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Historical Approaches to Western Concert Dance

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not so *stupid!*

“The object of art is to crystallize emotion into thought and then give it form,” said by Francois Delsarte, a commonly forgotten figure of the origins of modern and contemporary dance, partially because his very first influences were spread over a “wide audience of scenic arts performers like actors, singers or even preachers” (LSU Libraries). Art is definitely designed to evict emotion out of their audience, and many times it takes rigor and dedication to your craft to have an emotional impact on an audience. There are many ways to create and experience emotion, truly individual to a person’s perspective. Dance is so human, and creates a unique relationship between the dancers and the audience. Pashman supports this by stating that “Dance is distinguished from some other arts in that the seen object, the dancer, unlike, say, a work of sculpture, presumably has experienced emotions even if she does not experience them while dancing” (Pashman, Susan). The audience’s attachment to the performer’s humanity creates natural vulnerability between the audience and performers during a show. Erica Sobol has been described as “‘fearless choreographer’ whose work combines contemporary, modern, and pedestrian vocabulary that has even brought her to Chicago to set a work for Visceral Dance Chicago. Her movement has been described as “animalistic” with a touch of “fluidity” and “vulnerability” by critics for her work placed on Visceral (Desk, BWW News). Sobol’s emotional connection to movement from performer to viewer creates a whimsical experience

during emotional performances that allows the viewer to see themselves in the dancers. Erica Sobol's solo choreographic work created in 2009 entitled *stupid!*, performed by Leah Moyer, provides a sense of nostalgia that is emotionally charged and driven by physicality and choreographic process, encouraging the viewer to emotionally connect to the work and to dance as an art form.

In *stupid!* Sobol lets you into the life of disheveled female character in a sort of emotional distress, wearing an oversized sweater and exposed underwear and bra, forcing herself to roll in and out or complete release of weight in the floor, as if she's searching for comfort. The music is a warped version of "Stupid" by Sarah McLachlan with additional percussive elements and special effects. The opening builds from the floor to standing with a contrast of released lofty movements and muscle contractions that have clear musical cues connected to each jerk. Moyer's moment quality has an angsty, trashiness specially on the arms, shoulders, chest, and neck that evokes feelings of heavy breathing, anxiety, polarizing movement that is supported by the costume, sound, and staging. Sobol beautifully weaves a combination of controlled and flailed qualities that connects the audience emotionally to the motivated desperation and anger Moyer portrays, that leaves the audience no choice but relate to her. Pushing this emotional story are very athletic leg extensions, jumps, and floor work at a fast pace. She also incorporates moments of playful, almost comedic, moments that create the sense of nostalgia of being lost in a dream. Sobol is able to compel emotion out of the audience because there is a striking quality that must come out of the process of working with her. A look inside Sobol's choreographic process says that there is always a "collection of the old woven in with the new," Sobol herself saying that "it [is] essential that this process be free of negativity and ego. Making a dance is

difficult enough as it is. In addition to their talent and fearlessness, all of the dancers I worked with brought humility and love to the creation process” (Loeffler-Gladstone, Nicole). From this interview, there is a clear sense of what Sobol values in performance and dance—fearlessness, humility, and love. As artists, dancers are aware of the emotional connection, and vulnerable feelings that are shared when performing—often times the goal is to call onto the emotions of the audience members to create an impact of their perspective on the content, character, dancer, or company. Unique to dance, when watching a performance there is an additional effect on the brain caused by mirror neurons. Heinrich Wölfflin, a notable art historian who wrote on the principles of art history, influenced many dance writers to apply his art principles to the brain and the audiences connection to dance. In a dance research academic journal, Susan Pashman had this to say about dance expression:

“To apply Wölfflin’s model to the art of dance, we may understand that a dancer chooses a particular dynamic spatio-temporal form for the feeling that, in her experience, is correlated with that form. The spectator ‘gets’ the feel of that tracing because he automatically models the dancer’s movements, thus reproducing the dancer’s pattern of muscle tensions in his own body. The spectator’s visual experience thus acquires feeling because of an instinctual tendency to make his body somehow congruent with what he sees. In his time, Wölfflin could only speculate that such imitative activity must occur, but his speculations have been fully borne out by research into the mirror neuron system and the action-observation network” (Pashman, Susan).

From this application of Wölfflin’s model to the art of dance, Pashman draws conclusions that the the mirror neuron system and the action-observation network allows audiences to experience part of the emotional investment the dancer portrays. Due to the mirror neuron system’s ability to connect watching movement to experiencing it—the vulnerability of movement, use of comedy to create whimsy, and emotionally charged imagery in Erica Sobol’s choreography provides

many opportunities for emotional connection and growth to occur in her audience during a performance.

Erica Sobol career walks between the concert and commercial dance worlds and has impact on both communities. As previously mentioned, Erica Sobol has choreographed for professional companies, Visceral Dance Chicago; however, she has also won commercial industry awards, The Capezio A.C.E. Awards in 2013. In the world of competition dance there is high score inclination towards dramatic, emotional performances, which allow teachers to create pro-found work on these pre-professional dancers. Erica Sobol has contributed choreography and teaching to this community that not only amasses thousands of views, but has impacted students in their artistic process. Sobol has placed many “once professional solos” on high schoolers for competition—*stupid!* being a repertory piece—as well as other original solos, duos, trios, and group pieces including: “Silhouettes” Modern Conceptions of Dance, “Byegone” Ryan Spencer & Morgan Burke, and “The Muse” Shannon Kelly to name a few. Primarily Sobol remains in the teaching and professional world in many different independent projects, LOBOS art collective being one of them. LOBOS art collective hosts a summer event that includes these instructors as her peers Medhi Walerski, Nederlands Dans Theater and Ballet BC; Adi Salant, Batsheva Dance Company; Jermaine Spivey, Kidd Pivot, and The Forsythe Company. Lobos Art Collective was also featured in Dance Spirit Magazine’s “The Higher Ed Issue” as one of the most desirable companies for post-competition dance life. As for her own lineage, Erica Sobol graduated from Columbia University in New York City, and has studied under Crystal Pite, Tilman O’Donnell, Jiri Pokorny, Medhi Walerski, Eric Beauchesne, and Tom Visser—all derivative of ballet and modern dance techniques with a lot of focus on Forsythe training.

Shifting the direction strictly to *stupid!*, the work was originally presented at collidEdance's blink/drEam show, but was uploaded to YouTube by Erica Sobol in 2011 where video currently holds 340,352 views. The feedback on the video was very positive and mostly quoted as “inspirational,” but there were also some negative comments about the choreography showing that it was not universally accepted in the commercial industry (Sobol, Erica). Leah Moyer herself even left a comment in defense of the performance saying:

“im leah, the dancer in this video. i really love hearing peoples reactions & critiques -- it only helps me to recognize what reads with people & what doesn't. what i feel on stage is only half the battle. it also must translate to an audience. however, because u have such an extensive background in dance, u of all people should know that art is relative. it affects people differently. dance isn't a dictionary. u yourself can create anything u want, & it is Perfect just so. always keep that in mind” (Sobol, Erica).

This comment allows Moyer to further communicate with the audience and emphasizes her importance translating her emotions to the audience from her own feelings on stage. Sobol's work brings up the different perceptions of concert and commercial dance to the bigger dance audience. Growing the current dance audience would gratefully benefit more indecent companies if there was more interest from typical commercial dance supports. There have been successful cross-overs, such as Travis Wall's Shaping Sound, so there is an audience there. I came across a review of Erica Sobol's piece “Black Skies/Heavy Skies” that further proves the readiness for dance shows, “I still remember how I felt after watching this piece for the first time...You see this piece is all movement. There were no tricks and rarely pointed toes, however it was the most beautiful thing I had ever watched. They moved as though they were the music and with so much passion, and incredible movement quality that it opened my eyes to the fact that exquisite technique is not a necessity to make something beautiful” (Rapoza, Ashlee). Erica Sobol

impacted this viewer to see more than the typical dance consumer and intrigued them to see more, growing their attachment to dance as an art form. Emotional conviction and exposure are drawing more commercial dance consumers, and choreographers like Sobol are connecting bridges to support the concert world.

The individual's perspective allows them a unique experience emotion. Dance is the most human art form, and creates a distinctive relationship between the performers and the audience. Pashman proves this by stating that "Dance is distinguished from some other arts in that the seen object, the dancer, unlike, say, a work of sculpture, presumably has experienced emotions even if she does not experience them while dancing" (Pashman, Susan). The audience's attachment to the performer's humanity creates natural vulnerability between the audience and performers during a show. Erica Sobol is a "fearless choreographer" whose work combines "animalistic" movement with a touch of "fluidity" and "vulnerability." Sobol's emotional connection to movement from performer to viewer creates a whimsical experience during emotional performances that allows the viewer to see themselves in the dancers. Erica Sobol's solo choreographic work created in 2009 entitled *stupid!*, performed by Leah Moyer, provides a sense of nostalgia that is emotionally charged and driven by physicality and choreographic process, encouraging the viewer to emotionally connect to the work and to dance as an art form proven by the the mirror neuron system and the action-observation network.

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