

Exploring Grief through Dance

by

Eboni Godwin

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Thesis Committee:

Angela Ramos, Thesis Director

Joan McRae, Thesis Committee Chair

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APPROVED:

Angela Ramos, Thesis Director
Master Instructor Coordinator, Health and Human
Performance

Joan McRae, Thesis Committee Chair
Professor, World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

Dedication

This project is dedicated to:

Destiny Nicole Godwin

Queen Esther Giles

Veleda Williamson

Larry Bolden

Josiah Cooper Turner

Ashley Pickett Webb

Abstract

Dance has historically been used as an outlet for both individuals and communities to explore complex concepts, and in many cultures, dance has been used as an outlet to celebrate the lives and mourn the deaths of people held dear to the community. However, it is possible to grieve things that are unrelated to the death of another individual, like marriage or health. Because the process and stages of grief are not always linear or predictable, thorough discussions about grief can become unnecessarily convoluted. The purpose of this project is to provide an example of how dance can be used as a method to explore grief, while also considering that grief is a fluctuating process that varies from person to person.

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Terms

Alvin Ailey: A black modern dancer and choreographer; the founder of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre

Anticipatory grief: A form of grief that is experienced prior to the actual loss

Contemporary dance: A style of dance that emerged in the 20th century and incorporates techniques from other styles, including ballet, jazz, and modern.

Contraction: A movement within modern dance that was introduced by Martha Graham; the curving of the spine

Disenfranchised grief: A form of grief that is experienced when society does not accept the loss experienced by the mourner as a valid reason for emotional distress

Graham technique: A style of movement within modern dance that focuses on contractions, releases, and floorwork.

Martha Graham: A modern dancer and choreographer; the creator of the Graham technique

Modern dance: A style of dance that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in rejection of classical ballet and focuses on expression and free movement.

Natalia Osipova: A Russian ballet dancer; principal dancer with The Royal Ballet in London.

Persistent complex bereavement disorder: A medically recognized psychiatric condition causing an individual to experience more severe symptoms, like suicidal ideation, following a period of at least 12 months of grief

Prolonged grief disorder: A medically recognized psychiatric condition causing an individual to experience symptoms of grief long-term; also known as complicated grief

Release: A movement within modern dance that was introduced by Martha Graham; a relaxation of the muscles used to contract

Somatic movement: A form of movement focused on connecting the mind, body, and spirit

Chapter 1: What is Grief?

Grief has been defined as the natural emotional reaction to a loss, and it is most commonly associated with the death of a loved one. Grief is a feeling that most Americans can relate to, with “approximately 2.5 million people [dying] in America annually, each leaving behind an average of five grieving loved ones” (Peck 2023). Grief is a personal process, and it can affect anyone who experiences it differently. Anyone who is facing grief, no matter its cause, should not be criticized for how they are affected or how they choose to express their emotions.

There is also a misconception that grief is only experienced with the passing of a loved one. Grief can be a byproduct of any situation that disrupts an individual’s sense of normalcy or routine. Examples of events that can provoke a grief response other than death include being fired from a job, breaking up with or divorcing a significant other, ending a friendship, experiencing infertility, receiving a terminal diagnosis, or moving a child out of the house for college. Minor losses can result in a more subtle display of grief, whereas major losses can cause severe emotions that can be difficult to navigate without assistance. It is important to recognize non-death related circumstances as valid reasons to experience grief so that an individual does not have to endure disenfranchised grief, or a lack of support while navigating a loss that risks being minimized or ridiculed by the public (Lenhardt 1997, 265).

Denial

The standard first stage of grief is denial. Denial occurs when the mourner is unable to accept the reality of their situation, even if they understand what they are going through (Fisher 2023). For some people, the denial stage can look like refusing to discuss or having an adverse reaction to their loss when mentioned in conversation. For others, it can look like outright denying that their loss even occurred.

Denial has been accepted as a defense mechanism that people employ when they are not mentally or emotionally prepared to address the circumstances that are affecting them. Denial as a short-term solution can be beneficial because it can “provide relief to people who [do not] have the bandwidth or ability to face a problem” (Godman 2023) and help mourners avoid addressing more complex emotions that they are not equipped to handle. However, when a person lives in denial for a long period of time, they are shielding themselves from reality and encouraging a state of delusion, which could eventually become more dangerous than allowing themselves to navigate their pain.

Anger

The second stage of grief that typically follows the stage of denial is anger. Once the griever has finally recognized their loss as part of their reality, they can begin to feel anger towards the situation or anyone who was involved. Anger at the situation tends to be more productive and less destructive to interpersonal relationships than anger towards an individual. Being angry at the situation allows grievers to recognize the effect that

their loss has on their life, while also giving them the space to experience the full extent of their emotional distress. The anger that a person feels towards the situation can manifest as feeling that their loss was unfair, even in cases where their loss was inevitable.

Anger towards an individual slightly differs. Though this form of anger also allows the griever to recognize their loss as unfair, they also tend to view it as the fault of the individual that they are frustrated with. This can lead to feelings of hostility between friends and family – and sometimes even the person who has passed – that can lead to the erosion of relationships. An example of anger towards an individual rather than the situation would be resentment towards a family member for not being actively involved in a loved one's life before their passing (Fisher 2023). The next phase that can follow placing blame on others for your loss is placing that same blame on yourself, introducing the bargaining stage.

Bargaining

During the bargaining stage of grief, the mourners' inability to fully process their loss is met with their perception that they somehow contributed it. Some mourners feel responsible for their own grief, thinking that some action of their own led to their loss. These people then imagine a world in which, if they had acted in a different manner, they would not have experienced the passing of their loved one. For example, after a person has committed suicide, some people believe that their loved one would not have taken their own life had they received more attention from their friends and family. This

thought process then leads them to believe that, because they did not provide their loved one with the attention that they believe could have changed the situation, they are directly responsible for the outcome. Another aspect of the bargaining stage of grief entails making offers to a higher power in an attempt to undo the past. An example of a negotiation that a griever may go through is asking God to bring back a deceased loved one in exchange for something that they deem of value. This thought process is incredibly dangerous because it is shrouded in a misunderstanding of how much power a person has to change things that have already happened.

The bargaining stage is thought to be one of the most irrational stages as the person experiencing grief becomes overwhelmed with thoughts about how they could have prevented their loss or what they would negotiate away to make themselves whole again (Fisher 2023). The bargaining stage can be a particularly difficult stage of grief to overcome because grievers are attempting to do the impossible by changing the past. Ultimately, in this stage, grievers are placing unwarranted shame, guilt, and resentment onto themselves for events that were completely out of their control. It is, however, also important to acknowledge that bargaining also allows grievers to hold on to the hope that they have following their loss.

Depression

The three previous stages – denial, anger, and bargaining – help to protect the mourner from the fourth stage of grief, depression. Depression can be described as the feeling of hopelessness or desolation that, as it relates to grief, someone experiences in

response to a traumatic event. However, there are multiple factors that may contribute to an individual's experience of depression, and not all of cases of depression are caused by a traumatic experience. For example, one of the most studied factors that contribute to depression are lack of serotonin, and "the monoamine-deficiency theory posits that the underlying pathophysiological basis of depression is a depletion of the neurotransmitters serotonin, norepinephrine or dopamine in the central nervous system" (Hasler 2010).

Additionally, the severity of depression that a griever may experience can depend on their susceptibility to mental illness prior to their loss, as well as their lifestyle choices following. Symptoms of depression include feelings of sadness, loss of interest in social activity, disruption of sleep patterns, weight fluctuations, fatigue, irritability, feelings of guilt, and inability to concentrate (Fisher 2023). Based on the pathophysiological understanding of these symptoms, it can be concluded that the depression stage of grief has more implications and poses a greater threat to an individual's physical and mental health than any of the previous stages. As a result, prolonged periods of depression following a loss can cause serious detriment to an individual's health, which can be recognized as prolonged grief disorder.

Acceptance

The acceptance stage of the grieving period should not be mistaken for overcoming all other stages of grief, nor does it mean that the person experiencing grief must have fully overcome their loss. The acceptance stage is simply the stage in which mourners can recognize the loss that they have experienced as part of their journey

through life, and they can return to normalcy without constantly feeling the gravity of their loss. Because the grief process varies from person to person, “we may not understand the mechanics of acceptance as well as we understand simpler, more visceral responses like anger or depression, but we can tell when it has occurred by the actions that follow” (Rooke 2015, 83).

Actions that can be indicative of entering the acceptance stage can fluctuate depending on the situation. For example, acceptance of the death of a loved one can look like visiting their grave on the anniversary of their death or being able to openly discuss their impact on your life without having an adverse reaction. Acceptance of a breakup or divorce can look like being able to engage in a romantic relationship with someone else without constantly thinking of your former partner or being happy for your former partner when they have reached a new milestone in their life. Acceptance of a diagnosis may look like allowing yourself to acknowledge your symptoms or finding a support group to help you learn how to navigate your life with your new illness. Regardless of the situation, acceptance of grief requires grievers to provide themselves with the space to experience their emotions in their fullest capacity so that they may continue their day-to-day life in a healthy manner.

Anticipatory Grief

It is also possible to grieve a loss before it has even occurred. This phenomenon is called anticipatory grief, and it is explained as the state of sorrow that “affect[s] people facing the impending death of a loved one or their own death” (Eldridge 2023). This

commonly occurs in people who have chronic illnesses and their loved ones. Examples of situations that may provoke anticipatory grief include awaiting the loss of a limb that will be amputated in the future, receiving a terminal diagnosis, or getting divorced. The five stages of grief that are typically associated with traditional grief can also be experienced with anticipatory grief. However, anticipatory grief also incorporates the elements of reflection, rehearsal of the death, and imagination of the future (Eldridge 2023).

Reflection allows the person experiencing anticipatory grief to address the feelings that they have towards the person they expect to lose and grants them the opportunity to redress any wrongs that they may have committed in the past. Rehearsing the death gives the person a chance to prepare themselves for the loss by providing a space to process the emotions that they expect to experience. Imagining the future without the loved one provides an opportunity to create a plan, which can be particularly helpful for those losing a member of their immediate family. While anticipatory grief can be beneficial because it gives the person the opportunity to prepare themselves for their projected extreme emotional state, it can also be detrimental because it allows the person to prematurely disengage from their loved one in an attempt to replace the loss that they expect to experience in the future (Sourkes 1982, 72).

Chapter 2: Dance as a Form of Therapy

Humans are naturally emotional beings, so it comes as no surprise that the period of grief following a loss would provoke such a temperamental response. Many people attempt to navigate their intense emotional state without receiving any professional assistance because of the stigma surrounding admitting to having struggles with mental health during difficult times. For people who are struggling through mourning, psychologists recommend attending therapy, either individual or group, to help process the emotions that they are experiencing.

For people who do not believe that therapy is a necessity for their own situation, it is still important that they find a healthy way to express their sentiments so that they do not suppress their feelings and risk causing greater harm to their mental state. Of course, however, grief is an extremely personal process, so no one should attempt to tell someone how to grieve their personal losses. Nevertheless, refusal for an individual to admit that they are struggling can lead to greater issues with mental health, like prolonged grief disorder or persistent complex bereavement disorder, that threaten the mental stability and life of the griever. Someone who is struggling with complicated grief can recognize this exhibiting itself as preoccupying the mind with memories or thoughts of their deceased loved one, avoiding settings that remind them of their deceased loved one, or being incapable of experiencing more positive emotions following the loss (Ramchand 2015, 32).

Prolonged Grief Disorder and Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder

When most people experience the loss of a loved one, they typically face temporary emotional distress. However, when their symptoms are persistent, this is usually indicative of a more serious underlying issue. Prolonged grief disorder is a medical condition diagnosable after a period of six months that “differs from normal and uncomplicated grief, not in terms of the nature of grief reactions, but rather the distress and disability caused by these reactions and their persistence and pervasiveness” (Boelen 2017, 1). This condition is fairly rare, with approximately five percent of mourners experiencing the disorder (Boelen 2017, 1).

Symptoms of prolonged grief disorder include irritability, hyper-fixation on the deceased individual, and inability to accept reality. Prolonged grief disorder is very similar to persistent complex bereavement disorder, but this condition can only be diagnosed in adults after at least a year. Additionally, persistent complex bereavement disorder usually coincides with suicidal ideation and isolation from society. Statistically speaking, women are at greater risk of experiencing prolonged grief disorder or persistent complex bereavement disorder, and these conditions are generally triggered by “unnatural and violent loss, due to homicide, accidents, criminal attacks, suicide, and unexpected death” (Boelen 2017, 3). Individuals who are suffering from either of these conditions are strongly encouraged to seek professional help to assist them in managing their symptoms of grief.

Somatics and Dance

In 1976, Thomas Hanna became the father of somatics, arguing that somatic thinking was an extension of Charles Darwin's theories on evolution, with somatic work being understood as a form of movement education and therapy. This form of bodywork places an emphasis on connecting your physical being with your internal being through movement. Anna Halprin eventually became one of the first people to explore the connection between dance expression and somatic movement, and she founded the Tamalpa Institute to explore "therapeutic expressive tools that help people move emotions into an integrative experience" (Eddy 2002, 49).

Dance is used as a method of artistry, expression, and communication in many cultures. The artist thesis holds that the expression process that an artist navigates when creating art allows the artist to give an articulate expression to their emotional state (Arnold 1995, 62). The expression theory states that "performance is construed as a vehicle by which the dancer expresses his feelings, emotions, or attitudes in an attempt to engender these emotions or attitudes as a response in the audience" (Sirridge 1977, 15). Throughout history, professionals in the dance industry have emphasized that the primary purpose of this form of art is to enable the dancer to elicit an emotional response from the audience by applying their own emotional state to enhance their performative storytelling abilities. In so doing, the dancer is given the opportunity to navigate and process their own emotions and mental state.

Dance Therapy

It has been argued that, though verbal expression of emotions is beneficial for individuals exploring their emotional state, it is proven to be much more effective when coupled with physical expression. “While verbal therapists are certainly aware of the importance of the body and of nonverbal expression, I think we too often assume that verbal and nonverbal expression may be separated, and that verbalizations are more direct expressions of thought than the body’s movements” (Wittig 2010, 54). More than half of all communication is done nonverbally, primarily through body language (Thompson 2011). Because communication is mostly nonverbal, it is important that more physical forms of therapy be explored as a valid additive to conventional forms of therapy, and a form of therapy that has been witnessing a rise in popularity is dance therapy.

The American Dance Therapy Association has explained that dance and movement therapy is the “psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual” (ADTA). Dance therapy is usually performed in groups and has the goal of providing participants with the opportunity to further explore physical forms of expression. Though sessions differ with every therapist, dance movement therapy sessions always incorporate improvisation to allow patients to use their subconscious mind to guide them through their movement and, therefore, their expression (Wittig 2010, 55). However, techniques used to guide improvisation also vary from therapist to therapist, with some therapists choosing to give

their patients a structure or prompt to respond to and others opting to allow full creative freedom to respond to their natural impulses.

Chapter 3: Dancing through Grief Across the World

Somatic practices draw influence from various cultures, particularly Asian and African cultures (Eddy 2002, 53). For example, in Japanese culture, there is a style of healing known as *seitai*, which encourages people to utilize their body's natural restorative powers to heal their physical ailments (Shoji 2005), and this connection is explored further in Japanese dance traditions. Additionally, dance is subject to interpretation based on identity, especially that of race, gender, nationality, and ethnicity (Desmond 1993, 42). Understanding the connection between dance, identity, and somatic movement, it is of extreme importance to highlight how cultures across the world employ dance to explore grief, as well as how members of these communities may utilize dance to pay homage to a deceased loved one.

Japan

In Japanese American culture, the Obon festival is a Buddhist festival in which members of the community pay homage to their ancestors whose spirits they believe are temporarily brought back to Earth to participate in the festival alongside their loved ones. One of the most important parts of this tradition is the *bon-odori*, which directly translates to the dance for Obon. The *bon-odori* tradition receives its inspiration from Ullambana Sutra, "which tells the story of a monk who danced for joy when he released his deceased mother's soul from hell by making a merit (a force accumulated through good deeds) for her" (Wong 2019, 76).

The bon-odori tradition was first introduced in the fifteenth century and was popularized during the seventeenth century's Tokugawa period. Some villages choose to opt out of participating in the bon-odori for their Obon festivals, but dance is still an active part of the celebration as folk dance is still incorporated in the celebrations. In Japanese American communities, specifically in California, the bon-odori tradition began in 1931 in the San Francisco Buddhist Temple. The tradition grew so rapidly that by 1936 the celebration had to take place outdoors. In modern day, the lead dance teachers from every region select eight dances to perform for the Obon festival. The dances are performed in succession, with a brief intermission halfway through the dances to allow everyone the opportunity to retrieve refreshments, like dango and shaved ice (Wong 2019, 78).

Mexico

In Mexico, the purpose of the Día de los Muertos tradition is to pay homage to deceased loved ones, but it “also has a history of enabling pundit-free speech to critique causes of death and the vanity of living” (Cordova 2017, 208). As the tradition becomes more globalized, the introduction of new elements of the celebration becomes more prevalent, and dance is one of the newer elements that were introduced by Mexican American communities. The celebration in California began in the 1960s as a method for Mexican Americans to reconnect with their indigenous and Catholic heritages, while also providing an outlet of expression through artistic means for members of the community.

San Francisco witnessed a rise in popularity of their Día de los Muertos events, with a growth from only a hundred to several thousand attendees over the period of the 1970s to the 1990s (Cordova 2017, 230). Because of this growth, the events are held more like parades, with some participants dancing in costumes that resemble human skeletons alongside people walking on stilts. In addition to their inclusion in the parades, some ofrendas, or offerings, also have displays involving dancing skeletons. Some parades, like the Día de los Muertos parade in La Mission, employ Aztec dancers to guide their processions and large matachines, or carnival dancers, who dance on stilts to samba music performed by a calavera, or skeleton (Cordova 2017, 232).

New Orleans

One of the most sacred parts of culture in New Orleans is the funeral ritual. As part of the tradition, members of the community join the procession, often ending with hundreds of people in attendance. The first line of the funeral incorporates percussive music performed by jazz musicians, and spiritual, brass music is heavily affiliated with the tradition. The second line of the funeral is executed as a parade, and “it is one of many sacred cultural rites that originated in the crucible of the American slave trade and are maintained to this day” (Young 2022). In the second line, dance is one of the most major forms of expression, existing to remind the crowd that death is a necessary part of life by giving them an opportunity to honor the life and legacy of their lost loved one as a group.

The New Orleans funeral tradition is heavily inspired by African, Caribbean, and Native American cultures, especially because these cultures also do not believe in the finality of death. Multiple layers of grief exist in the second line emphasizing the variability of the grief process for all people who experience it. For Ausetua Amor Amenkum, the artistic director of the Kumbuka African Drum and Dance Collective and an adjunct dance professor at Tulane University, the dancing that is involved with the second line gives each griever the opportunity to express their individuality in grief (Young 2022). Amenkum recalls her childhood experiences, stating that people generally joined the parade once the second line began to collectively mourn while also being able to physically express their emotions through dance in whatever way they were drawn to do so (Young 2022).

Chapter 4: Modern Figures in Dance

Not only has dance been used by people of different cultural backgrounds to explore their own grief, many of the most renowned figures in the dance industry are most known for their works surrounding grief. One of Martha Graham's most famous works, *Lamentations*, highlights the embodiment of grief. Alvin Ailey's most famous work, *Revelations*, highlights the grief that was experienced by African Americans throughout their history in America. Natalia Osipova is well known for her performance in Arthur Pita's short film, *The Mother*, which explores the grief that a mother feels after her child has passed and the anticipatory grief that soon-to-be mothers with at-risk pregnancies experience while pregnant.

Martha Graham

Martha Graham, born in 1894, began her professional dance career with the Denishawn Company, which encouraged Graham to explore non-ballet movement in her dancing. By 1923, she left the Denishawn Company to complete a two-year internship for John Murray Anderson's *Greenwich Village Follies* (Jowitt 1991, 14). The dance industry viewed Graham as a radical figure due to her progressive views and how she utilized the female body in dance. For example, she was known for encouraging abstract movements, like contractions, controlled falls, and angular motion during a period of time when classical ballet movements were the standard.

In 1926, Graham founded the Martha Graham Dance Company, which has “expanded contemporary dance’s vocabulary of movement and forever altered the scope of the art form by rooting works in contemporary social, political, psychological, and sexual contexts, deepening their impact and resonance” (Martha Graham Dance Company 2023). Not only was Graham a gifted choreographer, but she was also a talented dancer known for her ability to tell stories through movement. She often struggled with relinquishing her roles to other performers because she believed that she was the only person who could execute her movement as expressively as she could (Sirridge 1977, 19). Over her seventy years in the dance industry, Graham produced 181 works, most notably *Appalachian Spring*, *Lamentation*, and *Chronicle*.

Graham debuted one of her most famous pieces of choreography, *Lamentation*, in New York City at Maxine Elliot’s Theater in 1930. The dancer performing this choreography is costumed in a long tube of purple fabric (Figure 1) and is representative of grief itself. The fabric restricts the movement of the dancer, creating an image of anguish that drastically affects the way the viewer receives the work. This body of work is known for “its convulsive twists, low swings, diagonal extensions, horizontal spreads, and upward thrusts” (Polcari 2005, 499) that help convey the emotional aspects of the choreography. This style of movement within the constraints of the costume also highlights another layer of meaning, an internal battle of suffering and emotion in which the viewer imagines fighting to escape their own skin.

Alvin Ailey

Alvin Ailey was born in 1931 in Texas, which would later inspire much of his choreographic work. Ailey's first introduction to dance came when he attended Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and Katherine Dunham Dance Company performances in Los Angeles. By 1942, Ailey began his dance training under Lester Horton, who was one of the first choreographers to accept Black students into his company. In 1953, Horton passed away, and Ailey became the director of the Lester Horton Dance Theater, where he first began exploring his choreographic abilities.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was founded in 1958 in New York City with the purpose of incorporating the African American experience into the mainstream modern dance industry. Ailey's most famous work, *Revelations*, was inspired by the cultural history of African Americans, with the entire piece being danced to gospel music and spirituals to explore "the places of deepest grief and holiest joy in the soul" (Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater 2024). The work was created in 1960, just two years after the founding of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and it has been performed in 71 countries for over 23 million people, making it the most widely viewed modern dance work of all time. *Revelations* is performed in three sections (Figure 2). The first section "Pilgrim of Sorrow" focuses on exploring the concept of salvation, the second section "Take Me to the Water" recounts Ailey's own baptism, and the final section "Move, Members, Move" depicts a worshipping congregation with movements suggesting "gossiping conversations, discomfort on a hot day, and the hope of salvation" (The Kennedy Center).

Natalia Osipova

Natalia Osipova was born in 1986 in Moscow, Russia, and she began her dance training when she was just five years old. In 1994, she joined the Mikhail Lavrosky Ballet School, and she trained at the Moscow State Academy of Choreography, one of the most prestigious ballet academies in the world, from 1995 to 2004 under Dean Marina Leonova. Once she graduated from the Academy, she entered Bolshoi Ballet as a member of the corps, and she was promoted to principal dancer in 2010. As a principal dancer with Bolshoi Ballet, Osipova danced the roles of Giselle, Nikiya, Gamzatti, Kitri, La Sylphide, Esmerelda, Princess Aurora, and Swanilda. In 2011, she joined Mikhailovsky Ballet as a principal dancer, leaving Bolshoi Ballet in her past.

Osipova danced with a variety of ballet companies across the world, and in 2012, she joined the American Ballet Theatre as a principal. With American Ballet Theatre, Osipova worked with Alexei Ratmansky to create the titular role in *The Firebird*. In the 2012-2013 season, Osipova was featured as a Guest Artist with The Royal Ballet, dancing the role of Odette in *Swan Lake* alongside Carlos Acosta. In the following season, she became a principal dancer with The Royal Ballet, where she is most notably known for her performances as Sugar Plum Fairy, Cinderella, and Anastasia. She worked to create new roles in *Strapless*, *Woolf Works*, *The Weathering*, *Medusa*, *Connectome*, *Tetractys*, and *Concerto pour deux*. She has also received “Golden Masks for her performances in *In the Upper Room* (2008) and *La Sylphide* (2009), Critics’ Circle National Dance Awards..., Positano Dance Awards..., and a Benois de la Danse Award” (Royal Opera House).

Osipova's performance in Arthur Pita's short film *The Mother* is based on a story by Hans Christian Andersen about a mother mourning the loss of her baby that has been claimed by Death, performed by Jonathan Goddard (Figure 3). In the short film, Osipova's character is seen cycling through all the stages of grief. At the beginning of the film, Osipova's character is pacing the stage while listening to her baby cry in its cradle. While the doctor, a face of Goddard's Death, tends to the situation by sedating the Mother, Osipova can be seen collapsing onto the ground after a series of frantic turns. The emotion of the short film is amplified by the set as "the rotating rooms of the set are grimly atmospheric, with peeling paint and the soul-piercing cries of a squalling baby" (Winship 2019). As the scenes shift, Osipova's movements proceed to get more and more drastic. The Mother receives repeated injuries throughout the film, with her eyes being gouged out and her costume becoming bloodier with each passing scene. At the climax of the film, Goddard's Death rips the baby out of the arms of Osipova, and "she convulses as if the child had been ripped out of her body" (Kirkup 2019). The film ends at the set of the opening scene with Osipova's character still being pregnant with her baby, highlighting that she was experiencing anticipatory grief prior to the birth of her baby out of fear of losing a person that she had already grown to love. *The Mother* has been critically acclaimed as a thought-provoking and disturbing take on the preparations that women go through as they navigate pregnancy.

Chapter 5: My Personal Experience with Grief and Dance

I began dancing in 2008 in Jackson, TN. I was trained in a wide variety of styles, including ballet, pointe, tap, lyrical, modern, contemporary, jazz, and acrobatics. I remained at the same dance studio from ages four to seventeen, when I graduated high school. At this studio, I was taught the fundamentals of dance and explored the boundaries of my body's own movement. At a young age, I was considered a very advanced dancer, and my dance teachers promoted me to class levels with peers who began their dance studies two to three years prior to when I started.

However, when I was ten years old, I was diagnosed with Graves' disease, a condition that caused my thyroid to overproduce hormones, causing me to gain a lot of weight in a short period of time. Being a dancer, I was taught that you had to have a certain body type – thin and tall with little to no curves – to be successful, and as I was aging, I could no longer identify myself as having a “ballet body”. I could understand that my body was changing because of puberty, genetics, and health issues, but I still felt that I was at fault for the way my body looked. My guilt surrounding my body was worsened with the rhetoric that I was being exposed to by adults in my dance environment.

By the time I was twelve years old, I was placed on an extremely restrictive diet by one of my dance teachers in an attempt to encourage drastic weight loss in a short period of time. When I was introduced to the diet plan, I was led to believe that my dance teacher and her daughter would also be participating in the journey with me, which I would later come to find out was a lie. With this diet, I could not consume any carbohydrates other than fruits and vegetables, any processed foods, any fats, or any dairy

products. I was also told to consume less than 1,600 calories per day and to drink my body weight in ounces of water. Being under the impression that I was not the only person participating in this diet, I was more comfortable taking on this responsibility because I had faith that we would not collectively be participating in a dangerous diet that threatened our health.

Because I was so young, I did not have a solid understanding of how dieting worked, and I could not recognize that my body needed fuel to function in the environment that I was in. On top of that, I was already battling issues with my health, and restrictive eating for quick and drastic weight loss posed a greater threat to my health than simply maintaining my weight. Rather than being told what I could eat, I was told what I should not, and this led me to severely restricting my eating to exclude virtually everything that I normally would have consumed prior to the diet. This ultimately led to me battling issues with my relationship with food and body image, and I am still battling negative self-image to this day.

In addition to my own personal thoughts surrounding my body, adults in my dance environment made several comments throughout my teenage years that continued to worsen my body image. At the point when most of these comments were made, I was already consulting with an endocrinologist to discuss removing my thyroid due to the number of issues it was causing. The seamstress at my studio made frequent comments about my weight and race. For example, I was told that I stood out on stage because I was “fat and burnt” and didn’t look like other people while performing. I was regularly denied more advanced roles in ballet productions because the seamstress refused to make a costume that would fit me since costumes were typically just reused from the last year.

On the diet that I was on, I lost eleven pounds over the course of thirty days. Rather than being concerned for my health, my classical ballet instructor, who also owned the dance studio, told me that I had made her proud, and she hoped that I was able to continue to lose weight at that rate to prepare for our show that was coming up in three months. Had I continued to lose weight that rapidly, I would have lost over forty pounds over the course of a semester, which should never be applauded or encouraged for someone at that age. My body was also regularly mocked in my ballet and pointe classes. In one of the most memorable classes to me, the studio owner used my thighs as an example for other dancers to show them how “big and ugly” your legs could get if you allowed yourself to gain muscle.

The dance company was eventually investigated by the state for a complaint made surrounding their mistreatment of dancers, and my experiences were included in grievance. Neither me nor anyone in my immediate family was responsible for the complaint being filed, but we were constantly belittled for the remainder of my time at the studio. It was later revealed that in an interview with state investigators, the studio owner made a comment that ballet was not made for big girls, so it should not have come as a surprise that she refused to highlight them by casting them in lead roles.

Because of the torment that I was being put through, my mom told me that she was willing to help me transfer studios, even if that meant that we made a far greater commute to get me to dance classes. I knew that the studio was one of the best in the area, and I did not want to put any extra stress on my mom, who was already balancing working full time and being a single mother, so we stayed until I graduated. However, in the week leading up to my last recital with the studio, the owner told me that she would

be surprised if I ever found employment in the professional dance industry because no one was looking for “fat girls who knew how to find the beat.” At our annual recital, the graduating seniors were interviewed on stage about our plans, and I stated that I refused to dance after I left the studio. During my first semester, I did not dance, but I attended a showcase for a campus dance organization, MTSU Performing Arts Company. To my surprise, I found myself auditioning to become a member of the company by the start of the next semester, and I was introduced to a dance environment that was kind and caring, which was completely foreign to me.

However, in December 2022, I learned that the owner of my old dance studio had passed away. This was a period of intense mourning for studio alumni, and I felt out of place because I had no feelings of sadness toward the situation. I would later realize that I was simply in denial of what happened. I did not allow myself to feel anything regarding her death, and by the time I came to accept that there was nothing wrong with grieving, I had built up so much resentment towards everyone. I was mad at my peers for being sad that she died because she treated so many dancers so horribly. I was mad at my dance teachers for choosing to reach out to every recent graduate but me to invite them to her funeral. I was mad at myself for not being on speaking terms with her before she died. Most significantly, I was mad at her for not apologizing to me or reconciling our differences before she passed because she knew what she had done to me and so many dancers before and after me.

The anger stage of grief was one of the hardest for me to overcome because I felt that I had the right to be angry at the situation due to my experiences with her. I later came to realize that being angry did nothing positive for me, and I was able to quickly

cycle through the other stages of grief once I was able to release my resentment. The only way that I knew how to navigate myself through this loss and to process my emotions was to dance. Anything that I felt towards the situation was put into my movement, and that led to me rediscovering my love for dance.

Dance has been a powerful method of expression throughout my life, and I believe that everyone can benefit from learning to how to use dance to carry them through tough times, which is why I came up with the idea for this project. Even if I am only able to help one person, I want to make sure that I tell my story of how dance has helped me in hopes that others are able to use dance as a tool to help guide them through difficult emotions.

Choreography Analysis

My choreography can be viewed by following this link:

<https://youtu.be/ATwFkXeNsVg>.

The song that I chose to choreograph to is “I’m Tired” by Labrinth featuring Zendaya. This song was written for *Euphoria*, an HBO show following the journey of a young woman named Rue after the passing of her father. In the show, Rue battles a serious drug addiction that begins to threaten her own life. In the scene where the song was first introduced, Rue overdoses and hallucinates dancing with her deceased father. This scene, and thus this song, was especially moving to me because it depicted how experiencing grief can drastically interfere with your perception of reality.

When I first began choreographing for this project, I wanted each stage of grief to have its own section of choreography, entirely separate from the other stages. The reasoning for the original plan was grief is a personal journey, and each person

experiences the stages differently. However, as I attempted to choreograph, I quickly realized that I could not explore the stages separately. All of the stages are intrinsically connected, and you cannot navigate one without also providing space to explore others. Once I accepted this fact, my thought process became much clearer, and I was able to fully articulate my vision.

Because I struggle to talk about my feelings, dance has been one of the most beneficial outlets for me throughout my life. Going through the process of choreographing has been very helpful for me in navigating my own journey of grief following the loss of my dance teacher. Her rhetoric led to some very intense feelings of self-loathing, which have proven to be difficult for me to overcome. As I choreographed, I was forced to confront these feelings. Every time I found a movement, I found myself critiquing every possible aspect of it, and I was then able to see the extent of the damage that had been done to my self-esteem. Once I acknowledged the harm that she caused, I realized that I had been holding myself back from grieving her because I felt like she did not deserve it and I thought that grieving her legitimized what she had done. Preventing myself from experiencing my grief did not benefit me in any capacity, and this project gave me an outlet to navigate this process without feeling pressured to move faster or slower than what was natural to me.

I originally believed that the most dominant stage of grief that I highlighted in my choreography was anger because, for the most part, I thought that what I was going through was anger. However, the more I watched my choreography, the more I saw that so much of my movement was rooted in depression. Most of my choreography was kept at a slow, steady pace, which was an unintentional choice at the time of choreographing

the piece. After I noticed the pacing of the piece, I appreciated that it directly mirrored my feelings of being stuck in depression and unable to progress through grief, which helped me understand my own personal journey and recognize what my own personal triggers were. Recognizing the depressive nature of my piece helped me identify the anger that I was feeling as a symptom of my underlying depression, rather than anger itself being my most dominant stage of grief. Because I had been trying to solve the anger issue, I was not giving enough attention and space to the depression that I was going through, making it impossible for me to truly acknowledge and address the root cause of the anger to overcome it.

At the beginning of the choreography, I rock back and forth on the floor and struggle to lift myself up, and I then begin to wipe tears from my face. This moment of the choreography is meant to symbolize the struggle to present a composed image to the public and highlight my unwillingness to accept how heavily my emotions weighed on me. At various moments of this choreography, I experimented with level changes to symbolize the fluctuating emotions that I went through as I allowed myself to grieve. An example of this occurs at the beginning of the choreography when I attempt to pick myself up from the ground, but I quickly fall back down due to being overcome by the overwhelming emotional journey that inevitably comes after a major loss. At several points in the choreography, I arch my back to look up at the sky, signifying my attempts to release my more complex emotions to a higher power. Because I have reclaimed my place in dance and accepted that ballet does not exclude bigger bodies, I included a section of port de bras, or ballet arm movements, as if I were reaching out to someone who was no longer present to respond to me. As I wanted to highlight the internal battle

that I faced when I was going through, I included a section of choreography in which I punched my own hand and visibly fought with myself for dominance over my own emotions. At the end of the choreography, I released my own hand, which symbolizes letting go of that battle and entering the path of acceptance.

My dance teacher's actions during my childhood alienated me from an art form that I have always loved deeply. Reintroducing myself to dance has proven to be a therapeutic method for me to creatively explore the emotional turmoil that I have gone through, as well as providing me an outlet to express the feelings that are too difficult for me to express through words. Knowing how much dance has benefited me, I believe that everyone could benefit from exploring this art style, especially when they are exploring difficult and complex feelings. Grief is one of the hardest processes to navigate, but for me and countless others, dance is therapy.

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