is a very true statement, and an aspect of the adaptive process that I had not deliberately leveraged but tapped into nonetheless in my crafting of the *West Side Story*

adaptation. The cast of the production embarked on this shared vision together with a communal commitment, and the value of the product was greatly heightened. It led to students taking ownership, increasing their arts education exponentially.

Having determined to work with signature repertoire, Swonder states there is then always the thought process as you approach the actual choreography. How does one stay true to the intent of the choreography while working with the technique level of the students? How does one adapt and balance the specifics of the classic repertoire to the students' artistic ability and sensibilities? How does one accommodate educational and situational needs, but not change the material so much that it becomes unrecognizable or less meaningful? Swonder's solution is to stay as true as possible to the original choreography so that students can get the following: a true appreciation for the technique of the piece and the work of a professional level dance; a promotion of personal technique; and an individual relationship with the material. If they view this production now or as an adult in a different theatrical setting, they will be able to recognize the choreography. Students will, therefore, have a personal connection to what they are seeing and ultimately have deeper respect for the dancers and the historical iconicism of the piece within a company's repertoire. From an educational arts perspective, these points are essential in the critical re-staging of a production.

Swonder also addressed the practical motivations of adaptation. These can factor heavily into considerations and choices to change choreography or staging. Chief among these is students' current knowledge and ability. One must take into consideration the strength of the students you have and the confidence level they have to perform the material. According to Swonder, sometimes she has had to change the exact step but still keep true to the movement idea that there is within that work, making the adapted choreography a study of theme and variation. In some ways, the movement adaptation process I utilized in choreographing *West Side Story* was similar.

Another common issue is the number of students one has to work with. How does one get everyone involved and challenged while learning iconic choreography? Can one find ways within the confines of the works to give more students a chance to work on stimulating, meaningful choreography? Related to this is the number of male versus female students and the conspicuous lack of males. How then to use the limited number of men to best effect? And when to re-use the same gentleman? – ie. dual-roles and swings. These are very valid concerns, and Swonder is right to bring them up. I have had to deal with these

same questions and others like them. Thankfully, I have found that creative adaptive practice provides viable answers, both in my classroom choreography projects and in regard to *West Side Story*.

One final practical aspect that Swonder points out is audience engagement. One must know their audience. Will the performed work be too long/short? Is it something the audience will want to see and remain attentive throughout? Is it something that they can appreciate and relate to? Moreover, how does one get non-traditional audience members more interested in the performing arts through classic repertoire? In my work with *West Side Story*, I was more concerned with the cast's participant engagement than the audience's, but it is a plausible motivation for adaptation.

Swonder also brought up more technical matters, such as costuming and lighting. These can be especially challenging on a more limited budget. Key guidelines, in her opinion, are to stay within color pallets and material cuts that complement the iconic repertoire and to use styles that stay true to the intended characters, place, and time. Adjustments may need to be made, though, to accommodate changes in technique or student-related movement demands. Always take into consideration when determining production elements if the students or audience will be able to recognize the similarities if they saw the original material or a professional company perform a straight re-staging of it.

In conclusion, when working with a master work or signature piece of repertoire, Swonder finds it important to incorporate historical relevance as part of the technique lessons associated with the choreography. This includes highlighting: information about plot, theme, and/or inspiration; new innovations introduced and identified with this particular work- such as technical steps, choreographic tools, costumes, sets, lighting, etc.; background data on the choreographer, composer, director, etc.; context of the history and time period of its creation; and visual text and/or images of professionals performing the original. Ultimately, Swonder believes the experience of learning the iconic choreography is invaluable for arts students, even if they may not always be ready to perform it.

### **Conventional Professional Reaction in Specific**

In the scope of this project, a fundamental part of it was orienting the work that I was attempting to do not just within creative studies, adaptation theory, arts education, and musical theater movement but more specifically with regard to *West Side Story* and

its original choreographer Jerome Robbins. My colleague Alexandra Swonder had rightly noted what I was already well familiar with – the necessity of a deep knowledge and strong appreciation of both the piece itself and its place in historical context when working with iconic or signature repertoire. Because of this, I needed to examine the professional standards expected of any production of *West Side Story*, as well as the prevailing attitudes in the discipline towards signature works of Jerome Robbins. Additionally, I needed to closely study the original choreography and background on its creation to gain greater insight into Robbins' initial motivation and intent. All this was essential to better understand the perceived boundaries of precedence and to ensure I made informed decisions to make different, unique choreographic choices with full awareness of the difficulties and disturbances this could provoke.

I include this information here now, out of chronologic order, in comparison to the views of my peers. For while I had received some positive backing from them – pre, thru, and post project - there was little to offer support in the larger professional sphere of dance and musical theater when dealing with the explicit topic of *West Side Story* and Jerome Robbins in conjunction with adaptation. Mention of his 1958 ballet *N.Y. Export: Opus Jazz* with modern changes to it as an example of the negativity associated with alteration to arts pieces had been found in my foundational general research and did not bode well.

“Jerome Robbins was a choreographer of diverse, prolific and complex genius who left a lasting imprint on both musical theater and American ballet. . . . He brought an authentic American style to a European art form and helped to elevate dance in musical theater from pure entertainment unconnected to the story . . . into a vehicle for defining character and advancing the story. . . . He remains best known for *West Side Story*” (Smith, 2012). And rightly so. It has been remarked that “*West Side Story* bears the timeless imprint of an offstage master, Robbins, whose artistic bequest in every way lives on” (Wolf, 1998). This 1957 musical “changed the way we think about how dance can tell a story. . . . [T]he dancing . . . in *West Side Story* it is as essential to the story as the music and the words” (Bloom, 2009). To someone like myself, who was attempting

an ambitious adaptation of this work, such commentary was heady stuff and a fair bit intimidating.

It appeared it was with very good reason that “many Robbins disciples and fans see every step in *West Side Story* as sacred” (Bloom, 2009). Some even went so far as to say that “[i]f you remove Jerome Robbins’s choreography, you lose significant plot, storytelling moments, and you lose characterization elements that are set in the dance. It’s rare that shows have dance as that kind of signature. It’s the emotional glue” (McKneely, as cited in Bloom, 2009). And yet, tinkering with Robbins’ signature choreography of the show was exactly what I was doing in my adaptation driven project. I needed to look more closely at the original and cut through others’ perceptions of it to divine Robbins’ intent.

One could ask, though: What is the original? There have been many iterations of the show in its long history. “There’s 1957 [first Broadway run], then there’s the ’61 movie, then there’s the ’80 [Broadway] revival, then there’s ‘Jerome Robbins’ Broadway,’ then there’s New York City Ballet. So, O.K., all of that is *West Side Story*” (McKneely, as cited in Bloom, 2009). As confusing as all that may seem, the salient point is that “Jerome Robbins was around, and he did all of those versions” (McKneely, as cited in Bloom, 2009). According to my foundational general research, original artists/choreographers have the purveyance to adapt and remodel their own works in any way they choose. Robbins was not uncommon in producing multiple works or re-workings of the same piece that were variations on a theme. Therefore, all these incarnations were included in my study of the choreography. A deep continuity ran through them - exacting steps were executed with pinpoint precision and accuracy; attention to details of movement was meticulously evident; qualities of motion were clearly defined and employed. There was something observably essential to and definitive of *West Side Story*.

This led me to a deeper investigation of Robbins’ intent. Jerome Robbins felt “compelled to create something different” (Bloom, 2009). “[H]e stressed the importance of imagination” in both process and product, and his “results at their best were vibrant,

original dance works that express the essential meaning and magic of theater” (Smith, 2012). Significantly, Robbins questioned “Why can’t we talk about the way we dance today, and how we are?” (as cited in Bloom, 2009). *West Side Story* was his answer. With it he captured a “modernity, urban edge, passion, and inventiveness that took audiences by storm” (Smith, 2012). At its creation, “*West Side Story* no doubt defined a new era of edgy musical cool” (Wolf, 1998). However, I queried if this was still the case today. And if not, shouldn’t it be updated and adapted to be so – alive and culturally relevant to today’s new generation. After all, that was its first best destiny, and what Robbins designed it to be. Arguably, my adaptive choreographic approach to *West Side Story* was merely fulfilling its continued destiny and honoring the spirit of Robbins’ intent.

All this further informed my analysis of critical reviews of recent professional productions of *West Side Story*. The first of these was a 1998 production at Prince Edward Theater, London for which “Jerome Robbins’ original direction and choreography were recreated by Alan Johnson” (Wolf, 1998). A cast member and dance captain of the original 1957 production, Johnson was well-known for his career of continued work with *West Side Story* and his passion to ensure Robbins’ steps weren’t tampered with – re-staging about 25 productions from the 1970s to the present (Smith, 2018). This was of importance given the concepts of “consistent through-line” re-staging recognized in my foundational general research. Within the field of dance, there is a continued commitment to the chain of knowledge and oral traditions that are responsible for preserving and passing down iconic material, thereby ensuring that the essence of certain masterpieces is passed on (Holder, 2013, p.50). Taking Johnson’s role into account, it was assumed that this production, like others he had mounted, was exceedingly faithful in its re-staging.

Unfortunately, no visual images or video clips were locatable for this 1998 show; only a published critique was available. The overall impression of this “physically rather scrappy revival” came “across as depressingly inauthentic” (Wolf, 1998). There was “no revelation” and “little truth to the playing of a book that, to be honest, itself



sometimes seems far more antique than its centuries-old Shakespearean source” (Wolf, 1998). The reviewer noted that “it may be time for a similar shakeup of a no less seminal achievement,” comparing the production to the then recently acclaimed radical revival of *Oklahoma* by Trevor Nunn (Wolf, 1998). While I was heartened by these observations and suggestions in sympathy with my own approach, the commentary concluded that “[t]he dancing is the lone reason to leap for joy in London’s new *West Side Story*” (Wolf, 1998). Clearly, Robbins’ enduring choreography was still in professional favor.

Determined rather than dispirited, I moved on to the second and more weighty example of professional productions under review: the 2009 Broadway revival of *West Side Story*. This show was directed by Arthur Laurents, the author of its original book, and the original choreography was recreated by Joey McKneely (Bloom, 2009). McKneely “worked directly with the choreographer as a dancer in ‘Jerome Robbins’ Broadway’ in 1989” (Bloom, 2009). He had also directed several productions of *West Side Story* over the years. As such, McKneely met the requirements concerned with the previously discussed “consistent through-line” re-staging and was well-suited to helm the movement of this revival. He drew from his own experience dancing numbers from the show like “Cool,” various production film clips, and Alan Johnson’s recognized *West Side Story* choreographic manual (Bloom, 2009). Coupled with Laurents’ presence and the additional involvement of the Jerome Robbins Trust and Foundation, which licenses Robbins’ work and safeguards its legacy, there was good reason to expect this production to be rigidly traditional (Bloom, 2009).

“But for all the efforts to adhere to the original choreography,” the directors claimed that this revival “has also been re-envisioned for today’s audience” (Bloom, 2009). According to Laurents, “You can’t worry about the past. . . . Jerry [Robbins] was very concerned with why they dance. Why they dance in this version is not the same as why they danced in the others. The theater has changed. You have to reflect that in the dancing and it does” (as cited in Bloom, 2009). Specific given examples of modifications include: Spanish lyrics, a younger-than-typical cast, costume alterations,

updated character treatments, and changes to parts of the dances - such as slight adjustments to arm/hand movements in the prologue, more violence in the rape scene, and different stage patterning with some cuts in the second act dream ballet (Bloom, 2009). Contradictorily, Laurents maintained that “the steps are the same . . . the movements are so familiar . . . but what is different is the emotional anger that is under it” (as cited in Bloom, 2009).

To me, this 2009 revival was a study in conflict of artistic concept and actuality. I have seen extensive video clips from this production and had even contemplated incorporating elements into my own work. But, truth be told, it was disappointingly uninteresting. The iconic “snaps, the hunched shoulders, the fist pounding into the palm, a pirouette to the ground, and the straight jump up [with] one leg sideways [and] both arms reaching up” were all there (Bloom, 2009). But, I could not discern any noteworthy distinction in their motivational mood, at least none that was visually appreciable. It lacked authentic energy and urgency; modernity was either absent or contrived; and there was no real passion between performers or connection to the audience. The directors sought to craft a “more realistic show” and “make the production seem more contemporary” (Bloom, 2009). However, they fell far short of it. I intended to learn from their mistakes and more than make up for it with my version of *West Side Story*.



### Concluding Commentary

“Hence, to think creatively, we must be able to look afresh at what we normally take for granted.”  
~ George Kneller (1965)

It has been said that “it may be the particular blessing as well as the curse of *West Side Story* to be greater than any individual interpreters” (Wolf, 1998). Thus, I could comfort myself with the knowledge that regardless or not of project efforts and activities, the essentiality of *West Side Story* would live on; I wasn’t going to ruin it. What I wanted to do, though, was grow it – grow it to connect to a new generation of cast members, grow it to reach to a new audience, grow it to bridge perceived gaps of artistic and demographic disconnect. Robbins intent was always modernity and relevance – movement for the times. What better way to honor that than by updating his classic with fresh movement sensibilities and styles that were more reflective of our current cultural norms? In thought, contemporary professionals may have been approaching this, but in actuality of implementation they were nowhere near the mark. I was ready to take the leap of faith forward – embracing core truths and intents of the work while letting go of the overly emphasized and tightly held physical forms.

And yet, “[e]ven with the direction to let go of past interpretations, the pressure to get Robbins right is immense” (Bloom, 2009). I reassured myself with thoughts of other elements of Robbins’ enduring legacy. “A central theme that runs through Jerome Robbins’ work is the nature of communities” (Smith, 2012). It was also present in his work process. “He instructed members of the corps de ballet to dance as though they were the leads, and stars to dance for each other, not for the audience” (Smith, 2012). This is a mentality that I embraced personally as well as encouraged in my *West Side Story* cast. I feel Robbins would be understanding of the choices I made to promote the experience of it within the cast, capitalize on it in new ways on stage, and update it for modern viewership.

Deviation from an original work needs to be deliberate, as well as well-reasoned and supported in order to garner acceptance. I would argue that mine was all of those.

And still, I can't truly think that industry professionals and Robbins purists would approve of what I accomplished with BAVPA's end-product performance of *West Side Story*. If I am entirely honest, I assume that they would have hated it and me for daring to do it. By way of explanation, I believe that the primary difference in opinions and acceptance levels between my peers and other professionals in the field – even beyond their connected versus removed status to me and my project – is that my peers are seeing it at least partially through the lens of an educator. Adaptation solely for artistic exploration is not wholly accepted, but I had used the position of creative adaptation in an “educational arts setting” with several practically minded provisions to achieve my new vision of *West Side Story*. It would seem that the label of “for educational use” can forgive a multitude of “artistic sins.” Things can be done in the name of education and student learning outcomes that would not normally be tolerated. A continuation of that line of thinking, and perhaps even research to that effect, is for another project though.

Of much greater importance to me is the reaction of those closest to this project – the students who participated in it, the parents and school staff that supported it, and the local community that viewed it. Largely free of professional standards or personal expectations, the audience greatly enjoyed the show; we ran for two straight weekends instead of the usual one, with frequently sold-out houses. The post-production meetings of the adults and other staff involved were full of positive feedback. Most notably, the student cast was happy, fulfilled, and exceedingly proud; they were left with a deep individual understanding and a shared sense of confidence. Moreover, I had completed the task I had set myself: **to generate an extended-length performance product that utilized and embodied identifiable creative adaptation theory and practice representative of a new approach to presenting iconic repertoire in an educational arts setting as shown in my choreography of *West Side Story*. In doing so, I had achieved my goal of demonstrating that purposeful personalized interpretation paired with creative adaptation skills could have dramatic impact on the experience, educational or otherwise.**

### **Comparison to Current Related Performance**

“Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.”  
~ Scott Adams (2013)

### **Temporal Non Sequitur**

Here is where this master’s project would have ended had I completed it on time – documenting and writing up the sundry aspects and activities encompassed by it immediately after I had completed the end-product performance in the late spring of 2016. However, I did not. I chose to look at this not as a failing but as an unplanned fortuitous occurrence. For now, I was able revisit my topic not only with hindsight but with additional current references and resources. Specifically, I investigated how the mainstream performing arts profession’s perceptions and practices had evolved with regard to creative adaption using the continued example of the iconic *West Side Story* and Jerome Robbins signature choreography as seen within it.

Prominent productions of this work mounted in the intervening years were reviewed with an eye to those that had broken from tradition and/or expectation. I discovered a subtle, slow-building trend towards greater adaptive freedom and acceptance, as new choreographers and directors opted for meaningful messages of modernity within the timeless framework of this classic. It would seem that the gap between what can be acceptably achieved in the context of an educational arts setting and the professional commercial arts world have narrowed. While I would like to speculate that the powerful work being done in arts education in some ways sparked this, further investigation would be needed to support such a claim. This examination was brief but with several noteworthy results worth reporting. Published critiques of the productions provided the majority of the information gathered as there were often no video clips and only limited visual images available.

## Contemporary Views & Productions

### 2017 *West Side Story* production performed at the Valley Performing Arts Center / the La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts:

Director Richard Israel and choreographer John Todd attempted to “bring a fresh and more realistic take” to their new production of *West Side Story* (Van Duzer, 2017). In their opinion, everything concerning the original identity of the show was stylized - the stylized slang of the Jets and Sharks, the stylized reality of the semi-surreal scenic design, and the stylized street jazz dance; it was a creational concept (Van Duzer, 2017). Therefore, why not further its continuance. Still, Israel didn’t “approach the show as an iconoclast determined to eradicate the original. He has a healthy admiration for the work” (Van Duzer, 2017). Similarly, Todd was “especially appreciative of what Robbins accomplished with the show,” particularly the “ability to tell a story through movement” (as cited in Van Duzer, 2017). This ability was key to reinvigorating parts of this show as the “story of youthful unrest and racial prejudice” being told was “especially important in today’s political climate” (Van Duzer, 2017). This version was styled “to celebrate our differences and to honor an individual’s choices... the key to creating tolerance and honor in our [contemporary] society” (Todd as cited in Van Duzer, 2017).

While to many Robbins’ iconic choreography has “bec[o]me so much a part of the cultural ethos” that changes to it are unimaginable, this version does make some (Van Duzer, 2017). Notably in the “Prologue” and the “Rumble”, “the dance feels more earthbound. There are more gymnastics and less unison movement. The fighting is more graphic. . . . [at times it] feels almost unchoreographed - messy and brutal” (Van Duzer, 2017). In “America,” the ladies’ only moves led by Anita “are more compressed and, again, more earthbound” (Van Duzer, 2017). Lastly, in “Cool,” which probably “feel[s] the most different, . . . there is much more floor work. Less unison dancing and more acrobatic moves” (Van Duzer, 2017). Additionally, updates in production elements involved a minimalist set with a chain link and brick background - where the original would have used drops and more fully realized interiors - and less colorful, less

deliberately coordinated costuming that felt more like streetwear (Van Duzer, 2017). ~ All these alterations, as well as the general thinking behind them, compared favorably with the adaptations I had made to my version of *West Side Story*.

2018 Guthrie Theater's production of *West Side Story*:

Director Joseph Haj and choreographer Maija Garcia mounted an “inventive new revival of *West Side Story*” (Ignacio, 2018). “[T]he production team does not feel that they are improving on Jerome Robbins, or that their work disparages him. . . . ‘[b]ut there’s a freshness to the production by the virtue of making new choreography for these bodies . . . for this specific production’” (Haj as cited in Ignacio, 2018). A staging notation in the original script describes the Jets as “an anthology of what it means to be American.” This promoted two questions that drove the creating force of this production: “What does it mean to be American today? And what does it mean to dance like one?” (Ignacio, 2018). Haj wanted “to make a production where we could believe the difficulty of these young people’s lives a bit more than we’re typically given to when we see this musical . . . a more dangerous production” (as cited in Ignacio, 2018). Given the signature fusing of movement, music, and storytelling in *West Side Story*, the choreography seemed the place where he and Garcia thought they could shorten the distance between then and now. As “it goes without saying that young people today don’t move, or dance, like they did in the ’50s[,] . . . the Guthrie’s production team chose to craft their own physical language . . . create[ing] a movement world that is rawer, harder in some places, tougher than what the Robbins’ choreography was” (Ignacio, 2018). Robbins work “expresses the young people of the 1950s and the energy of that time,” but Garcia strove in her choreography “to really capture the essence of the core issues of the play today” (as cited in Ignacio, 2018). ~ These were nearly the exact same shared sentiments of my project work with *West Side Story*.

With the approval of the Robbins estate, Garcia “created gritty new dances that give the Jets and Sharks a fresh spin” (Ignacio, 2018). Her choreography is “based on



the idea that everything comes from the inside to the outside of the body” and draws greatly from “her background in Afro-Cuban movement and American jazz” (Ignacio, 2018). The choreography for the two gangs contrasted with each other, with differences in their physicality reflecting those in their socio-cultural identities. “The Sharks enter with a completely grounded sensibility, with just a stunning show of unity and fluidity in their movements, and then right after that the Jets come back and their movement is more electric and explosive and kind of frenetic” (Garcia as cited in Ignacio, 2018).

Garcia’s choreography also made new space for the women of the production.

“Whenever possible García added women into dance numbers that traditionally feature only the male members of the gangs, including the ‘Prologue,’ where in this case women join in portraying members of the Sharks and Jets” (Ignacio, 2018). She likewise worked to make Shark and Jet women essentially sustaining to the fabric of the movement in “America” and “Cool.” ~ The ideas of internal movement motivation, contrasting movement motifs of identity, and increased female engagement all align with principles presented in my *West Side Story* choreography.

Aside from these larger movement concepts, the most distinct piece of individual choreography in this revival show is “Somewhere,” a reimagined classic moment where the Sharks and Jets dance together using milk crates to create a path for Tony and Maria that then becomes an altar, and then a memorial for the couple as the warring gangs come together as a community to build a world for them (Ignacio, 2018). It appears that they were also experimenting with updates to production elements. ~ The general look and tone of the show shows some similarity to mine.

#### 2019 *West Side Story* production performed at Manchester’s Royal Exchange Theatre:

For more than 60 years, mountings of *West Side Story* have followed the philosophy of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” and been obliged to follow in the footsteps of the original (Fisher, 2019). This faithful step-by-step reproduction was fostered by the official choreographic score or manual that accompanies licensed production materials for the show – a “book with absolutely every movement all written out and

diagrams, so detailed and exact. Because everybody who does *West Side Story* uses the same choreography” (Collins as cited in Winship, 2019). “Things are changing, however” (Fisher, 2019).

Director Sarah Frankcom and choreographer Aletta Collins “ditch Jerome Robbins’ choreography” and “sidestep [the] Broadway blueprint” but “keep the stakes high” in their exhilarating 2019 production at Manchester’s Royal Exchange Theatre . . . “that is neither slavish nor disrespectful to the original” despite its re-envisionment (Fisher, 2019). Frankcom “think[s] all great pieces of work need to be reimagined” (as cited in Winship, 2019). Though “[t]he relationship between dance and theatre is really different in 2019” than when Robbins created this master work, “she sees clear parallels with today” that make the material feel fresh (as cited in Winship, 2019). Frankcom worked to make the production look fresh too, with a deliberately unspecific urban setting and taking full advantage of the non-traditional staging in the round. She also provided strong support of Collins’ new choreography.

Collins feels the pressure that comes with the radical act of rewriting Robbins’ steps, which are so well-known and far-reaching that even someone who’d never seen *West Side Story* could impersonate how they dance with signature finger snaps (as cited in Winship, 2019). She “isn’t out to rebel against Robbins for the sake of it,” but “she has found it liberating being freed from the sacred choreographic score” (Winship, 2019). Collins choreography “takes a smart-but-casual approach, honoring the modernist gestures of Robbins while giving leeway to the movements of her assured young ensemble” (Fisher, 2019). She creates “in collaboration with [her] performers,” guiding them “to create their own gestures” (Winship, 2019). With no set personal style, Collins aims “to try to find something that comes out of character and location” (as cited in Winship, 2019). The movement is “bursting with energy, with elements of Latin, street dance and northern soul all coming through in the choreography” that is somewhat different in looks but similar in spirit to the original (Winship, 2019). There are shades of danger, malevolence, and authentic racial tension in their movement and mood, but “[t]here’s still something too wholesome about these inner-city hoodlums”

(Fisher, 2019). ~ The general movement outlines and motivations here are again in sympathy to those I employed in my adaptive work with *West Side Story*, though they were not as deftly defined nor radically realized here as in other reviewed examples. As “a clutch of new *West Side Story*-s are wiping clean the choreographic slate,” I can’t help but be comforted that my master’s project was clearly onto something of future importance in the arts field (Winship, 2019).

#### 2020 Broadway revival of *West Side Story*:

A review of this current incarnation of *West Side Story* raises questions of many holy-grail givens in the dance and theater world. It also might be the final missing piece in my quest for professional comparison to my own *West Side Story* project and definitive contemporary views on creative adaptation in the discipline.

This “is the first Broadway staging to forgo Robbins’s choreography” (Sagolla, 2020). That is a distinction that incited many queries. To start with: “what constitutes a musical’s ‘original’ choreography[?] Is it simply the dance steps? Or is it the decisions to have particular characters dance at particular points in the show – as a break within a song, backed by an ensemble, or for an extended sequence that might be termed a ‘ballet’? Is it the degree to which a show relies on dance to advance the narrative, marking some musicals as ‘dance shows’ and others not? Is choreography defined in terms of its formal elements, the spatial composition it draws upon the stage, or its temporal aspects, the energies generated by the moving bodies?” (Sagolla, 2020). And what about a show whose choreography is built heavily upon improvisation; in this sense “original” choreography may be nothing more than the concept undergirding its making. Since “[m]usical theatre choreography, in short, encompasses everything the dancing contributes to the drama that the music and spoken word do not,” this led to the more pertinent questions: “[J]ust because the characters are moving differently, can this *West Side Story* really be said to be serving up new choreography?” – and because *West Side Story* is revered as a shining exemplar of the integrated use of dance in musical theatre – “[I]f De Keersmaeker’s choreography does much of the same work as

Robbins did” even sans signature choreographic elements, “can we really call it brand new, or is it more properly understood as ‘updated’?” (Sagolla, 2020).

Director Ivo van Hove and choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, both Belgian, clearly had a lot to answer in their re-fashioning of *West Side Story*, a quintessentially American dance musical. But perhaps most interesting was: “[W]hy do you re-stage the musical on Broadway in 2020?” (Portwood, 2020). “Van Hove rarely stages musicals,” but in his opinion, “*West Side Story* seemed to fit the times, since it ‘deals with this world where people don’t listen to each other’s arguments, but just react to each other, and blame each other for what they are missing in life’” (as cited in Soloski, 2020). It was understandable though that the current production team “would want to distance themselves from Robbins to present their own version of this classic” (Kourlas, 2020). “The show is not one that either had seen on stage, though each had watched the 1961 movie version in the 70s or 80s” (Soloski, 2020). Oddly, that neither of the principle production team members had previously watched it on stage is possibly part of why they were able to bring such a fresh approach without the preconceived perceptions or expectations that so many have.

Experimental superstar director, Ivo van Hove is “an outsider who has an uncanny ability to see past the tired tropes of classics and focus on their essence” (Portwood, 2020). Some of *West Side Story*’s new look may be attributed to this and his signature personally preferential style of branding. “Van Hove’s hot-cool, deconstructionist, revisionist aesthetic – with its screens, its mythos, its spare, moody sets, as well as its emphasis on physical and psychological violence – is by now familiar to Broadway” (Soloski, 2020). He “approached *West Side Story* in a typically non-naturalistic style” and “built his production to transcend any particular historical context” (Soloski, 2020). “[V]an Hove’s startlingly contemporary version is not set in the 1950s. Instead it sets out to illuminate the musical’s timeless themes of ethnic prejudice, violence, and love within a present-day cultural” framework (Sagolla, 2020). Van Hove’s idea for a revival had other stipulations as well. “He wanted to portray ‘the America of today’ – which meant casting Latinx actors for the Sharks and black and

white actors for the Jets. He wanted to cast young actors to bring out ‘the raw energy that’s hidden within *West Side Story*’” (van Hove as cited in Soloski, 2020). Van Hove also “insisted on brand-new choreography” (Sagolla, 2020). Related to this, because he “saw the musical as a series of fights . . . where the original had dance-fighting, this [should have] fight-fighting, or ‘organized chaos’ . . . ‘The violence should be really tangible’” (van Hove as cited in Soloski, 2020). It was also because he saw America today as “a much rougher world” (van Hove as cited in Soloski, 2020).

The country looks very different than it did 60 years ago. “[T]he urban youth don’t move like they did on the streets and dance floors of Robbins’ jitterbugging-and-mamboing ’50s America” (Sagolla, 2020). Any new production of *West Side Story* probably should look different too. At least, that’s the philosophy espoused by the revival’s choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker (Mink, 2020). She had “all the respect and admiration . . . for Robbins – without denying that, how do you make a genuinely authentic new reading for the 21st century?” (De Keersmaeker as cited in Mink, 2020). *West Side Story* incorporates a rare story of juvenile delinquency and fatal love together with violence, poverty, identity and exclusion (Soloski, 2020). These ideas “are timeless, but at the same time you want to give them an articulation and a readability that is genuinely us today in a changed world” (De Keersmaeker as cited in Mink, 2020). In much the same way the “bodies of people are the same but also different; people move in a different way today” (De Keersmaeker as cited in Mink, 2020). That is a lot to unpack about and pack into a production, especially when all done with movement only. In this new revival, “[t]he music doesn’t change, the text doesn’t change” (De Keersmaeker as cited in Mink, 2020). “All the movement had to relate to that expression [of story], through a certain emotional logic or through dramatic consequences, which was challenging” (De Keersmaeker as cited in Mink, 2020). That didn’t mean though that dance, theater, and music didn’t all have to fuse together and serve the story.

The scale of this was different from most other projects De Keersmaeker had worked on. The challenge of the bigger structure coupled with issues of identity,

expectation, and even legal ownership of this “American classic” (Mink, 2020). “In fact, Robbins’ choreography [is] copyrighted. . . . the rights to the choreography are licensed separately, and they come with a [choreographic] ‘bible’ delineating the exact movements. While the idea of rewriting that bible can feel almost sacrilegious (not to mention actionable), judicious ‘editing’ has been done in productions over the years” (Sagolla, 2020). “This was an exceptional occasion, because it was the first time [anyone] got permission from the Jerome Robbins estate to write new choreography” (De Keersmaeker as cited in Mink, 2020). Ostensibly, “obtaining the rights to stage the musical without Robbins’ choreography [was a] Broadway first” (Soloski, 2020). All this made De Keersmaeker understandably reluctant, as she acknowledged the enormity of this feat of “going into the lion’s mouth” and “the risk of being roasted” for failure (De Keersmaeker as cited in Mink, 2020). Yet, she embraced it, proclaiming “if I was going to do a musical, I might as well do this one” (De Keersmaeker as cited in Mink, 2020).

According to De Keersmaeker, “[a] choreographer organizes movement in time and in space. [She] love[s] choreography because it is the most direct [means] of embodied abstraction” (DeKeersmaeker as cited in Mink, 2020). “De Keersmaeker is a well-respected contemporary choreographer” (Kourlas, 2020). She is both a an “avant-garde formalist” (Stokes, 2020) and a “brilliant postmodern minimalist” (Sagolla, 2020). “She is not an obvious choice for *West Side Story*,” however members of the revival cast “explained, De Keersmaeker, like Robbins, has a knack for fusing formal movement and everyday gesture” (Stokes, 2020). “De Keersmaeker’s facility in moving groups of bodies around a stage” is also invaluable in a musical like this where “groups are really important” (Sagolla, 2020). Generally, she “designs meticulous, geometric dances that often consist of movements repeated in a loop” (Stokes, 2020). But here because of an infusion of technology to the production and its incumbent demands on the stage space, more is gleaned “of the structure of the dance – its frame – than its interior details. . . . When you can make out the details of her movement . . . its

rippling flow and bodies, seemingly unhampered by bones,” are appreciated (Kourlas, 2020).

For the new choreography of *West Side Story*, De Keersmaecker “wanted to let Bernstein’s music suggest a new physical vocabulary that borrowed from modern, postmodern and occasionally street dance, rather than ballet, to reflect contemporary life” (Soloski, 2020). She played “with gravity and buoyancy in her passages, which borrow from hip-hop, martial arts and house along with her own contemporary vocabulary,” infusing derived styles with her personal sensibilities and those of the performers (Kourlas, 2020). After first exploring them independently and with her professional dance ensemble, the steps of individual numbers in the show were workshopped with the cast so that they could incorporate their own movements while making sure that the dance still told the story (Soloski, 2020). While choreographer Aletta Collins may have joked about Robbins’ finger snaps being in different places in her 2019 revival, cast members in this revival seriously note of their choreography: “the one key difference . . . is the snapping – it’s gone” (Stokes, 2020). To De Keersmaecker, establishing the sweeping stylistic governances of the show are of more concern than subtly spotlighting the gangs’ differing ethnicities through movement. Nonetheless, “the Jets’ movements incorporate house and hip-hop - things that were created in this country,” while the Shark “dances have Afro-Caribbean inflections” (Stokes, 2020). In response to worries about perpetuating Latin stereotypes and the awareness of identify politics, former Miami City Ballet principal Patricia Lucia Delgado, who is also an associate producer, and and Tony-winning choreographer Sergio Trujillo were brought in as dance consultants to help create a more Latinx feel.

Any nostalgic expectations should be immediately discarded after viewing just the first three minutes of the “Prologue” (Weiss, 2020). This is definitely “‘a *West Side Story* for the 21st century’ . . . [s]ongs have been dropped, dance routines booted out and the street-fights look nasty” (van Hove as cited in Soloski, 2020). The stunning minimal set, rain-showered and mist-shrouded effects, and technology savvy lighting and media design fantastically add to its modern appeal. And while it undeniably has

been updated visually on many levels, from a script and staging perspective, it “feels as if it’s actually an adaptation of both the stage musical and the wildly popular 1961 film” (Portwood, 2020). Certainly, the “cast of young dancers and actors in the latest incarnation are recognizable as denizens of the 21st century” (Portwood, 2020). The array of diverse “bodies onstage truly do act out a version of *West Side Story* that more honestly reflects America’s newer generations and the dark realities many face” (Portwood, 2020). Clad in modern streetwear comprised of hoodies, sweatpants, and bomber jackets and accessorized with scars, tattoos, and piercings, they represent the fashion of modernity and the attitude. “Their expressions are hard, their eyes bright . . . their faces . . . too, are tough and sad, prematurely worn down by life” (Weiss, 2020). “The menace onstage is now less joyful and more foreboding. These kids are edgy and sexy, but also look like they want to kick your ass” (Portwood, 2020). This is a somewhat sinister take on an American classic (Mink, 2020).

“De Keersmaeker’s choreography is never less than striking and supports this iteration’s directive to speak to 21st-century audiences” (Sagolla, 2020). It runs the gamut “from the subtle weight shifts of the [P]rologue to the hectic footwork of Dance at the Gym” (Soloski, 2020). Darting and dropping suddenly to the floor level, slicing and sliding forward on the side of their hip, and rolling and shaping their bodies into organic, earthy forms - “De Keersmaeker’s choreography makes meaningful use of floorwork, in direct contrast to Robbins’s balletic loftiness” (Sagolla, 2020). There’s a natural feral grace to the performers’ floorwork, and the audience’s “understanding of their connection to their turf deepens as we see how physically in tune they are with the ground” (Sagolla, 2020). Much of this movement vocabulary is shared by the Jets and the Sharks, as is the incorporated variety of contemporary steps and current street-dance styles seen executed. Though in contrast to precedent which sharply distinguished the two gangs by movement motifs, this “choreographic kinship” reflects van Hove’s diverse casting and revamped story concept in which the Jets are not cast as an all-white gang but include Latinx and African American members, the Sharks are



comprised of diverse-in-color Latinx folks, and both have common points of identity like poverty, exclusion, and violence (Sagolla, 2020).

Though it “may depart from Jerome Robbins’s original steps, . . . De Keersmaeker’s choreography communicates much of the same dramatic content Robbins’s did” (Sagolla, 2020). Specific examples include the Prologue, which “looked succinct and less literal, yet got the job done just as effectively” (Sagolla, 2020). In the “Dance at the Gym”, the essential motions and moods of the scene are there for the gangs to throw-down and show-off with their moves in a neutral space. Though here, “De Keersmaeker appears to be drawing more from Broadway jazz and the showy lifts of Latin ballroom than from the contemporary dance sensibilities informing the kinesthetic world she evokes on the show’s streets for the rest of the musical’s choreography” (Sagolla, 2020). “Gee, Officer Krupke” is no longer played for comic relief. Abandoning its “goofy vaudeville” vibes and accompanying physical shtick, “it’s now smart and chilling . . . it’s a song about abuse and neglect” (Portwood, 2020). “What’s more, the ‘America’ dance – which here includes the Shark men, as in the film version – has changed in a way that should make it more relatable to today’s viewers. . . . [T]he new choreography, while still depicting male-female contention, reflects the more equal terms on which couples now argue” (Sagolla, 2020). Sans aggressively swooping skirts and no longer employing saucy sexiness as their weapon, these pants-wearing women prefer to be fierce rather than flirty as they dispute about the advantages and humiliations of living in New York City in this rowdy, rambunctious song. Another “pivotal moment for this production . . . comes during the song ‘Tonight’” (Portwood, 2020). Daringly staged without the requisite fire escape/balcony or any other set to speak of, this viscerally powerful ensemble number builds from the lone lovers tenderly touching one another on the ground to an erotic tableau of a writhing mass of Jet and Shark bodies pulling Tony and Maria apart (Portwood, 2020).

For all this, one is struck by “how much less of a ‘dance show’ this *West Side Story* is” (Sagolla, 2020). Cast members “walk, posture, glare, shift their weight, turn, change directions, then pick up the pace” (Sagolla, 2020). Through “ingenious use of

traveling wedge formations, each gang shaped loosely into a triangle with their leader at the point, as they circle, stalk, intimidate, and prepare to pounce,” the audience is told all they need to know about the Jets and the Sharks and their tense, turf-war fueled rivalry (Sagolla, 2020). But the truth is, “De Keersmaeker’s choreography is pared-down and marked by a conspicuous absence of technical dance vocabulary” (Sagolla, 2020). Moreover, to meet a significantly shortened running time, this production “eliminated significant dance time, including the extended ‘Somewhere’ dream ballet” (Sagolla, 2020). It has been suggested that the changes “seem to be accommodations to audiences’ dwindling tolerance for drawn-out, choreographic explorations of dramatic themes, in favor of more immediate, symbolic encapsulations of big ideas. . . . If, historically, the original shifted the balance of elements decidedly toward dance as the primary conveyor of the narrative, here a kind of balance seems to be restored among words, music, dance” - with the modern addition of video imagery (Sagolla, 2020). The revival “appears to have relinquished the original choreography’s heavy-duty storytelling responsibilities in favor of pithy movement statements that might be seen as choreographic equivalents of tweets” (Sagolla, 2020). Therefore, though De Keersmaeker’s choreography may seem new in its reflections of contemporary youth culture, it neither fully furthers the role of dance in musical theater nor can it be considered game-changing from a movement perspective alone.

“Reinterpreting a classic generally courts controversy: some audiences prefer such a show to remain a museum piece” (Soloski, 2020). So much so that, it was not unheard of in past practice for choreographers to be fired for proposing that they weren’t going to use Robbins’ work in a re-staging of *West Side Story*. Previously, “to present this seamlessly integrated, revolutionary musical theatre portrayal of teen gang violence without the iconic Robbins choreography was inconceivable” (Sagolla, 2020). As such, “some musical theater purists . . . will reject van Hove’s stunning excavation of this cherished staple,” condemning it for the absence of Jerome Robbins’ anchoring finger snaps and all the other vernacularly stylized street ballet dancing that went with them (Portwood, 2020). Without the original choreography something central was

claimed to be missing - it was “a ghost on the stage. That’s because what Robbins created wasn’t just a series of dances, however peerless, but an overarching view of how, beyond anything else, movement could tell a story. . . . Robbins’s choreography is the true libretto. . . . dancing has always been the true star of *West Side Story*” (Kourlas, 2020). In this revival, though, the choreography is at times rendered “extraneous or, worse, inconsequential” by other elements and “the results can be muddled” (Kourlas, 2020). Here the choreography is part of a larger vision that reduces its power and prominence in the production. The production team’s “desire to get at something bold and contemporary seems at odds with the script’s creaky mentions of ‘buddy boy’ and ‘daddy-o,’” and with “little sustained urgency” the new choreography is not strong enough to support it – it “doesn’t make this reimagined *West Side Story* breathe” (Kourlas, 2020). The revival can be called “gritty” in the cheesiest sense of the word. “It’s posturing,” its forced, and “[i]t doesn’t seem to grasp that it’s important not only how a dancer leaps but how he stands” (Kourlas, 2020). In its over-attention to insignificant details and central action, it greatly neglects the negative space and transitions between that make a show complete. The overall images are “embarrassingly more suited to an Instagram post, which is sad but fitting:” given the amount of tech embedded in it and the social media age in which it was set, “[t]his is an Instagram show” (Kourlas, 2020).

Yet, “[i]f we’re being honest, *West Side Story* has seemed a little out of date for quite a while” (Portwood, 2020). Even at its inception, though met with mostly positive reviews, some critics “such as the highly influential Harold Clurman, thought that it soft-soaped prejudice and teen violence . . . abandoning ‘the pain of a real problem’ for ‘popular showmanship’” (Soloski, 2020). In the subsequent six decades, additional critics have suggested a range of shortcomings such as an overly romantic portrayal of gang warfare, a lack of sensitivity to Latino culture and specificity between the Puerto Rican characters, and a certain tendency toward inappropriate or offensive lyrics. With this in mind, this “revival breaks all the rules for all the right reasons” (Portwood, 2020). “For all his changes, van Hove does not see his own vision as being so different. ‘With elements,

methods, instruments and technical devices that are all around today . . . that's what [he] tried to do – create a new kind of wholeness” (van Hove as cited in Soloski, 2020). “While this *West Side Story* may seem outrageously and dangerously new to some, it hews to the original in other essential ways” (Portwood, 2020). “[I]t will perhaps best be celebrated not as genuinely novel, but as astutely modernized” (Sagolla, 2020).



### Concluding Commentary - Again

“Creativity is the greatest rebellion in existence.”

~ Osho (1999)

Personally, I am greatly appreciative of the revitalizing revival trend and glad to see “directors are rubbing away the patina to show us something a little more real, a little more truthful, and a lot scarier to look at” when viewing a renowned classic American dance musical like *West Side Story* (Portwood, 2020). Unfortunately, due to the closures associated with the pandemic, I was unable to see this show in person or view it in its entirety – though I had planned on it. The new Broadway revival of *West Side Story* opened on February 20, 2020 and was forced to close just a scant three weeks later following the March 12<sup>th</sup> cancellation / postponement of the Broadway season. As such, much of the information about and impressions of it have been based on published reviews from the first week’s performances or in some cases final rehearsals and previews. And yet, for such a short run-time the critical responses were surprising in strength and number, which is something of a statement itself. *West Side Story* inarguably occupies a place of prominence in the pantheon of American musical theatre and undisputedly still commands a certain cache of reverence and respect – regardless of its revival status.

A personal review of the few “sneak peek” interviews and trailer clips available on YouTube clarified and confirmed my understanding of the basic choreographic principles and production elements of the show. Generally speaking: movements had a strong and cohesive contemporary aesthetic – with hard, sharp, angular hits interspersed with more fluid and fashionably casual shifts; performance intensity was high, almost forcedly so, with lots of direct edgy eye-contact towards the audience; costumes were a slightly exaggerated and prettified version of street wear; deceptively “simple” dramatic lighting and color-coded tonal shifts helped to complete the mood. On the surface, for all that separates them, this production and my own 2016 BAVPA production are surprising similar in their modernist identity and visual styling (see Comparison in Still Photography).

Discussions of personal aesthetic preference aside, though - the primary importance of the new Broadway revival of *West Side Story* is its resoundingly public and professionally recognized representation that more and more new choreographers and directors are opting for meaningful messages of modernity within the frameworks of canonized classics. The arrival of this revival center on the Broadway stage marks a progressive transformation in the attitudes and practices of industry professionals towards significant creative adaptation - from stark disapproval, to subtly seen trends, to what might be called a full shift in the treatment of classic works. It seems that seminal works can indeed be updated.

On so many levels, this was tremendously gratifying and validating for me personally and the work I had been doing on the boundaries and benefits of creative adaptation of iconic artistic performance pieces. This production and its creative team tackled issues and fielded critical concerns not unlike those I had explored and addressed in this master's project - both broad questions: What constitutes a musical's "original" choreography? Is it simply the dance steps in certain numbers, or is it the decisions about who dances where, when, how, and why in the larger show? Why does one re-stage? Where is the distinction and proper understanding between "new" and "updated" or "revival" and "revisal"? How does one pay appropriate homage to the original while avoiding subservience? Whom approves or accepts changes made? - and specific decisions: departing from Robbins' choreography while still communicating similar dramatic content; retaining the role of integrated dance as a narrative device in musical theater as established by the original through other changing aspects of the show; refocusing the reflection of the movement on the essence rather than exact step and on the individual person rather than general time/place/style parameters; and even acknowledging that when it comes to *West Side Story*, reinvention and modernity are nothing new. Finally, I was no longer the lone voice or one of the outliers. Significant conversations and performances of an adaptive nature were occurring in the professional commercial sphere with potential of acceptance and productive advantage.

And yet, I felt a fair bit of frustration as well. I was disappointed that there was not more discussion of the means, methods, and integral workings of the creative processes employed to update this work. Neither were there deeper disclosures of adaptive motivation, other than the need to “make it modern” and “reflective of cultural changes.” Notably an independently determined point of shared efficacy in this between my work and the 2020 revival was a collaborative inclusion of the cast in creative choreography – but the fundamental focus of it differed.

The adaptive work I engaged in with *West Side Story* paired purposeful personalized interpretation with deliberate creative problem-solving skills. The choreography we crafted together for this staging reflected the cast’s spirit and sensibilities and let their voice be heard in the physical retelling. In many ways, one of the driving principles of my production was performer impact; it tended to be centered on the experience of the participant with the resultant outcome of a stronger, vital, more compelling, and honestly accessible show for audiences to enjoy. This was by careful design, supported by solid creative adaptation theory. In contrast, the 2020 revival clearly was motivated by and focused on audience impact and engagement; their goal was to create something that viewers would appreciate, relate to, and remain attentive to throughout. Working with the cast on creative decisions served that purpose; authentic connections on the part of cast members was circumstantial coincidence of the need to build a youthful, modern-looking and contemporary-feeling production.

While there was artistic creativity present, there was no deliberate creative practice. Moreover, in issues of adaptation, motivation and intention is a key factor - especially when considering artistic integrity and identity. In my adapted staging of *West Side Story*, I was motivated to reimagine this iconic work to make it more appropriate and applicable in response to the needs of my young, urban cast; their individual modernist identity immeasurably updated the show. In the case of the 2020 revival, the decision was made to update and modernize the production for audience appeal; this shaped all aspects of this show’s staging, casting, choreography, etc. I believe the differences of this can be seen and felt in the productions.



In addition, I'm saddened that this greater acceptance of creative adaptation in the mainstream performing arts professions of dance and musical theater does not seem to be accompanied by greater enlightenment. Yes, adaptation is a form of evolution; but true creativity is at the heart of all adaptation as a practice (Babbage et al., 2010). Noted creative processes take place during adaptation, and there are a number of theoretical and practical creative functions of it (Sherry, 2014). I fear that there are those who have latched onto adaptations' ability to easily influence temporal and cultural relevance - ie. "modernize" - without appreciating the other benefits it brings or acknowledging the greater connected theories and practices of creativity. Perhaps the gap between what can be acceptably achieved in the context of an educational arts setting and the professional commercial arts world have not narrowed that much after all. These recent explorations and attainments of creative adaptation regarding *West Side Story* may not have been so much a merging of shared goals and concerns, as a chance circumstantial overlap.

Ultimately, I do believe that my joint lens as an arts educator and creative studies professional gives me a unique perspective as well as exceptional opportunity for meaningful work on shared subjects. **This master's project is a perfect example. Through the completion of its many phases, I have demonstrated that purposeful personalized interpretation paired with creative adaptation skills can have dramatic impact on the performing arts experience, educational or otherwise.**

### Comparison in Still Photography

(Aligned to left – 2020 Broadway revival of *West Side Story* in pre-production & final rehearsals, Photo Source: Jan Versweyveld in various publications/reviews. Aligned to right – 2016 BAVPA production of *West Side Story*, Photos from BAVPA Communication Dept.)









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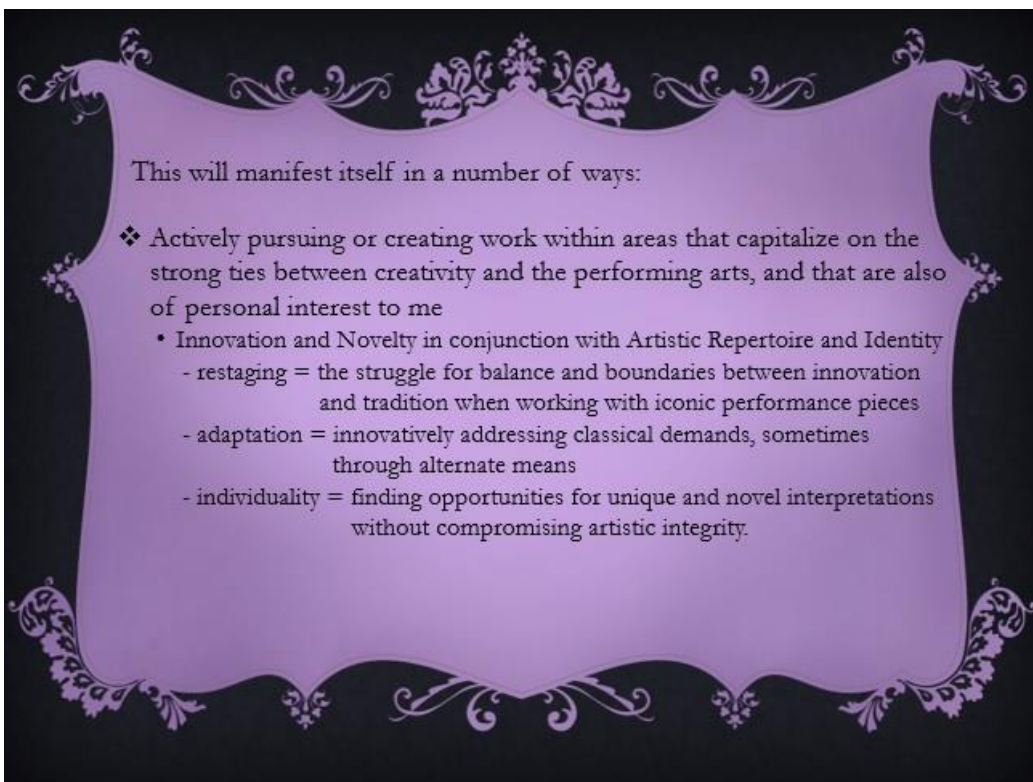
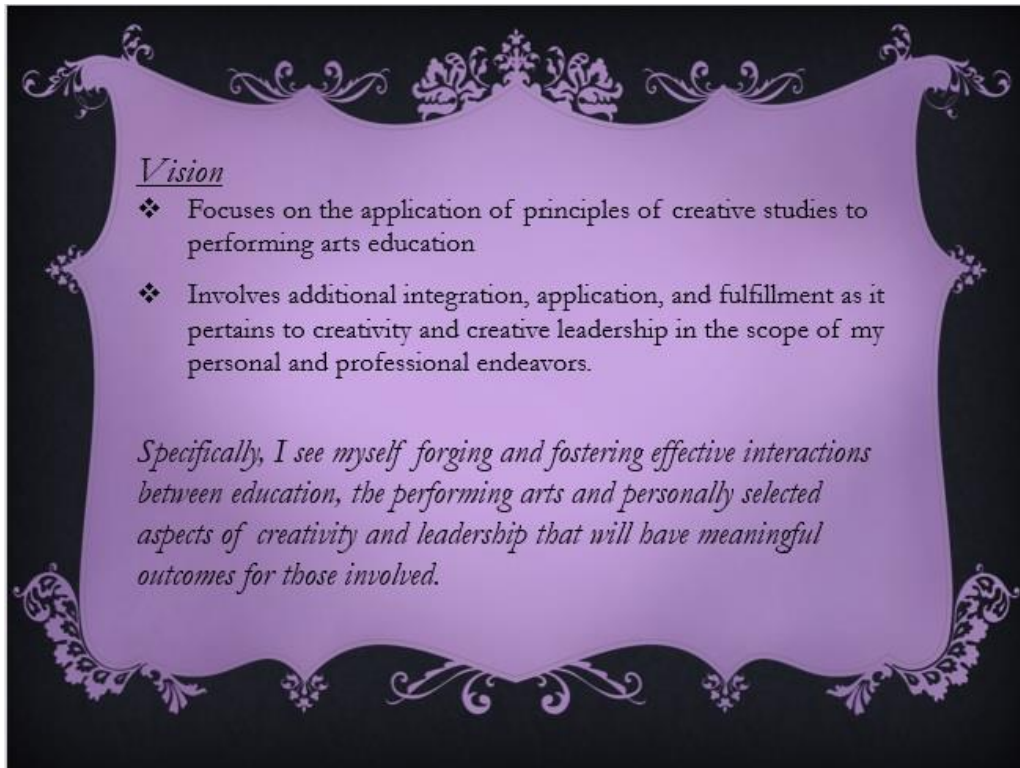
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Appendix A: Excerpt from “Personal Vision Statement” – CRS 635



**Appendix B: Letter of Posting – Choreographer for *West Side Story*, BAVPA**



**Buffalo Academy for Visual and Performing Arts**

450 Masten Avenue Buffalo, NY 14203

ph: 716-816-4220 fax: 716-888-7136

<http://www.buffaloschools.org/BAVPA.cfm>

Jody Covington  
Principal

Rebecca Ryan  
Assistant Principal

Jonathon Welko  
Assistant Principal

Chris P. George  
Arts Coordinator

**POSTING**

**POSITION:** Buffalo Academy for Visual and Performing Arts is interested in receiving applications from qualified candidates for the position of **Choreographer** with the familiarity of theatre and experience in choreographing students in a production for the high school musical, **WEST SIDE STORY**.

Show dates: Thursday, March 10, Friday, March 11, Saturday, March 12,  
Thursday, March 17 and Friday, March 18, 2016.

**QUALIFICATIONS:** Candidates must hold a New York State permanent certification and be currently employed with the Buffalo Public Schools as a tenured teacher, able to utilize a theatrical script, have experience in choreographing students in a high school production, and proficient in theatrical terminology and stagecraft.

**DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES:** Candidates will be responsible for working directly with the students to choreograph dance numbers and run separate rehearsals with small groups of students while the Director is concentrating on the larger picture. The candidate will need to be available each day after school as designated by the Director and be committed to be on hand at all scheduled shows, if needed.

**Choreographer**

**Choreographer Service Hours: approx. 50 hours**

**APPLICATION:** Interested Candidates must submit a letter of interest which specifies professional qualifications to the Principal of BAVPA.

**APPOINTMENT:** Appointment will be made by the Principal following assessment of experience, credentials, qualifications, and evaluation of service.

**SALARY:** Teacher's salary schedule based on specified hours.

**FINAL DATE FOR FILING: November 30, 2015**

The Buffalo Public School District does not discriminate on the basis of an individual's actual or perceived race, color, creed, religion, religious practice, national origin, ethnic group, sex (including sexual harassment and sexual violence), gender identity, sexual orientation (the term "sexual orientation" means heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, or asexuality), political affiliation, age, marital status, military status, veteran status, disability, weight, domestic violence victim status, arrest or conviction record, genetic information or any other basis prohibited by New York state and/or federal non-discrimination laws in its programs and activities and provides equal access to the Big South and other designated youth groups. Inquiries regarding the District's non-discrimination policies should be directed to [HR@buffaloschools.org](mailto:HR@buffaloschools.org) or to:

Wendy J. Lawrence, Deputy Chief of Talent Management  
721 City Hall Square, 10th Floor (716) 816-2277

**JODY COVINGTON, PRINCIPAL OF BAVPA**

**DR. KRISTEN BARR, SUPERINTENDENT**

*Celebrating over 30 years of excellence in Arts and Academics*



**Appendix C: Excerpt from CRS Ind. Study – Applied tools & strategies of Creativity in the production of a musical**

**1. Checking, Changing, and Cultivating Creativity in the Musical - An analysis of the 4 P's of creativity as they present in this situation**

The previous director had held this position for over a decade. It is my belief that many of the processes, people, presses, and products involved were not as effective as they could be and this had led to a substantial lessening and perhaps even stagnation of creativity. I wished to address this and bring the idea of checking, changing, and cultivating greater creativity in the musical to the attention of those involved, namely the creative team and cast.

To do this, I initiated a Brainstorming session with all invested parties. Beginning with the question – H2 improve the musical this year?, I used the Stick-em Up Brainstorming to solicit responses. We briefly reviewed the collected answers as a group, and I asked them to Highlight some hits that they thought were particularly important. I told the group that I would review the totaled ideas more closely and get back to them with potential plans and/or topics for further discussion.

When I reviewed the ideas on my own, I employed a re-clustering and hits strategy of my own, arranging the generated ideas into clusters according to the 4 P's of creativity: Person, Process, Product, and Press. After identifying and reviewing which P's the ideas most closely aligned with, I analyzed which of these areas were most heavily represented and which could be most easily effected. My plan was to design a production model that would specifically addresses shortcomings and weaknesses. Then I would enact this model for the current production season, making significant changes to the appropriate areas in the hope of fostering and cultivating a more creatively productive experience. I met with my creative team and shared by findings, my methodology behind them, and potential plans for improvement. The reactions were mixed, and based on this on I decided to not share with the cast as well, but keep this as a working discussion and guideline for the teams' decisions and directions this season. As of this time, only a few of the proposed changes have been made. While I am disappointed this was not better received, I still feel it was a positive and productive application of learned creative studies.



**2. CPS Tools applied to the Audition Process - Casting with Card Sort**

Having worked on numerous productions in the past, I know that the audition and casting process can be incredibly difficult. The concerns and decision involved are many. As such, I aimed to bring CPS tools into the process to help my casting team to be fair and conscientious in as easy a way as possible. In particular, I employed an adapted version of the tool CardSort. Firstly, we used photos of the auditioning students to work through casting the leads. We narrowed the potential candidates for each role, then alternatively ranked the students most ideal to least ideal for each role. There was some overlap between several roles, such as the same student being ranked most ideal for two roles, in which case the second choice was moved up on this basis. Although it took some explaining for my casting team members to understand the process, it worked exceptionally well and allowed us to make large scale casting decisions in an organized and precise manner.

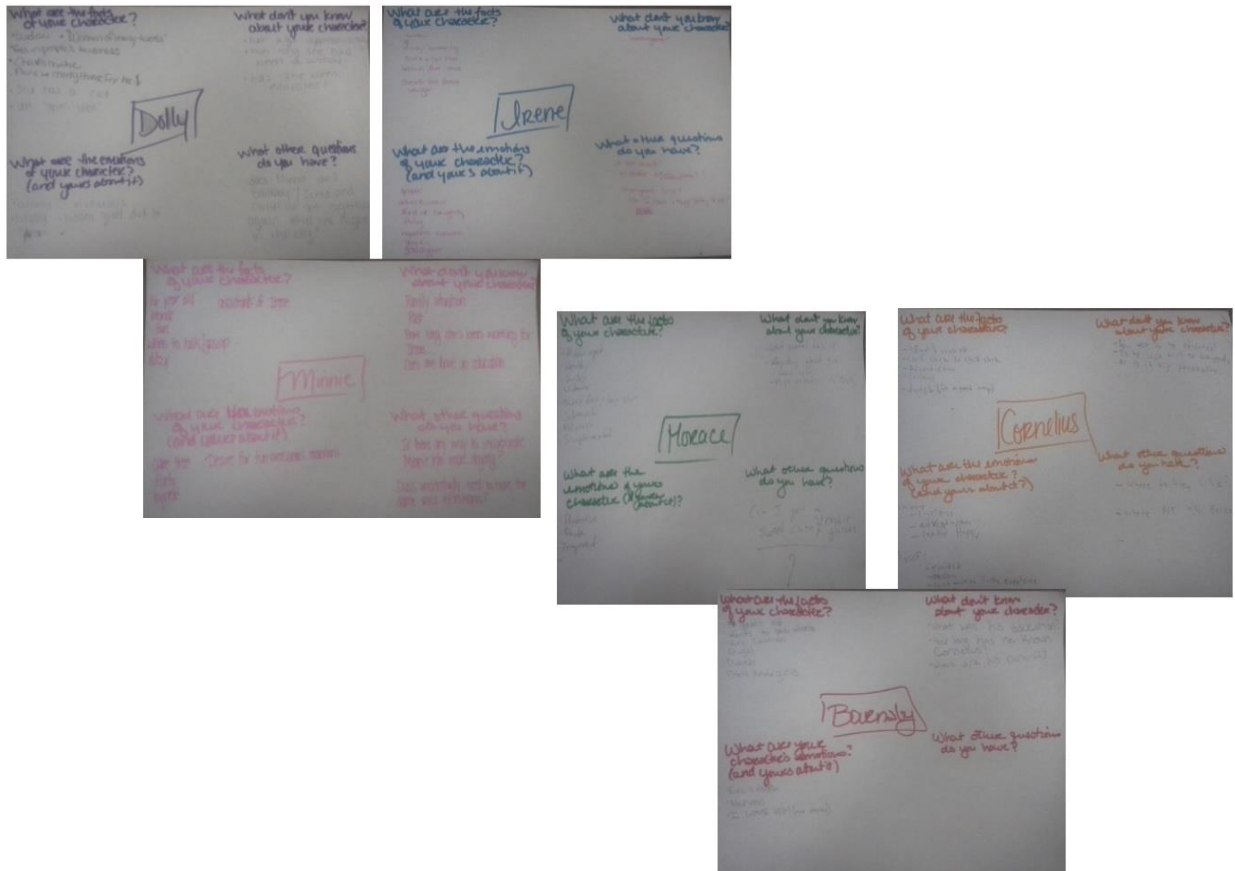
After the leads were cast, we wrote the remaining auditioners' names on Post-its and laid out the chorus groupings we were looking to make. We used an adapted version of Highlighting and clustering to place the students into small chorus and dance groups based on attributes and skill levels. This simplified what might have been a daunting process.



**3. Clarifying Characters & Concerns - Adapted use of CPS models and tools to this task**

As I began work on this production, I realized that there was a centrally shared theme in both creative studies and the performing arts: being prepared. It can make or break the experience and affect the general perception of CPS, and it can certainly make or break an actor’s/singer’s/dancer’s performance. I also realized that in both instances “being prepared” is more than just having the materials and/or skills prepped and ready. A firm understanding of the concerns, surrounding situations, and processes to follow is necessary. Furthermore, it is most helpful when this is addressed early-on. One needs to begin the proceeding by Assessing the Situation and Clarifying. This being the case, I was able to adapt a Pre-Process Client Interview worksheet and graphic organizer that I had developed for use in facilitation of the CPS model to have the student performers with lead parts do preliminary character data-gathering and development work.

More specifically, using Clarifying Tool Card 2a as a jumping off point, I came up with a method of delving deeper into the data gathering practice at the start of the CPS process, which in this application referred to character research before the production process began. By breaking the broad term “data” into four different yet related headings – “Facts, Perceptions, Emotions, Gaps” - one is forced to consider and take into account a number of differing angles and facets. Under each heading, several questions are posed and answered in distinct short-answer format. When this information is presented with the accompanying graphic organizer, it affords the clearest and fullest picture of the surrounding situation, or in this case character, before beginning the CPS process, or the production and performance process as it may be. With this tool, not only is one discovering facts but one is discovering new ways of thinking about them. The students and I found it to be very helpful.





**4. CPS Tools applied to Stage Plots, Choreography and Costuming**

The logistical problems that must be solved when creating stage plots and choreographic formations for a large production are myriad and complex. As with casting, I endeavored to adapt and utilize elements of CPS and its tools to aid in the process. With casting done, I worked with my choreographer to develop formations and stage plots for the large ensemble numbers. We again employed Post-its as a flexible means by which to cluster and organize students into appropriate formations. We repeated this process for each grouping of the ensemble for each musical number. While the process was time consuming, it was far less time consuming than it could have been had we not employed the CPS tools. When each group was individually ordered, they were then plotted onto a stage sketch in order to get an image of the whole scene.

Similar to the way that I employed highlighting and clustering for casting and choreography, I also worked with my Costume Mistress to develop a cohesive costume plan. We again put each student's name on a Post-its and used images and swatches of fabric as well as period costume images to make a costume plan for each member of the cast based on their chorus ensemble groups and their formations for choreography.



### 5. Teaching Creative Process and Creative Content Together to my Cast

Last year the musical program graduated a large number of talented seniors leaving this year's cast to be mostly young and untried. As such, I approached this production season from a very educational perspective, trying to teach these students about process and training them in theatrical skill, not just putting on a production. This is important as it will help the potential-filled cast develop into the best performers they can be.

Toward this end, I endeavored to teach both creative process and content to the students to create a more enriching experience and aid them in their development as creative individuals and performing artists. In doing so, I drew heavily upon the Torrance Incubation Model (TIM). I developed rehearsal plans in a TIM format – adapted mini-lesson plans with linked process and content goals. Below are a few of the most successful:

Process Goal: To “Look At It Another Way”

paired with

Content Goals: Stage Direction and Vocabulary/Sight Lines and House Parameters

- This young cast needed all the basics regarding stage craft, from the simple – which side of the stage is “right”- to the more complex – how to “cheat out” so your actions and emotions still play to the whole house.
- Encouraging the performers to see this from different perspectives, both literally and metaphorically, aided in their understanding.

Process Goal: To “Keep It Open & Be Flexible”

paired with

Content Goals: Characteristics and Procedures of Productive Rehearsals

- The young actors need to continue working and reworking the material they are responsible for. Just because you've already done it or it is “done” is not a reason to avoid doing it again.
- Once is never enough, we need to keep trying new ideas and experimenting with material. You never know when you will hit upon just the right thing
- Having understudies run the material too helps keep the cast open to other options as well

Process Goal: To “Let Humor Flow and Use it”

paired with

Content Goals: How to Respond to On-stage Oops and Bloopers Moments/ How to Move Past Them or Incorporate Them into Performance

- Mistakes can be awkward, but sometimes the best ideas come from the resolution of or recovery from these mess-ups.
- Young performers need to learn to appreciate these happy accidents. They can't be afraid to

make mistakes.

- Being able to laugh at yourself, loosen up, and go with the flow is essential to successful scenework.
- For example, our student playing Minnie Fay accidentally said “In order to form a more perfect human” instead of “more perfect union.” Everyone was laughing so hard that we decided to go with the mistake and keep it. We made the staging work so that she could wink at her love interest as she said it.

Process Goal: To “Break Through – Expand the Boundaries”

paired with

Content Goals: Use of Audience Interaction and Expanded Playable Space

- Our production uses a catwalk out into the audience. Actors also enter and exit from the audience, interacting with them along the way – the Parade, Dolly passing out her business cards, etc.
- All this is nontraditional. It is literally breaking the physical boundaries of the stage space, but it took a similar breaking of mental boundaries to arrive at such a creative staging decision.
- I modeled this and urged the cast to expand both their creative thinking and actions in similar ways.
- giving them experiences working with several different counterparts

Process Goal: To “Put Your Ideas into Context”

paired with

Content Goals: Putting Small Pieces of the Show Together into the Larger Sequence of the Full Production

- It is important to teach young performers their individual importance, but also show their collaborative role in the larger framework.
- Running full scenes – leads have been working individually with vocal and dialogue coaches, now they must work together to do a whole scene
- Running full acts – dancers and chorus has been rehearsing separately from leading actor, now everyone works together and sees where their pieces combine and the flow of scenes through the act
- Run through the whole show – pit and stage crew now join in as well and everything is put into full sequence

Appendix D: Excerpted PowerPoint slides - Artistic vs. Deliberate Creativity

**Artistic and Deliberate Creativity**

by Howard Gardner, Ph.D. and Teresa M. Amabile, Ph.D.

**Deliberate Creativity**

**Artistic Creativity**

**Deliberate Creativity**

**Using Deliberate Creativity in Artistic Practice**

Artists need deliberate creativity and not randomly creative.

All 97% of the Harvard students used an office of inventing original ideas. These ideas were mostly to illustrate classroom activities.

**Product**



**Appendix E:** Excerpted examples of Arts classroom practice with Creativity

Participants: Mixed gender group of 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> graders who have committed to the Met Opera HD Live Stream project; 13 students comprised of five 10<sup>th</sup> graders (4 girls, 1 boy), seven 9<sup>th</sup> graders (6 girls, 1 boy), and one 8<sup>th</sup> grader (girl).

Date: **10/21/2015**, 10/23/2015

Activity Name: **Clarifying Characters (3A)**, *SCAMPER (3B)*

Tools Used: **Self-Generated Data Gathering Worksheet** (adapted for artistic use as previously used in independent study project), *SCAMPER*

Environment: BAVPA studio classroom #197 – my fulltime room where students regularly meet for class. My room is equipped with a whiteboard which I used with Expo markers instead of a flipchart for activities.

Situation: The MetOpera HD LiveStream is an afterschool activity in conjunction with BAVPA’s music department. Students learn background information about a selected opera. They then field trip to see a live streamed presentation of said opera at a local movie theatre. Students then work to generate an original artistic piece using music, imagery, and/or themes from the opera. The work will hopefully be included in school productions throughout the year. This year’s select opera is *Otello*. Students saw the live-streamed opera performance on Saturday, October 17.

A number of these students have modest exposure to creativity tools as they were a part of classes or after school projects in which I began experimenting and introducing basic creativity ideas and tools. As such, I felt comfortable introducing additional skills and tools with this group.

**Following the opera viewing, we did an activity with Clarifying Character that was intended to check students’ understanding of the material and allow for them to dig deeper into their differing levels of knowledge about *Otello*.**

*Building off that, we did an activity with SCAMPER. After clarifying some of the essential features of the Otello, namely the characters, we were ready to start exploring alternate envisionments and interpretations of the content and themes to make them more appropriate and applicable to the project group.*

PPCo

Pluses:

- Successfully clarified characteristics of main characters
- Gave chances for all students to contribute
- Gave students different methods alternate methods of communicating/contributing
- Let students take lead and feel ownership – student centered learning
- Assessed students’ comprehension of what they viewed
- Assessed students’ background knowledge
- Highlighted the overlap and gaps between the two
- **Helped students focus on main characters**
- **Helped students better understand the main characters**
- Review basic tools and skills
- **Practiced basic tool (i.e. Stick’em Up Brainstorming) with expanded application to other tasks**
- **Get students excited about characters**
- **More interested because characters are more relatable**
- **Better understood the plot because they better understood the players**
- Encouraged divergent thinking
- *Tied into another creativity skills – looking at things a different way*

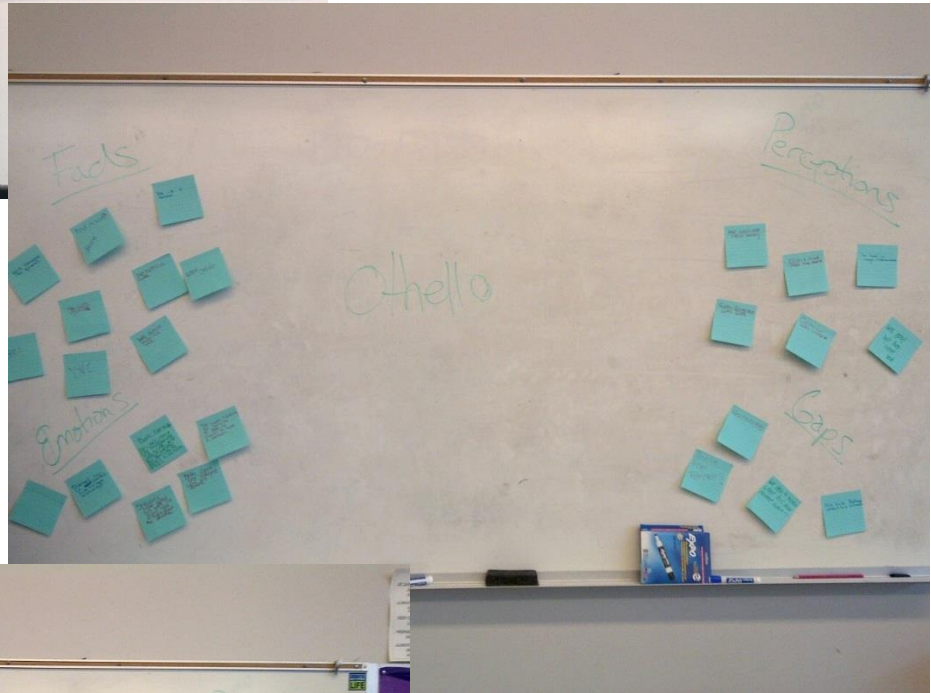
- Smoothed out the logistical elements of facilitating such practices
- Having a mix of student/teacher leadership was successful
- Showed students the value of collaboration
- Functioned as a starting point for students’ creative work with the opera
- **Reused a previously adapted tool in a different setting**
- *Used activity I had only previously used on my own in a group*
- *Manipulates & reimagines the familiar*
- *Emphasizes the use of variation & adaptation*
- *Expands the focus from characters to other story elements*
- Capitalizes on the extra-curricular commitment of students
- Greater freedom of classroom management

Potentials

- Built groundwork for further incorporation of creativity tools and practices
- Presented opportunity for exploring more of the content/process duality in TIM based lessons
- Offered opportunities to addresses gaps in learning/comprehension
- Presented opportunity to deeper understanding of themes and complex story elements.
- Provides avenues of exploration for potential artistic pieces
- Provided lead ins to cross-curricular learnings
- **Began to envision themselves as the characters**
- *Began to envision how they might personally fit into the story and incorporate personal interests*

<b>Concerns</b>	<b>Overcoming</b>
Varying knowledge base with regards to specific opera – not all students were able to attend the field trip so they do not have firsthand exposure	Appointing student “experts” who did attend the field trip to share out specific knowledge, be a reference guide, etc. Pause the creative process as needed to clarifying knowledge and correcting opera content as they arise
Varying knowledge base with regards to ballet – the mixed level grouping means that some students have more experience and technique than others	Appointing dance captains to aid in teaching of choreography/unfamiliar dance vocab/steps. Pause the creative process as needed to clarifying technique and presentation questions as they arise
It is good for group dynamics to have differing levels of knowledge but it is my concern that it will lead to some students dominating the experience and others feeling excluded.	
Material outside their dance specific domain is included – incorporating and interacting with other areas like music and theatre are integral to this project	More in-process collaboration with other departments – joint lessons, shared rehearsal time, etc.
Larger role of the facilitator due to aforementioned concerns – taking away from the student-centered model	Focus more on management skills instead of directing. Create effective prompts that lead students to more productive use of tools.
Excessive amount of pauses will break flow of process and inhibit creativity	Look for ways to pre-segment the process and tasks in ways that allows for and anticipate the need for additional explanation and knowledge clarification.
<i>Struggle to distinguish between the verbs – the sometimes subtle differences between these words seemed to equate to “change” in general to some students</i>	<i>Facilitator being better prepared with definitions and examples removed from specific content. Employing flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity as tools for dealing with overlap</i>

3A





3B



**Charlie Character Worksheet**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Project / Piece: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Character: \_\_\_\_\_

**Step 1:** Generate short answers to questions in each of the following groups and write them in the appropriate space on the graphic organizer. Indicate the dominant point under this heading (optional).

**What are the Facts about this character?**  
 (Focus on research, experience, and concrete information)

- Who is this character?
- What is his/her role in the work?
- What are some of his/her major actions (events/experiences)?
- When do these actions occur in the course of the work?
- Where? (Who, who are these actions staged?)
- Why do these actions occur?

**What are your Perceptions of the character?**  
 (Focus on scenes, incidents, and moments)

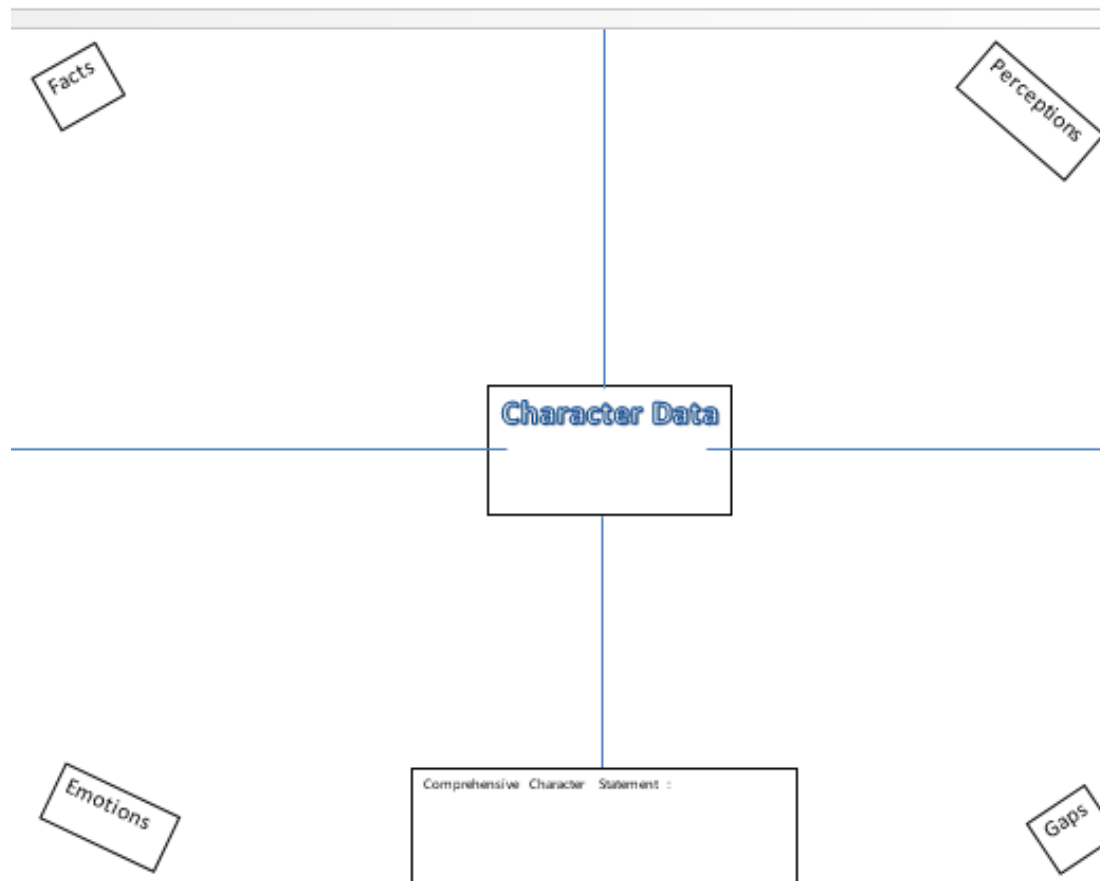
- What do you sense about this character?
- How do you sense others respond to and interact with this character?
- What does your intuition tell you about his/her actions?
- Do you have any hunches about his/her motivations?

**What are your Emotions related to the character?**  
 (Focus on feelings and values)

- How do you feel about this character?
- What are the causes of your feelings?
- Are your feelings affecting your behavior?
- How can you use your emotions positively?
- Do your values affect your understanding of the character?

**What are the Gaps in your knowledge of this character?**  
 (Focus on questions, unknowns, and certainties)

- What questions do you have?
- What are you still curious about?
- What do you still need to find out?



**Step 2:** Review the variety of answers “character data,” “Character statement,” or any combination of them, into a “character statement,” and write it in the appropriate section of the graphic organizer. Or select one statement, which most exemplifies and best embodies the character and write it as a “character statement” in the appropriate section.