

Honors College Senior Capstone Reflection – “In Conversation with ‘Landscapes’”
Karolina Klatka
Department of Theater and Dance
May 20, 2020

Introduction:

“Landscapes” is an original piece of work created for the Intermediate Composition dance class final project. The piece was soon accompanied by an in depth reflection and explanation of the dance piece, entitled “In Conversation with ‘Landscapes’”. Though similar and including many overlapping elements, “In Conversation with ‘Landscapes’” delves deeper than the surface image. The piece asks me, the choreographer and creator, how and why I made the choices I did, what I learned from the experience, and how I hope to apply this piece in future endeavors. Included is a synthesis of the physical material gathered, but also an exploration of the mental and emotional connections created throughout the process. This second piece is interesting in that it displays the original choreography while also expanding upon minute details and offering descriptive explanations to answer viewers’ questions.

The creative vision for “In Conversation with ‘Landscapes’” stemmed from my years involved in two directions of study: Dance and Environmental Science. My studies in Environmental Science have provided critical experience in conservation strategies. Additionally, my journey through dance now and in the years leading up to an undergraduate education have shaped my desire for technical structure and growth in choreographic techniques. Joining these two ideas produced an outdoor dance project with extensive representation of vast and bold landscapes, fine-tuned videographic structure, and an attention to detail within dancing.

The first piece, titled “Landscapes”, brings together these two thought processes in a cohesive work of art. I am the only “performer” visible, though I could argue that my brother, Pawel, is also performing as the camera operator. The second and more descriptive piece also brings multiple forms of media into the picture. The new layer includes pieces of an interview, providing explanation to give the viewer context. The music, “Twentytwo Fourteen” by The Album Leaf, fades in and out, providing an essential backdrop. The entirety of the piece was filmed within 100 miles or less from my parents’ home in Rock Springs, Wyoming over the course of two weeks. The final product is about ten and a half minutes long and accurately represents the variety of landscapes and ecosystems that make up the southern corner of the state of Wyoming.

Inspiration and Process:

During the summer of 2018, I spent three months interning and living in beautiful landscapes – the Tetons. The Tetons are an obviously spectacular view, but Teton Valley itself on the back side of the Tetons provided a source of inspiration and tranquility within me daily. Before my summer internship, my knowledge concerning Teton Valley was non-existent. Confined to memory, I only knew of the classic and “traditional” look of the Tetons from Jackson Hole. As a result of living in Teton Valley, I learned that unexpected places many times provided the most stunning landscapes. Upon summer’s end, I was sad to leave but promised myself that I would continue to explore underappreciated landscapes, places that were still unknown to me and possibly to many others. This project exemplifies this statement, as I walk and dance through environments of previously underappreciated areas or unfamiliar locations.

The bulk of the challenge initially rested in making sure that my choreography and performance were compelling enough to fully attract the attention of the audience. I would

demonstrate my ability to dance in many settings, all of which were public or private lands that were thankfully accessible to me because of the open space in Wyoming.

I started simply, with a short phrase I had choreographed and an evening in the desert hills near Rock Springs. This first session was helpful because it gave me insight into what my dancing looked like through a screen. Though I used only one or two of these film pieces, their role in the project was necessary, sparking my decision to change the choreography as well as my costume decisions. After returning to a studio space and deciding upon a new choreographic direction, I was ready to embrace a new environment. My brother and I spent mornings and evenings scouting out diverse landscapes in the vicinity of Rock Springs.

Over time, and as suggested by peers and advisors, the piece evolved. I opened my mind to new perspectives of filming and new tools as a choreographer. I was influenced by some of the projects we had done in the Intermediate Composition course, such as creating a “No Manifesto” (a term coined by Yvonne Rainer), and allowing artwork on campus to inspire me. I looked up natural color palettes and took photos as I went on hikes and walks in early Spring. I was also heavily influenced by the scenery I was taking in, by my trials and errors to dance barefoot and in variations of my own clothing, and by the accessibility to varied environments. This resulted in largely positive scenarios and interactions with the landscape. In the end, I realized my plans for choreography and composition, creating a compelling and very full dance work that moved well in response to each landscape.

An additional challenge included the process of the videography. Laramie provided an abundance of connections with dancers, theatre students, and other artists that I knew well who could help me with the filming process. Due to the closing of the university, I returned to Rock Springs for some time just as many other students moved home. It was necessary still to find someone who could understand my artistic decisions, sacrifice time in the evenings to film, and whom I trusted with one of my prize possessions, my camera. Fortunately, my brother stepped in to help and the process became more than a rush to finish a project. It also became a way for me to spend time with my brother who is usually in Annapolis, Maryland at a military college.

Once this piece of the videography challenge was settled, I became aware of the complexity of dance on camera. In order to make the viewer see the entire scene and feel as if her/she is present, it was necessary to film from various points of view. With each new location, my brother and I became more confident in finding these angles, and we challenged ourselves to produce as many different shots within the same location as possible. We also utilized suggestions from mentors and peers, including zooming in and out on the dancing, and zooming in on specific body parts such as hands or feet, giving the viewer a perspective he/she would not usually have in a typical theater setting. This was a crucial part of the process and became even more important during the editing.

Another unexpected challenge included finding the “right” locations for filming with proper lighting. Working with outdoor lighting meant we were limited by the hours of the sun, filming only at sunrise or sunset. This produced the most expressive and interesting shots, but severely shortened the hours in the day we had for filming. In the end it was rewarding to see how we were able to capture landscapes bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun.

I also wanted to keep man-made structures, such as roads and powerlines, out of the picture. This meant we usually had to hike into places or video very carefully, in some cases multiple times, so as not to include a man-made structure. The original locations were also

sometimes on the other side of closed roads or were inaccessible because of high winds or other environmental factors. In some cases, this meant we were forced to find new locations. For example, many of the places I'd wanted to film at originally near Lander were still snow-covered, and roads leading into these places were impassible. Though frustrating, this led to discovering other settings along the way that we would not have considered stopping by had the roads not been closed. On a few other occasions, we were completely deterred from filming because of the magnitude of wind. While some light wind produced a lovely effect on my hair and clothing, too much wind made it difficult to set the camera on a tripod, video with camera in hand, and even dance at times. Sadly, I tried to reach a spot at the Flaming Gorge south of Rock Springs three times, and all three times I was pushed back by massive and unpleasant winds. We did not capture any film at this location but chose to find other places unknown to us instead. These scenarios exemplify a few of the challenges of working in Wyoming open lands. Through these difficulties, I improvised and was able to produce intentional work, even without the original expectations.

An unexpected challenge during the process included experimentation with costume and footwear. Initially, I thought that wearing only dark colors against a natural background would produce the desired image and effect. After watching some clips, I realized it was necessary to include other natural colors and tones. As I debated on whether or not I would wear the same costume throughout the piece, I realized the importance of standing out just enough from my background and varying my attire in relationship with the space I was dancing in. As a result, each landscape has a unique choice of clothing colors.

In some cases, my experimentation did not work out as hoped, but still it produced an image that was satisfying. At the first location, for example, I decided I would try dancing barefoot. This would have been fine for a short time period, but I was dancing and walking on the rocky soil and stepping in dead and dried brush for a couple hours. I only chose to dance barefoot once more, at the Killpecker Sand Dunes near Rock Springs. This was a very pleasant experience and my feet were much happier at the conclusion of the filming process.

Conclusion:

“In Conversation with ‘Landscapes’” continues to ask me questions about my interactions with the environment. The process gifted me with unexpected experiences and a plethora of challenges, but I welcomed each piece of the process. Learning by experience was crucial as I developed new skills and expanded on old ones. I have also gained a newfound appreciation for Wyoming's open spaces, and for quality time spent with my two siblings. As I transition into new physical spaces, this piece invites me to continuously explore these spaces, so that I may connect with each location on a deeper level and form meaning within places for myself and others. Through each reinvention of my original idea, each challenge, and each composition decision, “Landscapes” has given me a solid ground to stand upon as a choreographer, video editor, and environmentally-conscious graduate.