

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

**AN ANALYSIS OF THREE
CHOREOGRAPHIC WORKS**

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**OLD FRIENDS, SACRED SPIRITS
AND COOL WIND BLOWING**

Department of Dance

By

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I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of my supervisor, Samantha Pienaar and my husband, Russell Collins.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

My choreographic career commenced in 1975 when my first work, *Aexia*, was presented as part of a third year choreographic examination at undergraduate level. Between 1979 and 2000, I created a number of dance works for CAPAB Ballet Company (now Cape Town City Ballet Company) and the University of Cape Town Ballet School (now UCT School of Dance). The works were all choreographed in a classical ballet style in which I was trained from the age of five. The ballets were most often created in an abstract form where interpretation of music into movement formed the primary motivation.

Against this background, the creation of a portfolio of three dance works submitted for the Masters Degree in Choreography at this time has become part of a personal process of choreographic development beyond the traditional classical dance style with which I am so familiar, towards a more modern contemporary style of dance which I anticipated would offer me new avenues of creativity.

AIM

The aim of this paper is to present an informative written analysis and interpretation of the three dances created for a portfolio of works for a Masters in Choreography at the School of Dance, University of Cape Town.

DISCUSSION

WRITING A DANCE WORK

The initial inspiration for producing these dance works centred around the creation of the first ballet, *Old Friends* (set in a rural Irish landscape) and written in a classical ballet style. However, the creation of the subsequent works *Sacred Spirits* and *Cool Wind Blowing* have markedly demonstrated a shift in my choreographic style.

When I decided to register for a postgraduate degree in Choreography, my initial enthusiasm was with the challenge of choreographing new works for my portfolio. Having *written* my first ballet some twenty-seven years ago, I felt confident that the process would be relatively smooth flowing! I accepted the task of creating three diverse works not with the intention of necessarily developing a new individual style, but rather producing works that would show off my abilities as an established choreographer.

The term *writing* a dance work is perhaps not a common phrase when discussing choreography. However, as I often draw on analogies to demonstrate examples in my teaching and choreographic work, I tend to liken creating a new work to the *writing* of for example, a short story or a novel. To expand this line of thought – I interpret the linking of a sequence of steps, as a written sentence, relating light and shade in movement and pattern to punctuation and emphasis in the written word. I realize that this approach has, over time, become an instinctive, unconscious development and feature in my individual choreographic technique.

I hold the view that the creative processes of the choreographer and the author of a literary work are similar. Where the author establishes a plot - the choreographer envisages a dance scenario; both the author and choreographer interpret his/her respective plot by way of characters that are congruent to the story-line. When writing a novel, the author leads the reader to a climatic point in the story; so too, the choreographer moves the dance to a crux point. In addition to developing the plot, the choreographer creates atmosphere and mood by utilizing light and shade in movement and pattern of the dance.

Another analogy might possibly be drawn between the architect and choreographer. Both see the importance of spatial and visual harmony in structure and design. The architect creates permanent structures in three dimensions. The choreographer also creates structure in the three physical dimensions but in addition includes the dimension of time, which thus contributes to the transitory nature of the choreographic work. Clearly, one of the differences between viewing a work of static architectural art and that of a live dance performance, is that in architecture, the structure does not alter over time; the viewer is not under pressure of time to appreciate the subtleties and nuances of the static structure. In the viewing of a choreographic work, the structure is continuously changing – the audience member has to value the dance at the moment of execution. This however is not the sole difference. *Postmodern* studies have shown how complicated the process of perception and interpretation really is.

It can be argued, that a viewer of architecture, for instance, might see the building differently at different times of the day depending on the available light, the angle of viewing, as well as the state of mind and emotion at the time of viewing; similarly, an audience member can value a dance creation in retrospect by re-viewing it in the mind's eye, recalling images in the memory and discussing it with other audience members.

I am inclined to conceptualize dance as an unfolding execution of movement, which perhaps implies that my personal choreographic approach is more *modern* than *postmodern* in nature; in other words that the sense of time in performance is linear (unfolding) and more linked to a cause-and-effect, ebb-and-flow patterning as in a *modern* approach than it is fragmented and linked to irony, juxtaposition and displacement as in a *postmodernism* interpretation.

It is my opinion that choreography is a visual art that operates in five dimensions, namely to the left and right of the performer (termed stage left and right), away from the audience (upstage) and towards the audience (downstage), elevation and depression, and lastly the dimension of time. This concept does not necessarily only apply in a more conventional stage setting with the formal proscenium arch; but could include a venue with perhaps an irregular shape or without the restraints of an indoor site such as an amphitheatre.

A further similarity exists between the choreographer and the film director in that both are required to further the story-line, develop the characters and create the atmosphere without superfluous repetition and duplication. For example, every scene in a film needs to be analyzed as to its necessity to the development of the work. Editing forms a crucial part of producing a successful outcome. Similarly in choreography, every movement needs to contribute positively to the work in such a way that if a movement is superfluous, it should be edited out of the sequence.

WRITING ABOUT DANCE

The task of analyzing the three dance works on paper seemed straightforward and, as I saw it, unproblematic. In retrospect, this rather *naïve* perception of how effortless it would be, has perhaps been the principal lesson for me as the *practical* choreographer. In this process I have had to be-*both* the choreographer and the researcher, the creator as well as the analyst, and my most significant discovery has been the realization that the process of *writing about* choreography is different to the process of choreographing *itself*. Many choreographers have found it difficult to discuss and interpret their works. For instance, many have held the attitude that an audience member should not have to consult the programme notes in order to understand the message in a dance work. The misnomer - that dance facilitators lack the academic acumen to express their opinions and interpretations on paper, and in so doing provide insight into their work, has for many years been a common assumption.

South African choreographers, such as Jay Pather, Jeanette Ginslov and Gary Gordon, have succeeded in “Articulating the Unspeakable” (Gordon: 1999). Pather (1999) suggests that the importance of literary articulation by the choreographer is to show *transparency and accountability* in a political context; Gordon (1999) accentuates the need for *articulation and statement*; Ginslov (1999) articulates choreography to make sense of a new style or form. I have, through the writing of this paper, personally experienced the struggle of expressing in words what so easily for me - translates into movement - but as a result have come to acknowledge the importance of the choreographer being able to articulate, make sense of and share his/her creative processes.

PRACTICAL PORTFOLIO OBJECTIVES

My original objective as choreographer for the practical component of the project was to create works that would embrace three diverse cultural areas. This stemmed from my continuing interest in the spiritual folklore and customs of cultures other than my own - particularly those cultures with belief systems and practices where spirit and nature are regarded as one - an interwoven whole.

INSPIRATION

In searching for a source of inspiration, the choreographer in a contemporary environment has the advantage of the availability of mass communication and multi-media, as this allows contact and interaction more directly and

encourages an understanding of the different dynamics of other cultures. Very often, however, this information has already been structured to suit the requirements of mass media and the choreographer is as a result, receiving a second- or third-hand source of information that may colour his/her perception of foreign cultures and events.

Literary and internet research, such as examples mentioned later in this paper, served to increase the depth of my understanding of the cultures of particular peoples. However, such research material served purely as inspiration for the three works, as interpretations of the particular societies portrayed in the choreography were based almost entirely on my personal perceptions. In other words, the staged works were a product of a creative process based upon the research that I had done but were in no way intended to be viewed as authentic cultural experience. During the choreographic process, I relied solely on my own sense of intuition, experience and musical interpretation. Although it could be argued that many of my perceptions in this case tended to be romanticized, my aim in this creative process was to interpret my individual sense of the essential or primary factors that guide these particular cultures.

I chose to centre the works around firstly, an Irish theme, secondly, a Native American Indian tableau and lastly a central Asian theme, with particular emphasis on the plight of Afghanistan women at the hands of Taliban rule. The visual imagery conjured up by the expression *ties to the land* best

reflects my perception of the three cultures depicted in my dance portfolio especially in the second work. Inter-personal, inter-cultural and physical landscapes resonate within the central theme of *ties of the land*; the term refers to the emotional and psychological associations, in fact relationships, between the physical landscape and a particular culture. I wished to create a visual tapestry set within a specific culture - particularly that of the North American Native Indian and central Asian landscapes.

The following analysis of the three choreographic pieces attempts to express the inspirations and influences behind the creative processes of my work.

OLD FRIENDS

The original concept for this work stemmed from a fascination that I have held, from an early age, with *rhythm*. In 1996, whilst viewing a video performance of the Irish dance-musical *Riverdance* (directed by John McCoolgan, 1995), I became completely enthralled with the traditionally based, *yet* artistically-projected, vocabulary. In other words, the dance material being used appeared to remain true to Irish *Ceili* tradition but the patterns, groupings and presentation of the vocabulary seemed more innovative and thus created a visually diverse choreography. Modern lighting techniques, original costuming and spectacle were pivotal in creating an appealing production. Musically, the retention of traditional Irish dance instruments - for example the Uilleann pipes and Irish drums - together with the introduction of instruments not normally played in traditional Irish dance settings - such as the electronic fiddle - created a richer and more diverse orchestral backing, further enhancing the theatrical atmosphere.

Having studied and taught Irish dance in South Africa for the past four years, it has become evident to me that traditional group dances - referred to as *Ceili* dancing and originally performed in a communal setting with no *staging* as such - have, since the early 20th century, given rise to the highly competitive form of solo dancing that is practiced today. Although *Ceili*

dancing remains a form of social interaction, it too has been adapted for competitive level. In the competitive Irish dance format, movements – particularly in the Irish *hard-shoe* where dancers wear heeled shoes with an additional fibre-tipped toe (similar to the American tap shoe) - are complicated, rhythmically intricate, musically complex and technically difficult to execute. In competition, floor patterns tend to be repetitive, where the competitor often moves from side to side across the front of the stage, in order to detract the attention of the adjudicator away from other competitors. Under these circumstances, little consideration is given to the elements of theatrical and artistic presentation mentioned earlier.

Based on my personal perception of the term *artistic projection*, the overall (holistic/gestalt) impression of the dancer and his/her emotional connection to the movements being performed is not a prerequisite in the competitive Irish dance arena. Rather, concentration is focused on the technique in the legs and feet of the dancer and his/her physical connection to the movements. Musicality and rhythm are of absolute importance, while projection towards communicating a theme to the audience and artistic interpretation of the dance are not considered pivotal. The origins of traditional Irish dancing, in which the face and arms are non-expressive while the feet and legs move mechanically, had its foundation in the Irish peoples' defiance of British occupation of Ireland in the late 17th and early 18th century continuing to the 1920's when the Republic of Ireland gained its independence – this attitude overflowed into the social dance.

In *Riverdance*, Micheal Flatley, the principal choreographer, choreographed utilized simple and effective movements, such as kicks, cuts and *trebles* (toe brushes), executed by as many as twenty four dancers at one time, to create an increasing intensity of excitement within the audience. Although the style and execution of the work remained faithful to authentic traditional Irish roots with the emphasis on musicality and rhythm, a sense of theatricality and originality was generated and achieved by the innovative staging.

However, it was not this typically Irish rhythm that inspired my choreographic interest, but that of an instrumental piece and two of the ballads sung by the chorus in the production. The visual and aural ambience established in the ballad *The Heart's Cry* (Whelan:1996), performed by soloist Sarah Clancy and supported by the choral group *Anúna*, suggested to me a quality similar to that of a Gregorian chant, with the voice of the lead female singer reverberating, while the chorus stood motionless. My ears rang with the depth of resonance in her voice. Perhaps it was the absence of orchestral accompaniment that created the Gregorian atmosphere that I pictured mentally. As I listened, I began to formulate visual images of what I pictured historically traditional Irish landscape and folklore to be. I recognized that many of these images were probably romanticized impressions and were possibly drawn sub-consciously from films and literature that I had watched or read over the years.

Films such as *Waking Ned* (written and directed by Kirk Jones:1998), for instance, invoked thoughts of a country's rural inhabitants living uncomplicated, sheltered existences and who exhibited, what I perceived to be, the *humour of the Irish*. The images that formed were not static frame-by-frame portraits but moving, lilting and flowing impressions of bodies moving through space. The choreographed *steps* weren't established in my mind's eye, but the spatial and floor patterns were beginning to evolve. The aural contrast of stillness and movement within the ballad did not escape my attention. In fact, this contrast excited me. I saw the potential for movement within this particular framework. The challenge of creating a motion-filled work to a quiet ballad appealed to me.

The second song chosen, *Home of the Heartland* (Whelan:1996), produced a similar response. Written in 6/8 rhythm, the lyrics flow continuously from one verse to another. I envisaged two dancers moving towards one another in an ever-decreasing circle. This sequence eventually developed into the opening movement of the ballet where two dancers emerge from a lighting black out; they spiral inwards towards each other, culminating in a low lift which I visualized as representing a rising mist in an early morning sunrise. As the piece developed I imagined couples moving in unison, intertwining with one another in choreographic sequences, thus forming relationships physically and emotionally, through the dance movement.

The third piece of music for the work entitled *Slip into Spring* (Whelan:1996), is purely instrumental. The unusual 9/8 musical rhythm of the piece fascinated me and presented a challenge – in the choreographic sense – that I could not resist. I approached the music as I would a *mathematical* problem. At first the unusual phrasing created difficulties for me choreographically, as I was more accustomed to four and eight bar phrasing, but I soon conquered the unfamiliar time signature by choreographing extended lift sequences and drawn out movements that may ordinarily have been contained within for instance, a four bar phrase.

Further, the experience of combining the three pieces became a sentimental journey for me when I had the opportunity to acknowledge a working relationship with David Poole, a past Artistic Director of CAPAB Ballet Company (CTCB), as well as work with a group of professional dancers who had established their dancing careers through the University of Cape Town Ballet School, where I taught, and with the CAPAB Ballet Company, for which I choreographed. The programme - *A Tribute to David Poole*, highlighting his contribution to the ballet company (since he had passed away in 1991) - was produced and performed by members of the ballet company (both past and present) at the Nico Malan Theatre (now Artscape) in Cape Town. I had the opportunity to speak of my relationship with Poole at the performance - a catharsis on its own! – as well as dedicate my new *work in progress* to him. I entitled it - *Old Friends*.

In the same year, the University of Cape Town School of Dance celebrated its 50th anniversary and a celebratory performance and reunion of past students was arranged. The newly completed work was included in the programme – the premise being that all the dancers were ex-students, myself as choreographer was an ex-student and the title *Old Friends* appeared fitting for the occasion. In fact, the final tableau, in which the dancers adopt an informal pose depicting a relaxed and comfortable intimacy amongst friends *of old*, portrays precisely what I had hoped to achieve when first inspired by the *Riverdance* music.

As the choreographer in the initial stages of a creative process, I sometimes have a sense of structure that is originally based on feelings, shapes, colours and rhythms, rather than on precise moves and steps. To illustrate this, my sensory perceptions when creating *Old Friends* produced images of rounded, rolling shapes in the colours of green and brown and I felt comfortable and familiar with these earthy tones and movements. So although vivid mental pictures of effects I wanted to generate were present, I waited for the initial rehearsal before actually developing *steps*. The dancers I had chosen knew each other well, both socially and professionally. As a result I felt confident that they would work in harmony with one another, as physical synchronicity would be an important aspect of realizing my original concept of the work. To the furtherance of this aim, I considered the personalities and style of dancing of each individual, and coupled boy with girl accordingly.

For many years I had observed ice skaters in their routines, particularly the partnership of Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean, the English ice skating Olympic champions of the late 1970's and early 1980's. What I hoped to emulate in this specific work was the continuous sense of travel and flow that I recognized and appreciated in Torvill and Dean's skating routines. As a result of their being on ice, lifts flowed smoothly from floor, upward and forward in a constantly moving routine. I was thrilled and inspired by the seemingly effortless *arc* of movement.

Old Friends consists predominantly of *pas de deux* work with qualities and relationships that I hoped would emulate the effect of *skating* across the stage. I often mentioned this to my cast, and because they were experienced and had worked with me before they were able to understand and interpret my wishes effectively.

I decided not to choreograph the work *en pointe*. In this instance, I had been firmly influenced by Jiri Kylián's work of the 1980's, where he seldom created dances *en pointe*. Having had the opportunity to observe his company in rehearsal and performance in The Hague, Holland in April 1984, I spoke with him on many occasions after rehearsal periods and his explanation for the absence of *pointe* shoe work was not that his dancers couldn't cope (they were all well-trained classical dancers) but that he required a swiftness of movement in his choreography that he felt was inhibited by the use of the *pointe* shoe.

As this quest for speed and the ability to travel extensively in a dancer has become a part of my own teaching and choreographic psyche, I have also, perhaps inevitably, steered away from the classical *pointe* shoe. This was also a move on my part to venture into a more contemporary style of movement, as I had felt for some time that the classical style in which I had worked previously, had become an inhibiting factor in my own choreographic development. I wished to experiment particularly with a variety of spatial levels, turned in legs and feet, rounded spinal movements and a rise and fall of the body which I felt would help increase the speed of movement in the dancers. This effect I perceived to be of a more *natural* physical expression of movement rather than the stylized, codified movements of classical ballet.

The atmosphere during rehearsals of *Old Friends* was one of experimentation. I would discuss the desired choreographic outcome that I hoped to achieve: for example, a combination of steps travelling forward while spinning or a canon in movement effect. The dancers would then interpret the instruction and experiment with their bodies until I, as choreographer and viewer, was satisfied and they, as dancers, felt comfortable with the physical demands and interpretation of the work. I especially enjoy choreographing with canon in movement, as it creates a visual canon, similar to those images found in the high-speed photography first developed by American photographer Harold E D Edgerton in 1931.

In a quest to seek perfection of symmetry and timing in motion, I have often thought that creating a new work by means of computer technology would achieve a level of perfection that would leave me as the choreographer with a sense of satisfaction. However, after years of choreographing and working with the *human factor* that is – the dancer, I have come to appreciate the often *unpredictability* of a live performance, which as a result, ultimately *creates* the unique experience.

As is common in theatre today, the rehearsal time for *Old Friends* was restricted and the dancers were pressured to achieve my aims within a short period of time. Professional dance companies follow a full rehearsal schedule when compiling a programme of varied works, requiring stamina and resilience from talented dancers. CAPAB Ballet Company twenty years ago afforded its choreographers the luxury of a twelve-week rehearsal period to complete a new creation. This length of time was partly due to extensive government funding of the arts, ballet in particular, during the 1970's and 1980's. In contrast, *Old Friends*, written in 1998 and approximately fifteen minutes in length, was written in less than a month with perhaps three rehearsal sessions per week. Nevertheless, I found that choreographing this work, despite the short rehearsal period, was a smooth, inspiring process and I was saddened when the ballet was complete.

The creative process of *Old Friends* gave me much gratification. I have always preferred the process of producing a new work to watching the final product on stage. The reason being that during the rehearsal period, the choreographer has control over the projected outcome of the work as it progresses - whereas in performance, the successful execution of the piece no longer lies in the hands of the choreographer, but with his/her cast. On the other hand, in performance, the artist takes the work to a new level of interpretation that I have found disconcerting in that the creator is sometimes left with a sense of insignificance. During the staging of this piece, I realized that a sequence in the final song, where three couples move in canon, was not a visual or musical success. I have found that a common fault in creating steps in canon occurs when movements follow on too rapidly which then tends to lead to as overlapping, leaving the audience uncertain as to whether the movements *are* in canon or are perhaps an unsuccessful attempt at symmetry within the group. I rearranged this section so that the dancers worked in unison and subsequently felt satisfied with the result.

I have sometimes commenced choreographing from the end of a work. So often I have witnessed ballets that appear choreographically strong with a clear message in the initial stages of the work, but find that focus is lost half way through the ballet. In this case, I sought unity amongst the dancers before I separated them into various *pas de deux* sections.

When viewing the choreography of others, such as American choreographers William Forsythe and the late Ulysses Dove, I have found that choreographic works are often a sign of *where* the creator is in his/her personal life. Whilst in Stuttgart in 1984, I attended a Stuttgart Ballet Company performance of Forsythe's modern ballet, *Love Songs* (1979). I was surprised and unsettled when viewing it, as the choreography seemed particularly aggressive towards the women in the piece. I later discussed this observation with one of the company members. Although this is an anecdotal example that has not been verified, his reply - that Forsythe had been experiencing difficulties in a relationship at the time and that the work was possibly reflecting his feelings - shed light on my interpretation of the work. Ulysses Dove on the other hand, felt compelled to write a work *Vespers* expressing the emotion he felt towards his grandmother (who had raised him) to acknowledge her great energy and love of the church. He chose a contemporary dance medium to express this and worked with eight young women who danced incessantly and with immense devotion and commitment to the subject matter. Possibly this personal expression through choreography is more of a modern trend.

It is also my experience that a choreographer's personal psychological state of mind at the time of creating definitely influences *what* is produced on stage. At times, for instance, I have required complete structure in my personal life and this is reflected in a work such as *Episodes*, an abstract dance piece interpreting the score of South African composer Bongani

Ndodana, written in 1999 for CTCB. In hindsight I realize that in this work - lines and patterns were rigidly ordered; symmetry was predominant and there was very little use of the upper torso. I tend to equate the immovable torso with a lack of emotional expression and a need to remain *in control* - and realized that this was a prominent feature of the work. Personal emotional turmoil in the early 1990's affected my style in the work *Ofana Naje*, (1994) where a movement written for a relatively untrained black dancer, produced a requiem of pain and retribution. Writing this work was a form of catharsis for me and it was the first time I recognized the value of expressing emotion through choreography and although the choreographer has to be careful of self-indulgence, there is certainly a healing process that can take place.

In much of my earlier choreography, my perceptions of dance as an abstract form of musical interpretation played a pivotal role. In more recent works, I have moved away from a close music/step interpretation – as demonstrated in works such as George Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco* (1948) and Chinese choreographer Choo-San Gou's abstract work *Schubert Symphony* (1987) - where the dance becomes the visual rendering or translation of the music. More recently I have choreographed through the musical phrasing, drawing out movements, particularly in *pas de deux* sequences. I have found that this creates a continual flow of movement that allows the dancer to contribute their own personal interpretation within the parameters of the musical phrasing. Although *Old Friends* could be described as an abstract

work, in that no real story-line develops, *inter-personal relationships* were suggested by my use of three individual couples seldom physically separating from one another.

Old Friends is the first of three works submitted as part of a choreographic portfolio and having completed the project, I realize that a change in choreographic style has emerged – from recognizable classically-based, to more contemporary influenced, movements. What I achieved in this work was a personal growth and development in the sphere of choreographing classical *pas de deux* work. The ballet was a break-through for me: I lost a long-held reticence of working with couples (in a choreographic sense). I achieved this by persisting with my choreographic desires, clearly illustrating what I wanted from my cast. Because they trusted me, they were willing to go the extra mile to achieve what I envisaged.



SACRED SPIRITS

The process of moving away in a choreographic sense, from a comfortable and familiar style of classical dance only really emerged with the development of the original idea for the work *Sacred Spirits* in early 1999. At this stage of my choreographic career I felt it would benefit me to venture into a more contemporary dance genre, with the freedom of body movement, which a more modern style of dance, in my opinion, appears to encourage. The extensive use of the upper body, spatial variation and the effect of a turned-in, flexed foot normally associated, or as I perceived it, with contemporary dance were visually and thematically appealing to me at this time and suggested a more natural, less studied and stylized way of moving. I chose to work in this dance style for *Sacred Spirits*, utilizing contemporary dance influences to express choreographically, the everyday life of an ancient society, as well as acknowledging the deep sense of spiritual being as I imagined it to be, within the North American Indian culture.

I have been interested in the historical character and culture, as I have come to understand it, through researching literature and popular media, about the North American Indians (NAI) for many years. My secondary education, which included a study of North American history, provided the initial insight. In my experience, a parallel can be drawn between NAI nations and the Khoi San of Southern Africa, in that both tribes/cultures appear to be the original inhabitants of the land but have been driven from and alienated

from, their land, having lost their original way of life and many aspects of their traditional culture. But it was ultimately my perception of the *spiritual* attitude of its peoples that drew me to these cultures. Being *at one* with the land and nature, as I understood these cultures to be, appealed to me.

For example, the North American Indian custom of paying homage to a slain animal by acknowledging the animal's part in providing food and clothing for the tribe.

I discovered the importance of communal dance, such as the *Sun Dance*, practiced particularly by the Plains Indians. In his book *All About the Plains Indians* (1975), Stephen White recounts the daily life and customs of a number of tribes that established communities in the vast plains area of North America. He describes the passing on of folklore and stories of the tribe in a verbal tradition, as well as defining their relationship with the spiritual world. He writes: "They always reveal a poetic vision of the relationship between the supernatural and the physical world. Men meet spirits in the form of other men or of animals" (White, 1975: 60). J W E Newbery in his case-study of the North American Indians in his book, *The World's Religions* (1989), talks of the social structure in a culture such as this, where the spiritual significance particularly of the circle in the North American Indian tradition, where "all thought and action is governed" (Newbery, 1989:165). I felt drawn to the image of the circle symbolizing the cycle of the seasons of the year which are reflected and interpreted in the dance work.

The significance of the *totem* in *Sacred Spirits* can be seen as an illustration of the historical cultural representation of a tribe where important events were carved and celebrated in spiritual rituals -is reflected in the final motif of the ballet. Dancers are drawn together having retreated upstage into a human *totem* thereby endeavouring to imprint their personal identities on the work. The final motif of the work forms an image of a *family photograph* – the *totem* - a record of kindred spirits.

I sourced a book of North American Indian poetry and found a poem that summed up the culture of *being one with the land*, very succinctly. The following is an excerpt from the poem written by Frank Conibear (T.F.Roman, 1994:185), which aptly reflects my thoughts on transposing a modern outlook on a traditional concept. In that much can be learnt about the history of a people, through a respect for the customs and traditions of the living members of a particular culture.

Artifacts

*the history is alive,
not to be found in an old site, but
present in the people.
and when the record changes to tell
a more accurate "history"
of our people, then the true
spirit of our past, present and future
can be given
and in return valued*

Literature such as *The Last of the Mohicans* written by James Fenimore Cooper (1826) and films such as *Dances with Wolves* directed by Kevin Costner (1990) based on the novel by Michael Blake, drew me closer to the spiritual culture of the North American Indian. Although I have not directly observed the North American Indian directly in his natural surroundings, or read a first-hand account of any anthropologist who has, I have through my exposure to literature and the media developed a kinship towards this particular culture and its peoples continued interconnection with nature.

Another opening for this work was when I was commissioned to choreograph a work for the CTCB programme, *Dance with a Difference*. At the time, a young English dancer Jonathan Olivier, who I felt had a tremendous stage presence and direct focus, was working with CTCB. He had studied at the Rambert Contemporary Dance School in London and, as a result, had extensive contemporary dance training and experience. Once again a visual image in my mind's eye began to develop. I imagined him onstage rushing directly forward, as if to challenge the audience. It was the power and strength of his talent and physicality that formed the initial inspiration for choreographing a work at this time. The dancer Olivier seemed the perfect vehicle for this project.

The concept of this work was formed earlier during a four-month choreographic study tour to Europe and the United States in 1984, where I was impressed and inspired by the work of Nacho Duato, a dancer and

choreographer working at the time with Nederlands Dans Theater in the Hague. He, in turn, was influenced by the work of Jiri Kylián, Artistic Director and choreographer for the company. This was clearly evident: Duato was a choreographer who demanded that his dancers move with lightning speed and precision when executing his choreography.

I made no attempt to use *traditional* Native Indian music or movements in this dance work. A desire to be *influenced* by, rather than *imitate*, the traditional movements of this culture was my preferred aim. I hoped that, by working in a more contemporary medium, the piece would appeal to a younger, more progressive audience, not necessarily the conservative traditional ballet lover.

In *Sacred Spirits*, I chose to choreograph to the compositions of American composer and singer Robbie Robertson, himself of Native American Indian extraction. Robertson is a modern song-writer who draws his inspiration from his cultural background. Again the accent on *rhythm* appealed to me as, in this instance, it suggested the incorporation of ritualistic elements that appears to be an integral part of ancient cultures such as that of the Native American Indian. The first piece of music, *Coyote Dance*, commences with an eerie drumbeat with wolves howling in the background. As I continued to listen, and hearing the music build in orchestration, I pictured a camera with a wide angle view capturing an early morning North American plains

scene with the sun just rising above the horizon casting a reddish glow in the sky, the frost on the hard ground and the mist lying in the low-lying *coulees* (hollows). With music in the background, the camera slowly zooms in on a group of dancers until the viewer was amongst them. Eventually I created this effect on stage with dim lighting designs, aided by a mottled gobo effect, which intensified as the dancers entered from side stage.

The second song, *Mahk Jchi*, (translated as *Heartbeat Drum Song*) sung by a chorus of women, has a carefree and lilting tone. It is in this piece that the influence of the choreographer Nacho Duato is apparent. While visiting the company in The Hague, I noticed a photograph of one his ballets on the studio wall. Five women were in motion, heads lifted, backs arched, expressing - as I perceived it - a sense of absolute freedom and abandonment. As I had not had the opportunity to view a performance of this work, this *still* image remained the only one imprinted on my subconscious mind. Although I may have interpreted the feeling of this image out of context, without music and concept to consider, it was the overall effect of the dancers' body language, frozen in time, that inspired my own movement study in *Sacred Spirits* twelve years later.

When choreographing the second movement, the rhythmical beat of the drum dictated a constant and intricate combination of steps for the young girls, for example triple runs followed by swift *jetés* traveling from side to side, where the alternately positioned girls move in canon. I wished to portray my perception and interpretation of the harmony and accord within a tribal environment and proceeded to create a piece that I hoped would

emulate the feeling that I had experienced when studying the photographic image of Duato's work.

The selection of Robertson's music used in the dance work offers a consistent, continuous rhythm, conjuring up images of a swaying, repetitive motion. With this in mind, I repeatedly experimented – alone in a studio - with movements and combinations of movements, looking for actions that would emulate the motion filled music. For example, inter-linking my arms and then rolling my arms and shoulders in an inward motion seemed to resemble a cradle or rocking effect which I then expanded into the opening sequence of the dance: the dancers enter from prompt side of the stage, as if returning from a day's hunt, using this upper body action to suggest the carrying of goods for their daily needs.

Sacred Spirits is a ballet choreographed for ten dancers, five male and five female. The work is essentially non-narrative but does depict the traditions of North American Indian rituals, as I perceived them to be. The full depth of the stage is utilized and with the aid of lighting gobos filtering across the floor and foot lights placed upstage and focused toward the audience, a vast open space is created for the dancers to move freely in and out of. Lighting changes are subtle, shifting from an atmosphere of early morning, passing through the middle of the day and finally into evening.

Once rehearsal with the company began, I became obsessed with creating a liquid, speed-filled dance work, particularly in the second piece. In fact, I would say that one of the signature identities of my choreography has become this obsession to physically move a dancer beyond what he/she believes is possible.

I was less satisfied with the final choreographic product of *Sacred Spirits* than *Old Friends*. Perhaps I felt less at ease writing in the contemporary medium without having a thorough grounding to relate to. If I were to rework the piece, I would search for more suitable music for the third song. I struggled writing to the popular lyrics and felt the rhythms did not contribute to the spiritual ambience I had planned to create from the first to the final song and felt that this detracted from the value of the work. On the positive side, I attempted to produce a more theatrical experience taking into consideration lighting effects appropriate to the subject matter, as well as earth toned costumes and appropriately stylized choreography, and in this way succeeded in portraying an eerie atmosphere suggestive of a spiritual cohesiveness in movement and emotion.



...small were asked to express their outrage by protesting at the professional



COOL WIND BLOWING

“Women’s rights have become the single most contentious issue for Muslim societies in this century” (Zeeshan Hasan, 1998)

The ballet *Cool Wind Blowing* was initially inspired, in early 1999, by an email message sent by an overseas colleague depicting the plight of Afghanistan women under the Taliban regime. The oppressive conditions under which the women existed were vividly recounted and recipients of the email were asked to express their outrage by commenting in the professional medium in which they worked.

On further investigation I discovered that an extreme brand of Islamic culture was imported into Afghanistan from Pakistan during the Soviet occupation of that country during the 1980’s. The United States supported a terrorist militia force, the *mujahideen* (translated as ‘soldiers of God’), in opposition to the Soviet Union. After Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the group identified as the Taliban emerged as a dominant force in the country (Anon, www.feminist.org/afghan/facts/html - 02/03/11).

The inspiration for this ballet – the final work in the portfolio - was founded on the theme of *gender discrimination* based on my perceptions of the women of Afghanistan being plunged into a state of repression, which had effectively removed their collective voice from society. The year 2000,

being the *Year of the Woman*, proved an opportunity for the expression of a personal tribute to the oppression of women world-wide.

Much has been reported in the media on this issue since the September 11, 2001 bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York and the subsequent removal of the Taliban government has in effect given the Islamic women in Afghanistan an opportunity to regain a more *moderate* religious life-style.

Rina Amiri, American research writer at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, in her article *Muslim Women as Symbols and Pawns* (2001) is quoted as saying “On the morning of November 20, [2001] the world awoke to the promise of a new era in Afghanistan, reflected in the hasty retreat of the Taliban from Kabul and the timid smiles of afghan women emerging from beneath their burkas” (Amiri, www.ksg.harvard.edu/new/opeds/amiri_women_symbols_pawns_nyt_112701.htm - 02/03/14).

Cool Wind Blowing is choreographed to three songs, set in three diverse religious backgrounds, all performed by the Kronos String Quartet. The first, entitled *A Cool Wind is Blowing* was composed in 1993 by Tigran Tahmizyan, and is based on an ancient Armenian folk song, which Tahmizyan is quoted as saying “survived centuries of Moslem domination and then Russian domination. It survives still – a symbol of the persistence of Armenian culture” (Gladstone, 1992).

In the first movement, a choreographic attempt to portray a sense of vulnerability and submission is reflected through the young female dancers repeatedly displaying their open palms to the audience. Arms of the dancers are often held across the body, in a protective gesture, while traveling. Movements are staccato and erratic. At one point, all dancers converge stage left in a close group, with hands held over eyes and mouth. This gesture suggested to me the facelessness of all oppressed women and the Afghanistan women in particular, women. I had asked the dancers, as they dispersed from this grouping, to change their mental approach to the movement from submissive to pro-active; in other words, to alter the intensity with which they moved and to interpret the second song as a period of transition and urgency, into the self-empowerment of the 3rd piece. The formal, structured, and clustered formations in which the dancers move reflect an attempt to depict the constraints under which the Afghanistan women existed. I choreographed movement *through* the music as opposed to *on* the music to create a sense of the women's *discord* with their environment. Much of this section was choreographed without attention to musical phrasing. When movements were eventually danced to the music, the speed and rhythms of movement had to be adjusted to match the musical nuances in the score. This resulted in a stop-start effect, illustrating my intention to depict what I perceived to be an unnatural form of existence.

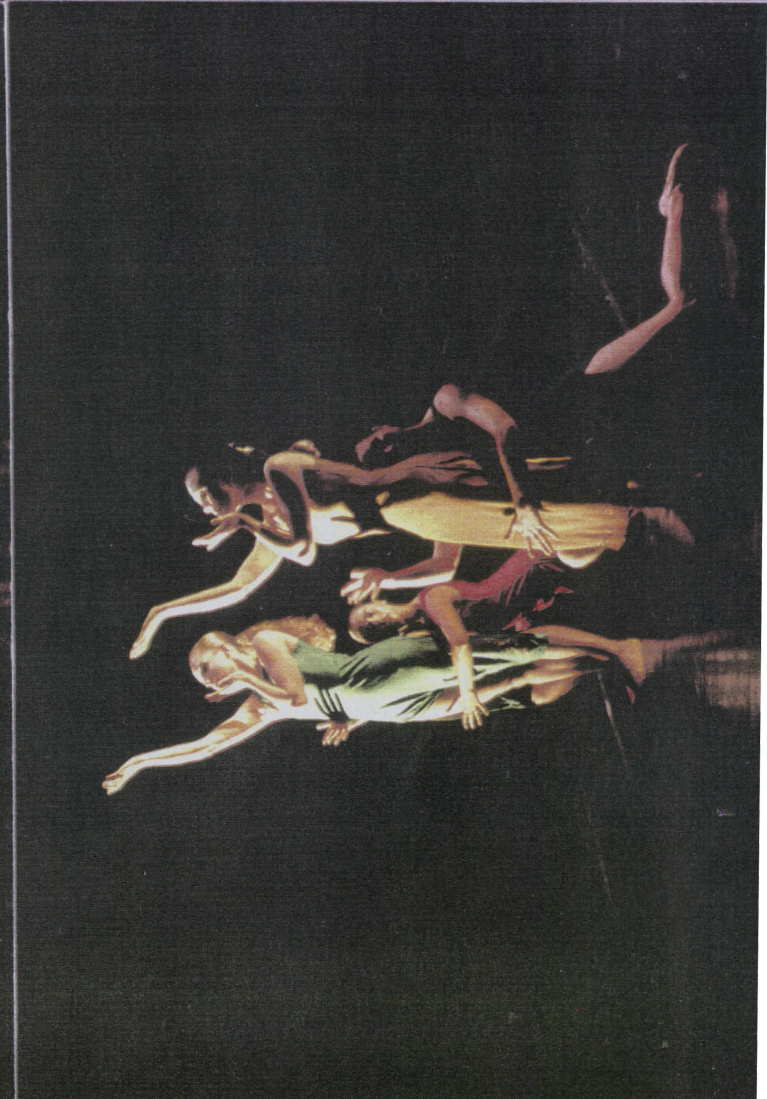
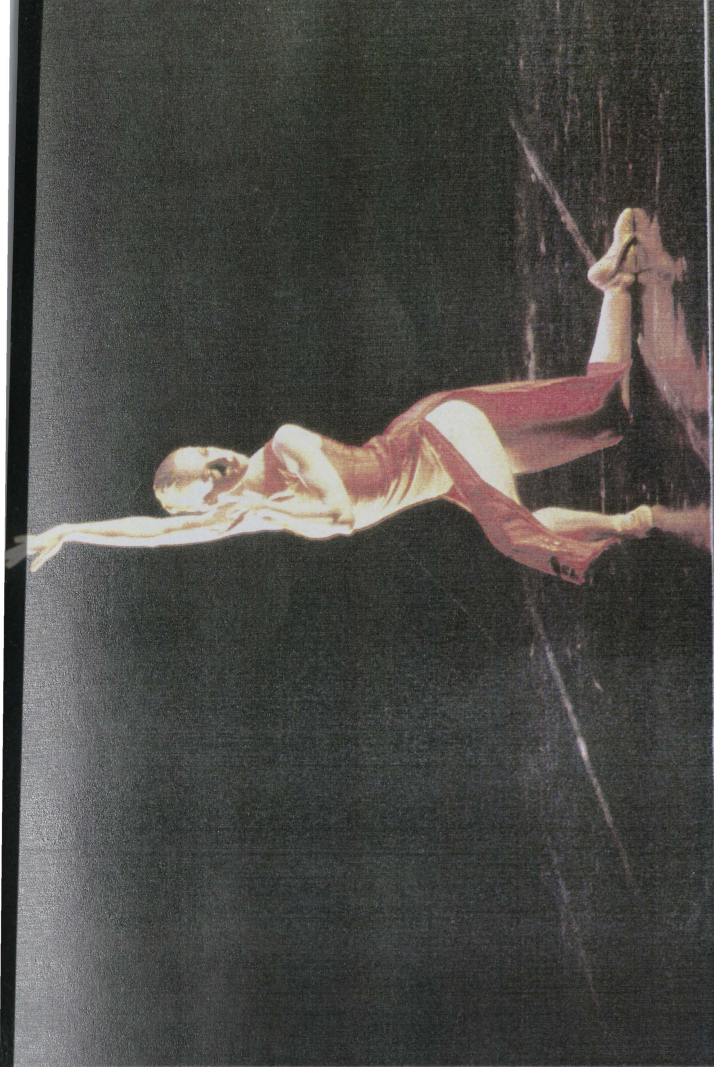
The second song, *Lacrymosa* (1991) composed by Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky, draws from part of the Catholic Mass, the Requiem. The section to this song was choreographed for a solo dancer and here controlled adagio movements were used to create an intense and passionate expression, merging with the soaring voice of soprano Dawn Upshaw. Three dancers weave continuously around the solo dancer creating an image of unrest and uncertainty, until finally all disperse in different directions. I wanted this to resemble an effect of the splitting of a molecule, where particles disperse from a central point, and the subsequent creation of a fresh foundation on which to continue.

The third movement alters pace and emotion in terms of choreographic and musical concept. *Kongerei*, arranged by S. Mackey (1993), is sung by the Throat Singers of Tuva. The idea of throat singing was first introduced to me in 1997, by Dr Trần Quang Hai, a prominent Vietnamese musician and expert in musical overtones of Central Asia. Hai describes the Tuvan throat singing as a “vocal style which enables the singer to produce two, sometimes three, simultaneous voices: one fundamental with low sound considered as a drone, and the other(s) with overtones gibing one or two formantic melody(ies)” (Hai, 1997:424). It is in this way that a single singer can harmonize with himself.

In this final movement, the dancers are more assertive and forthright in their movements: palms are flexed away from the body and the focus of the dancer is direct as it was my desire to create a sense of the growing

anticipation of freedom. The final moments of the ballet show the dancers advancing downstage. Stage lighting fades to black out, leaving the audience in what was hopefully a state of suspenseful anticipation that the women might become whole again and feel the fullness of life.

When the ballet was written in 2000, any thought of the liberation of the women of Afghanistan was, in truth, not a reality. There is, however, a sense of gratification that at the time of writing this essay, Afghanistan women have in fact been allowed to “emerge from beneath their burkas” (Amiri, www.ksg.harvard.edu/new/opeds/amiri_women-symbols_pawns_nyt_112701.html - 2002/03/14).



CONCLUSION

It is my view that to a large extent, especially from the mid - 20th century onwards, choreographers have relied largely on the media for information regarding societies other than their own. Moreover, literature, radio, television, internet, video and film are all interpretive of a subject in their own way. Hence it can be surmised that the final image presented by the artist has often already been influenced by previous interpreters, such that perceptions of that culture may be removed from, or romantic versions of, that culture's reality. However, it can be argued that new works created within these parameters are equally valuable as original art forms and should be appreciated as such. It can be said that the appreciation of art in any form can be seen as subjective and the artist's own perceptions transposed into this own work. In this way, each composition can be seen to transcend the country of origin and have a universal validity while still attaining an air of authenticity.

In conclusion, it has been suggested to me by South African choreographer and dance academic, Samantha Pienaar, that my approach towards choreography is a *modern* one, where the choreographer is ultimately solely responsible for, for example selecting, editing and integrating the movements, costumes, lights design - in other words collating the theatrical whole. To highlight and acknowledge this statement, two important features of my work include the following: the *integration* of artistic elements - the

linking of movement to a particular theme and the communicating of that theme through carefully selected and refined phrases, as well as through carefully selected lighting, costumes and music; and *coherence* of artistic elements - the logical evolution or unfolding of one movement idea to another, an avoidance of repetition and unnecessary phrases and carefully motivated and fluid spatial or rhythmic transitions between sections and phrases.

This could be said to be very different approaches to some of the *postmodern* choreographers who, for instance, do not integrate the various artistic elements but allow them to work independently of one another. American choreographer, Merce Cunningham, for example, brings the music, movement and costumes together right at the end of a process, sometimes just before a performance, and does not work out the steps to suit the rhythm of the music. *Postmodern* choreographers also tend to work much more with fragments of action, and the unfolding and patterning of these sequences do not always appear to be coherent, logical or fluid.

Perhaps the two most prominent trends in choreography during the last hundred years have been *modern* and *postmodern* dance. Having stated this, these are however very general, broad categories with a variety of individual approaches. And within these parameters South African choreographers have inherited most of our techniques and inspirations from overseas being

influenced by choreographers, innovative theatre techniques and in fact universal issues that have impacted on artists both at home and abroad.

The process of writing this paper has been about finally reaching the point where I have delved deep enough into my methods and approaches to choreography to be able to stand back objectively and see my positioning in terms of current traditions and trends of choreography. That is as a choreographer, interested in expanding her stylistic repertoire to include and be influenced by the cultures, experiences and influences of other artists in the theatrical environment both in South Africa and the rest of the world.

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