Stephani Babcock, Featured Scholar
Journal of Undergraduate Research

Modern dance is a medium of artistic expression so varied and dynamic that to make any assertion about the genre as a whole is a difficult, if not impossible, task. In the way that it appropriates various cultural styles and traditions—breaking down conventions and making something anew—perhaps the only constants in modern dance are change and innovation. Moreover, when writing about dance, one is stuck with the problem that comes with describing almost any piece of art: how does one quantify the range of emotional effects it has on both the artist and the audience? Specifically, is it possible to trace the tangible way that the visceral movement of dance induces emotion? Stephani Babcock, recent graduate of the College of Fine Arts and current graduate student in UF’s Mental Health Counselor Education program, took on this challenge in a project that employed dance, photography, and psychological theory and culminated in her paper, “Choreographing Emotion: The Process of Creating ‘ViewFinder.’” Through the College of Fine Arts’ School of Theater and Dance, Babcock was able to explore the perplexing arena of human emotions through her lifelong love of dance and choreography.

The term “personal” comes up a great deal when Stephani Babcock describes her fascination with the connection between dance and psychology, so it is perhaps fitting to know a little bit more about her in order to understand how she came to complete the most important work of her undergraduate career. Originally from Ohio, Babcock still considers herself “to be a northerner. I moved to Florida just before high school so my immediate family is in Orange Park.” She admits, “I drink ‘pop’ and I like dressing for cold weather once in a while.” Although Babcock had been a dancer her whole life, coming out of high school she was looking for a college education that, along with giving her the option to pursue her interest in dance, allowed flexibility. As Babcock describes it, “initially I didn’t know what I wanted to do for a career: I picked psychology as my major from the start, but I had a lot of interests so I wanted a school that could provide a good education in any of them if I should have chosen to switch majors.” Babcock found the perfect fit at the University of Florida, an institution that by virtue of its diversity of departments, faculty, and majors gave what Babcock says “was an amazing experience.”

UF gave this northern transplant a new sense of home. “From the day I moved into Hume (residential hall) and became part of a great community on my floor,” Babcock exclaims, “I’ve felt free to be myself.” There are three significant factors in this sense of comfort and happiness. One is her work with UF Housing, where she has been involved with resident assistants and residents as a hall director. Another is becoming part of campus ministry through Lutheran Gators, a group she says that has “always been there for me from the beginning of my time at UF; they are basically a huge family for me.” And then there is the School of Theater and Dance faculty and fellow
students, another community that, in Babcock’s words, provided both “the support and the push to take creative risks,” and where “I first had to experience those risks as a dancer before I was ready to take them on as a choreographer.”

This dual identity as dancer and choreographer, as well as her academic background and interest in psychology, is at the core of “Choreographing Emotion.” Throughout her time at UF, Babcock came to realize that there was something important about the connection between dance and psychology, a phenomenon that Babcock admits she was “struggling to articulate.” Initially Babcock intended to use a theory-heavy, empirical research mode that would attempt to quantify emotional reactions to dance. However, after coming up with a “plan for how to do that based on psychological research from the lab I’d been part of,” she says, “the idea of choreographing the movements that were to spark those emotions the project became overwhelming.” This led to a more lucid concept about how to interrogate the relationship between dance and emotion: “ViewFinder.”

Babcock choreographed a performance that encompassed three primary subjects: the dancer, the Feeler, and the Observer. The dancer performs the choreographed piece while the Feeler interacts directly with the dancer and the Observer follows the duo and photographs them as they move through the stage space. The project, Babcock admits, became about the difficulty of conveying emotion as it arises from dance, and it reflects “my own struggles between the empirical Observer and the artistic Feeler in me.” Furthermore, Babcock, identifying the place of the audience in the dance experience, added perhaps what is the key element to the “ViewFinder” project. In order to bring into contrast the “evaluative and empathetic ways of experiencing emotion” in the context of dance, Babcock distributed single-use cameras to various members of the audience, encouraging them to follow—and photograph—the Observer as she relates to the dancer and Feeler.

Babcock relates how pioneering American psychologist William James’ notion of the subjective, “observing I” provided the inspiration for the third party as photographer while the Feeler figure was drawn from another significant part of Babcock’s career at UF. “As I began choreographing I was also going through training to be a volunteer phone crisis counselor,” Babcock recalls, “so my emotional sensitivity became much more significant to me.” This is perhaps most acutely conveyed in the moment when audience members join the primary dancer, Feeler, and Observer, on stage. A video of the performance (available at http://usppsychedance.blogspot.com/) shows the interplay between audience and dancer, and the mediation that takes place as we view the interpretive spectacle of dance: the line between viewed and the viewer becomes blurred as audience members come on stage in order to (literally) zoom in on the dance. This is a moment where the individual subject becomes connected to another, demonstrating the ways that dance evokes an emotional engagement.

Empathy is not only the core theme of her choreography for “ViewFinder,” but a vital part of both Babcock’s time at UF—reflected in both her academic and extracurricular activities—and her future. While her current plan after earning her master’s degree is to become a counselor at a university counseling center and embark on doctoral studies, she is open to other possibilities: a trait one can see reflected in the process of creating “ViewFinder.” “I’m a fan of ‘planned happenstance’ as a way of approaching my future,” Babcock states, “and it’s worked out well so far!”

—Christopher Garland

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