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Cycle of Friendship: creating a story in dance

M. Leigh Spencer
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On April 26, 2002, at 7 pm, *Cycle of Friendship: a story in four dances* was performed. This suite of four dances was the final product of over a year of dreaming, choreographing, teaching, and organizing. This paper will explain and detail the processes and effort that went into this project, as well as critiquing the final performance.

In January of 2001, I began contemplating the idea for my final honors project. I had just discovered that it was not required to remain in one's major when creating a thesis or project. The idea of a suite of dances had been inspired by a dancer from my first semester in SIRDT; for her undergraduate degree in dance she had been required to put together a long suite and a short suite. I confirmed that a suite of four dances was an acceptable senior project, and began the process of creating it.

The story for my suite came easily once I had solidified the project. I had been pondering the idea of friendship and tracing the story of two friends as an idea for a single dance, but it was too complex for the short format. The original story for the suite was simply about two girls who become friends as young girls, go to school together, drift apart in college and then come back together years later with the help of their daughters. When I began to flush this out, for the purpose of finding music and beginning choreography, I realized that drifting apart was not strong enough; it would be difficult to convey through dance, and hard for the audience to grasp. So I decided to have them become rivals, and to separate, if not violently, at least on less than friendly terms. The four dances now had a plot; meeting, high school, college (rivals), and meeting again. Now that the storyline was set, it was time to find music.

Someone suggested to me that the music for my suite should all be by the same artist or composer. In fall of 2000, my quest for dance music led me to acquire a large collection of music by David Arkenstone. A new age musician, Arkenstone's instrumental music is moody

with a nice amount of repetition. I began with this collection, listening to some of every song I had and trying to fit the mood of the music to the mood of the piece. After finding several songs that would work for each piece, I then listened to the entire song, making sure there were no surprises in the music, and that the song was an appropriate length. When I had it narrowed quite a bit, I listened to my top choice for each piece in context with each other. One song had to be replaced; the sound was too different and the flow between songs didn't work. Once I had my four songs, in proper order, choreography could begin.

I began choreography late spring of 2001, using whatever space I had. I decided early on in the process that the best way to choreograph four dances and tie the main characters together through all the pieces was to use a theme movement. I also decided that each piece would have its own unique set of repeated movements. These were what I choreographed first. I tried using different styles of dance for each piece, to fit the music as well as the mood. The first phrase I choreographed was the base for what became "Conforming." This was the only phrase finished before summer. I spent quite a bit of time choreographing over the summer, though much of the choreography was for a solo I planned to do for the fall concert. For the principal dancers in my suite, I choreographed a base phrase without referencing the music. Later, I modified this phrase for each piece, to fit the counts and speed of each piece of music. The only phrases I finished over the summer were this phrase and what I originally planned to use as the base phrases for my rival groups in what would become "Division."

With the return to classes and SIRDT in the fall, I chose to finish "Conforming", the second piece of the suite and the first of two with a large corps, for the Fall 2001 concert. My original plan was to have 8 corps, 2 principals, and 2 young dancers, but as long as I had an even number for the third piece ("Division") I would be able to work with any number between 6 and

12 corps. I taught the phrases from "Division" at casting in the fall, to insure I got dancers who could handle what I anticipated would be the most difficult dance, and cast 11 dancers. I also invited Amy Ralls to participate, with the knowledge that she would not be performing in the rival piece. I knew up front that one of my dancers would only be able to dance in the second piece, and I made sure that the rest of my dancers knew they were making a commitment beyond the usual one semester commitment of most SIRDT dances.

I chose to start teaching the second piece because I could begin teaching the basic phrases and layout before selecting my principals. I waited until after the third week of rehearsal before announcing my choice for principals, because before that date, dancers are allowed to drop without explanation and I wanted to make sure the dancers I chose were going to stick it out. I also talked individually to each of the two I chose, to make sure they knew the extra commitment they were making. The principals had to learn and perform four dances, whereas the rest of the cast only had to learn two each. I chose dancers who I knew were capable of learning and performing the dances, who I had worked with before, and who I knew could play the characters of the best friends.

Within the first three weeks of rehearsals, I had two dancers leave the company (and consequently my suite) and one dancer who was injured and had to sit out first semester. With luck, the injured dancer would return in the spring and I would still have an even number for the third piece, but "Conforming" became a cast of 9. During the semester, while I was teaching movement choreographed earlier, I was creating the choreography I would be teaching in a few weeks. With "Conforming," I played with variations on a theme as well as walking as movement. I also worked with my dancers to create some small partnering movements, as partnering work was a large part of the suite. The principals had a few duet moments, but for the

most part they worked with the corps, doing the same movement. "Conforming" turned out to be a relatively simple dance, both on the level of teaching as well as the actual amount of choreography, but it created the mood I wanted and the simplicity of it helped contrast this dance with the one to follow.

The costume designing process also began in the fall, as well as naming the four dances. Three of the names chosen in the fall remained the same; the first piece was originally named "Formation" but was changed to "Initiation" in the spring. The base for the costumes was finalized in fall, and ordered, but the actual costumes added to the base were not finalized in design until their construction. For Dance Expresso Fall 2001, the dancers did not have the leotard base or the final costume, so I simply had them wear a colored leotard with pants over it for the performance of "Conforming" that semester. Ironically, the tank leotards that they would use as a base arrived the day of the second performance, but I simply kept them for use the next semester. The performance went well, but out of context the dance had trouble standing alone.

Over the winter break, my sister and I worked on some of the movement for the third piece, "Division," and played with the principals' phrase in each dance. We also worked out some partnering ideas for the rival gang members to use. My mother and I also worked on costume design. We found t-shirts to use over the base leotards for "Conforming," and we got patterns and fabric for the "Division" costumes. The base costumes for the dancers were light blue leotards for the corps, lilac and pale green leotards for the principals, tan or nude tights, and white ked-type tennis shoes. The costumes for the first and last pieces were postponed until I had my young dancers. Costume construction also had to wait until I had all the measurements from my cast. We ended up having to wait longer than planned, because I lost three dancers over break for various reasons.

When spring semester started and dances for the spring concert were cast, I had three dancers to replace. My injured dancer from the previous semester returned, and I found two more dancers willing to learn "Conforming" as well as "Division." Fortunately, I kept both of my principals, and in the process of recasting I gained an obvious pair of dancers to fill the roles of "gang leaders" in "Division." I began the semester teaching and reviewing "Conforming" and teaching the phrases that, at the time, were to be the basis for "Division." After two weeks of rehearsal, I lost yet another dancer, and had to recruit from the company to replace her. Thankfully, the cast I had now was to remain my cast for the duration of the semester, and the last dancer added caught on very quickly.

While I was working with the entire group for the second and third pieces, I began working separately with my principals. We began with the first piece, of which they had to learn only the second half. I was choreographing both "Initiation" and "Division" at the same time. In one bolt of inspiration, I created what we referred to as the "signature moves" for each gang, and "Division" evolved rapidly from these. "Initiation" was simpler, though the music different counts than the rest of the dances. It, too, evolved rapidly once I had the basic movements. Donna and I decided that, instead of simply performing the suite in the Spring SIRDT concert, I would have a concert of my own. So, while I was choreographing and teaching, I also began the concert production process. I arranged for a lighting designer, who I trusted to take care of the technical aspects. My mother and I also began work on costumes for the entire suite. This left one last task; finding young dancers to fill the two roles still open.

I contacted Susan Barnes Dance Studio about observing dance classes, and went to several classes. I knew that I wanted girls about 9 or 10, and that they needed to look believably like my two principals. I was truly lucky, for I found two girls, already good friends with each

other, who I thought would be perfect. I sent letters home to their mothers, explaining my project and the commitment I needed from them. Both mothers called me back that evening, and we arranged a weekly rehearsal time that worked for both girls. I began working with just the two of them before Spring Break, and immediately following Spring Break, the principals began joining us.

With "Conforming" and "Division" coming along nicely, I began to focus on "Initiation" and "Reconnecting." The opening piece for the suite was fairly easy to choreograph and teach; it was meant to be simple, with repetition establishing the theme movement for the principals. I also included Amy Ralls as a "dance instructor" at the beginning, to add context for the start of the friendship. "Reconnecting" was really my hardest task.

"Reconnecting" involved individual movements for the young dancers, the principals, each mother-daughter pair, and the four of them as a unit. I ended up playing with variations from movements used throughout the entire suite, particularly from "Initiation" and "Conforming." The very end of "Reconnecting" introduced new movement that I choreographed over Spring Break. For some reason, "Reconnecting" took longer to teach than I anticipated, and my dancers had trouble remembering quite a bit of it. The principals also had a tendency to rush one section, but the young dancers always managed to recover it. I ended up having them run "Reconnecting" before the house opened on performance night.

The other aspects of putting together a performance also took much of my time in the weeks leading up to the show. I had to find costumes for all the dances, create fliers and programs, arrange for videotaping, and organize the lights and sound. I also arranged for refreshments following the performance, courtesy of the University Honors Program. Arranging

for the videotaping didn't take much time, and my family helped with program and flier creation. The real trials were technical and costume related.

The costumes for "Conforming" and "Division" were arranged before Spring Break. For "Conforming," I simply got large men's t-shirts in bright colors to match the base leotard color for each of my dancers. I cut out the neckline and had the dancers tie the shirts at the waist, at a location of their choosing. For "Division," I put one group in flood length pants of a dark blue patterned fabric, and the other group in modified bib-overalls of a slightly lighter blue patterned fabric. The costumes for "Initiation" and "Reconnecting" were more difficult. I ordered leotards for the young dancers to match those the principals were wearing, and purchased fabric in the same colors to make wrap skirts. I acquired wrap skirts for the principal dancers, and the "Initiation" costumes were complete. For "Reconnecting," I borrowed costumes from the SIRDT costume closet for all four dancers. The older girls I put in white pants over their leotards, and I modified the matching white tops for the young dancers to wear over their leotards. After seeing the results on the dancers, I was very happy with the costumes.

The Monday of our tech week, my dancers, technical crew, and I hung lights and set up sound equipment. Arranging for sound was easy; I simply put all four songs on one CD with gaps between each. I let my lighting designer, Scott Wasserberg, create most of the design for the performance, with the understanding that I could make any changes necessary. Most of his design was appropriate, though we had to make a few modifications and a compromise on one issue. The one interesting effect we hadn't foreseen with lighting was the action of daylight; the concert occurred before the sun set, though rehearsals had been mostly after dark.

One major crisis had to be taken care of very close to performance. One of the child leotards did not arrive in time. Fortunately, one of the stores in the mall carries children's

leotards, and though they did not have the color I wanted, they had pink leotards that would work. At this point I was happy enough to find something pastel. When I watched the performance, though they weren't exactly what I had originally envisioned, the pink leotards worked well.

The actual performance itself came together quite nicely. Though I gave a minor explanation for those in the audience prior to the performance, most of the audience understood the basic plot. A few even picked out the symbolism of color and lighting, some of which was planned and some of which was unintentional. The colors of the costumes were, for the most part, planned symbolism. The corps was put in a primary color, and both principals were variations of that color. The costumes in general got progressively darker, more richly colored, as the suite went on, until the last piece. The color deepening was to portray the growing depth of the characters and the elaboration of the plot. Because the last piece was a kind of rebirth, white costumes were appropriate. The lighting was based on these costumes, as well as the mood of each piece of music, and it complimented the suite very well.

The movement itself worked well. The repeated base phrase achieved the desired effect of tying the principals together through the whole suite, and the repeated movement in each piece conveyed a theme without being overused. The movement for the young dancers was not too complex, and they portrayed their characters well. Even though they were not the same group of dancers as first semester, the corps turned into a solid unit; they were not simply 6 dancers on the same stage. I personally was impressed at the unity of the group during the performance.

"Initiation" successfully conveyed the feeling I was aiming for, and looked very good on stage. It turned out to be a good introduction to the characters, and gave context for the rest of the suite. "Conforming" and "Division" were, in my opinion, performed better in the suite

concert than they had been in their respective SIRDT concerts. In context with each other and the other two dances, they were more understandable than standing alone in a large concert. They also continued the story, and conveyed the desired emotions well. "Reconnecting," the piece I was most concerned about, looked better than it had in any rehearsal, and was a nice conclusion to the suite.

The discussion that followed was not planned very well, though it seemed to turn out okay. The feedback I received was all positive, and some of my unintentional symbolism was brought to my attention. There are a few ideas that were presented that I would like to address in this paper. First, my cast was all female. Though creating the suite in the context of SIRDT almost required this, it was a conscious decision. I considered using males, especially when the only SIRDT male wasn't cast in any other dances. The only dance that I thought could maintain the proper context and mood without an all-female cast was "Conforming." Obviously "Initiation" and "Reconnecting" had to be fairly intimate pieces, with the only cast member outside the young dancers and the principals being a teacher-type figure to introduce the girls. I was concerned that, if males were introduced to "Division," people would see it as two friends splitting because of the men in their life. I wanted the split to occur by life choices the two made, either through their college or professional affiliations, rather than choices made by others in their lives. I wanted them to have to choose between a group and their best friend, not a man and their best friend, and I wanted to make sure the audience saw this.

I would also like to touch on the happy ending. Originally, I concluded with a happy ending simply because it was the easiest conclusion for the suite. The plot was also meant to be a tear-jerker. Friends are always drifting apart in one way or another; as people change, relationships change, and often the changes doom a friendship. I wanted to show this, but with a

glimmer of hope. I though it would be appropriate to bring the friends back together through their daughters, and thus continue the cycle. I think this accomplished at least creating the emotion I wanted.

The other issue I would like to discuss is the use of "marking," or small movements mimicking the actual choreography, in "Conforming." The original concept I had was to use a base phrase, and repeat it with three variations. I had to add a set formation for my dancers; at first I had them choose their own locations for each variation. The variations were to be the original, the same pace yet somehow bigger, and a faster pace. The idea behind the three variations was for the first to be the dancers learning how to conform to each other, the second to be the group conforming well together, and the third to show the pace of life getting more hectic. In teaching the final variation, I realized that the speed I could achieve on the phrase was much faster than most dancers, and let them do the phrase as fast as they chose, with a set ending beat. This turned out to have an added effect; this created individuality in the dancers' movements immediately before everyone split at the end.

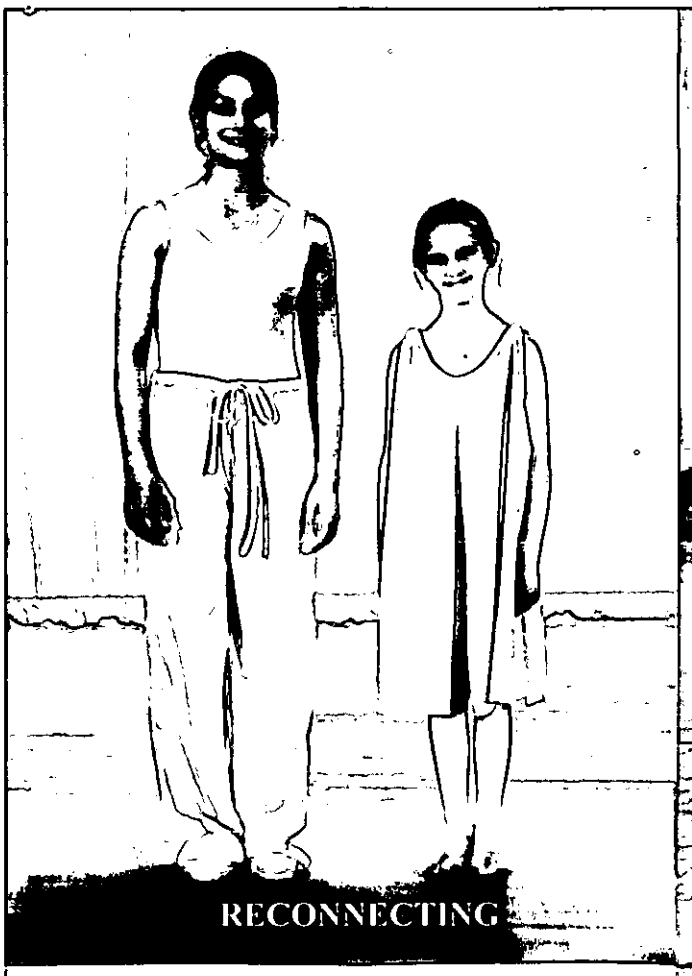
After watching the same phrase for several weeks and getting feedback from SIRDT members at Showings, I realized that the difference between the first two variations was incomplete. It was hard to tell they were variations at all. I had used "marked" variations in pieces before, and found that it could be an effective way of varying the movement. Also, the few dancers I watched perform the two variations did the original phrase quite large, and I was under the impression that the "marked" and original phrases looked strikingly different.

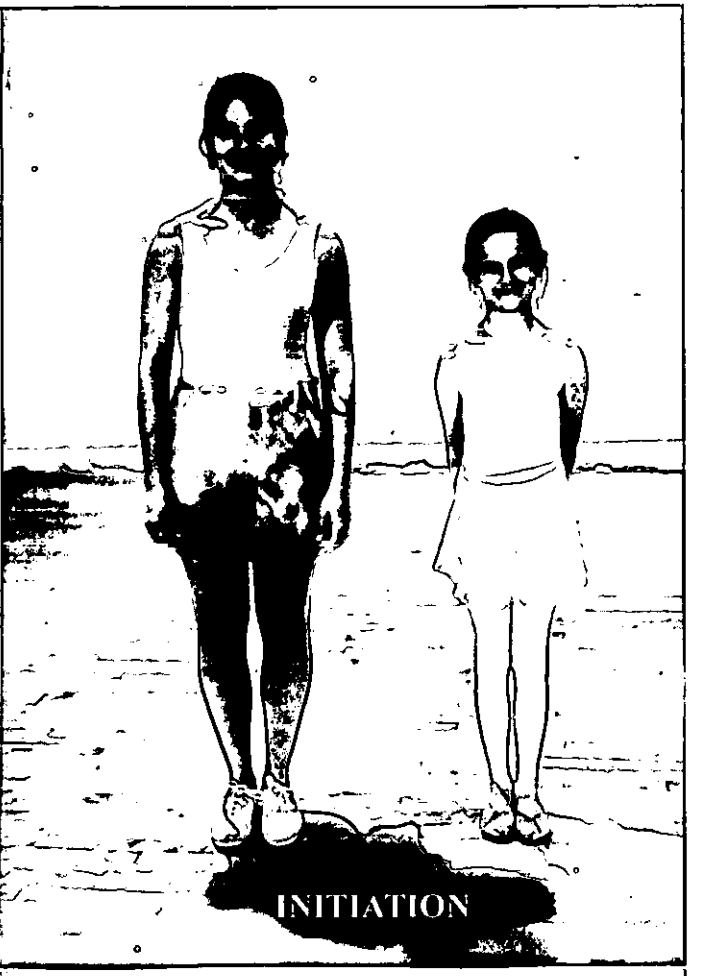
Unfortunately, no matter how much I worked with them, my dancers could not mark the phrase the same as each other. Looking back, I think I would have left the strong original phrase as the second variation, and tried something different with the first phrase, perhaps slowing the

pace and only using part of the phrase. I spent so long working on the three new pieces this semester that I don't think I took a good enough look at "Conforming" to spot that problem. I think the rest of the choreography in "Conforming" worked well, but that should have been modified.

One aspect of the suite that I was not completely prepared for was working with Courtney and Brooke, my young dancers. I had worked with younger dancers previous to this, but in more of a class setting than a performance setting. The girls I had worked with before were also used to performing outside of recital. Courtney and Brooke (and their moms) were accustomed to primarily recital performances, though the girls had both been in the Nutcracker. Except during tech week, I managed to keep calm when working with them, and to keep my expectations at a reasonable level. During tech week, when "Reconnecting" fell to pieces, I reprimanded my dancers in my usual way. I forgot that Courtney and Brooke, unlike my SIRDT dancers, had never seen me frustrated. I found out later that they thought I was truly mad at them, instead of simply frustrated. Amy made sure to clarify for them, and I know that I did my best when it came to working with them. It was definitely a different experience than working with SIRDT dancers.

This project turned out much as I had imagined it would, and I am proud to have been able to present it to an audience. This is the most ambitious choreographic project I have ever created, and while it could have used a little more tweaking, I am pleased with the results. The dancers did an admirable job, the costumes and lighting fit the pieces well, and the whole show ran very smoothly. I had a lot of help, from parents, friends, teachers, and most of all, my dancers, and I greatly appreciate everyone's support. I doubt I will ever have an experience quite like this one, and the memories I made in the process will stay with me.





DIVISION

CONFORMING