The Old One and La Mer

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The Old One and La Mer: A Collaborative Choreographic Process

The Old One and La Mer was originally conceived of as an exploration of intersecting interpretations of thematically-related source materials through collaborative movement creation. In the Fall of 2022, I became interested in the potential of exploring two pieces of art that had an immense impact on me in my younger years; the Ernest Hemingway novella The Old Man and the Sea and the Claude Debussy symphony La Mer. I first came into contact with these works as a teenager, and as I initially developed this project I realized that my memories were tinged with compelling associations related to the ocean that intertwined fittingly with the themes in both of the source texts. The prospect of exploring these concepts further felt not only artistically invigorating, but also deeply intriguing to me from a research perspective. The project was ultimately solidified when I received approval from Heidi Jones Eggert to facilitate an extended-length process that would culminate in a final showing. In this paper, I plan to convey the most impactful aspects of this project as they relate to my development as a creator, and I will also examine the key elements of research that guided the process from start-to-finish.

Starting in the Fall of 2022, my original artistic proposal was a major jumping-off point for this project (see Appendix A). One particularly influential aspect of the proposal was my utilization of the word “collaborative” to describe the general mechanisms of how the piece would be created. One collaborative tenet that was utilized quite prominently in the process was
guided by the interplay between creativity research done by Dr. Lacey Okansi, et al., and
professors Dr. Sarah Harvey and Dr. Chia-Yu Kou.

Okansi, et. al., posit that choreographers and instructors seem inclined to create and use
metaphor in both creative practice and public performance (35). Additionally, Harvey and Kou
posit that giving and receiving feedback in a collaborative setting can foster a sense of
engagement with not only one’s own ideas, but with the ideas of other individuals in a group
(350). Taking these two research components in stride together, the general motivations for
navigating rehearsals were centered on utilizing metaphor and feedback to more clearly
understand interpretations of the work done in-process. I will analyze this approach further in
this analysis, but it is worth noting here because of its influential impact on the progression of the
process. Moreover, another choreographic consideration that was an integral part of the
movement creation process was the implementation of improvisation and chance not only into
rehearsal, but also into the performance of the work.

Much of the research on improvisation for this project comes from the writings of dance
professors Lynn Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin in their book *The Intimate Act of
Choreography*. Blom and Chaplin describe chance, in particular, as the “process whereby the
choreographer decides to give up [their] own self will and, to some extent, leave decisions in the
hands of fate or of [their] dancers” (117). This understanding of chance and the function of
improvisation was a central pivot point to most, if not all, of the movement that was created for
the final showing of the piece. In fact, there were large sections of the project that ended up
being completely improvised according to structures that were set in rehearsal (see Appendix B).
This supports how strongly improvisation influenced my choreographic proclivities while
facilitating this process. Moreover, the conceptual basis for improvisational exploration throughout the project was deeply rooted in collaboration.

For example, in order to establish an improvisational structure that occurs during the last movement of the project, the group collaboratively created a list of seven words that would be randomized for each dancer on the night of the showing (see Appendix C). This utilization of improvisation doubly acted as a utilization of chance, too, insofar as the dancers would not know the exact improvisational progression they would enact in the final performance of the piece. This highlights how improvisation and chance were utilized in this process not only to create and structure material that would be shown in the final performance, but also as a form of choreography that would be implemented into the final showing. However, when implementing improvisation there often needs to be an underlying motivation or structure driving the choices being made. In the case of the improvisation list, for example, the group utilized similar conceptual understandings of the ocean in order to come up with the words. Utilizing these types of working processes were where both *The Old Man and the Sea* and *La Mer* had a prominent effect on the process.

Regarding the utilization of Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* in this project, a major guiding influence for interpreting this source related to a feminist reading of the novella that interprets the ocean as a feminine, omnipotent character in the story (Beegel 131-2). Specifically speaking, author Susan Beegel’s perspective of the ocean as a character in its own right in the story was a particularly influential conceptual element for this project. Beegel implies that Hemingway meant to metaphorically translate the ocean as a maternal, venerable figure that holds as much power in the story as Santiago - the masculine protagonist (131-2).
many of the group’s considerations for movement creation throughout the rehearsal process, particularly concerning how we considered embodying our own relationships to the ocean with such concepts in mind. Such a reading, while societally underrepresented, was introduced into the process to promote diversity and nuance into the group’s understanding of the novella’s themes as they were utilized within the project. Consequently, too, such nuance is what led to the creation of most of the unique functional elements of the process - such as the improvisational list.

Along with these concepts, structural elements of the novella also influenced the process in a prominent way. One specific structural element of the story that was integrated into the choreographic process was that of opposition. As Sogang University professor Dr. Wook-Dong Kim explains, the opposition of paired elements can be found in the novella at both a micro and macro level, particularly concerning the overarching themes of “youth and old age, pride and humility, the individual and the community, and human beings pitted against unconquerable natural forces” (1). In practice, implementing such an understanding of opposition was most evidently manifested while navigating the group’s oftentimes opposing interpretations of the source materials being utilized. Considering the many interpretations of the story that exist, and the evidence that the literature suggests exists for them, it thus became a facet of the creative process to consistently consider how the group’s creative choices either contradicted, supported, or were tangential to overarching themes that could be interpreted within the text.

In this consideration, too, it also became important to utilize collaborative tenets of the process to compromise interpretations into a cohesive unit. One example of this can be seen in the development of one of the first phrases created - a partner phrase that happens in the last
movement - and how it originally started as three separate phrases that were merged into one (see Appendix D). Such compromises were ultimately utilized the majority of the time in this project in order to create movement, which aligned quite fittingly with the goals of the project to explore how various interpretations could be collaboratively utilized to set movement within a process.

Regarding the utilization of *La Mer* in this project, this part of the process related heavily to deciding which version of the symphony would be used in the final version of the project. This research, while not as conceptually resonant in the project as the Hemingway-related research, functioned quite importantly in terms of how the piece structurally and aurally progressed. With that being said, it is also relevant to note that the history of the *La Mer* manuscripts introduced a question of choice into this creative process.

As musicologist Roy Howat explains in describing the history of the *La Mer* transcripts, there are “three complete autograph manuscripts of the work [that] survive: the full score, the piano duet reduction[, and the complete draft in short score” (65). As a consequence to these historical antecedents, a multitude of recordings of the work exist that encapsulate a diverse range of aural experiences. This historical dynamic introduced, among other things, a conflict in this particular process between the written score and specific recording being used. For example, in this project the written score that was utilized (the Eulenberg score) did *not* include a brass fanfare in section 59 of the last movement, whereas the recording that was utilized *did* have the brass fanfare (Debussy 156-7; Thomas and Philharmonia Orchestra 00:06:48-00:07:01). This relationship between the Eulenberg score and the recording goes to show how there was a certain degree of discrepancy in the group’s understanding of the symphony in its various forms. Nevertheless, the conflict itself was acknowledged to foster a deeper engagement with the music
within the group; in this case, by helping to foster an understanding of the differences between various recordings of the symphony and why the specific recording being utilized was chosen. This way of going about the process consequently risked that the group face diametrically opposing or conflicting ways of understanding the symphony, but as professor and film critic John C. Tibbetts puts it about the symphony as used in Ken Russell’s Debussy biopic, the music “always suggest[s] something, even if it’s not necessarily the intention of the composer, and even if it is inflected differently according to the changing nature of the image and scene” (90). In comprehending the music in this way, the group was thus allowed the freedom to explore nuanced perspectives related to the music while also not feeling tied down by one particular interpretation of the source.

One final consideration that was immensely influential for this project had to do with the ethics of dance-making that I implemented throughout rehearsals. In implementing the choreographic device of collaboration in this project, in particular, there were certain ethical considerations that had to be taken into account in order to counteract discomfort or insecurity on the part of any of the participants. For example, one driving ethical consideration had to do with treating each and every participant as a creator/choreographer in-and-of-themself. With this as a predominant motivation for the project, it became important to consider how various ethical frameworks could either help or hinder the process of collaboration within the group. One concept that held a significant place in terms of ethical conduct in relation to dance-making came from UCLA Performance/Choreography graduate Sophia Vangelatos. Vangelatos posits that implementing the person-centered, humanistic principles of either Care Ethics or Kantian Ethics in the studio can help to counteract historical biases and trends in dance-making that place the
choreographer as an authoritative figure within the creative process (3). This idea of power dynamics was a facet in the realm of ethical considerations for this project that had a profound influence on how movement creation was conducted within the group.

As social work researchers Trish Van Katwyck, et al., put it, “the inherent power differentials and accompanying dilemmas [of process-focused projects] must be addressed… utilising tools and strategies to care for the project and its participants” (156). Considering this project was meant to be collaborative in nature, such ethical considerations became a requirement for the group to not only consistently reflect on throughout the process, but also actively engage with as the piece grew in size and scope. In reflecting on implementing such practices into this process (like Kantian ethics), it is also worth noting that each ethical framework that was implemented was also perceived from diverse perspectives in order to more fully understand each creator’s relationship to the process at any one point in time.

For example, this project involved seven female-identifying dancers and one gender non-conforming dancer, all of which were white individuals. The performers were: Josie Caringi, Zoe Dehline, Seely Garrett, McKenna Johnson, Eryn Laramie, Annika Libby, and Isabela Sant’Anna-Skites. For my part, I identify as a white male, and as such it became important for me to be consistently aware of my privilege and how I was in a position that required a great amount of responsibility and accountability. Thus, I had to be particularly aware of how the implementation of certain working styles or ethical frameworks may have not only been a product of personal biases, but also potentially detrimental to the effective functioning of the dancers. Also, in being motivated to be self-aware of privilege and identity throughout the process, the hope was that an open line of communication between the dancers and myself became easy to maintain so that
everyone’s lived experiences could contribute to an ethical, engaging, and effective space of
dance creation. I personally felt as though this was achieved by the end of the process, but it was
something that was constantly alive during the entirety of the project.

Moreover, this concern relates to another primary ethical issue in the project regarding
meeting the dancers where they were in life, so to speak, when it came to implementing touch
into the choreographic process. This meant that I had to make sure that the entire group engaged
with the fact that touch is not only an experience that is phenomenologically unique to each
individual, but that an individual’s relationship to touch can evolve from minute-to-minute
(especially in a choreographic process). One concept, in particular, that was implemented early in
the process to ensure cognizance of the power of touch came from dance researcher Dr. Maria
Fonseca Falkembach. Falkembach argues that a moral approach rooted in Foucauldian principles
is an effective way to understand how the subjective experience of touch can be an evolving
facet of a structured process (21). One quote from Falkembach that further clarifies this idea
states, “Which defines whether I should, if I may or may not touch someone… is not a law, not a
regiment, but the current arrangement of the ways those who touch relate to their touch… The
rule, in this case, is not rigid; it should be built every second” (22). This idea places great
emphasis on the autonomy of the individual to determine how and why they relate to touch in
any given moment, which aligned quite naturally with the overarching goals of the project
concerned with regarding each dancer as a relatively autonomous choreographer.

For example, one way that Falkembach’s ideas were practically utilized in this project
was in a regular acknowledgement of touch consent during every rehearsal. At the beginning of
each rehearsal, the group would check-in with how everyone was feeling about utilizing touch
that day, and the group would also continue to check-in about touch if it became an increased choreographic tool during a rehearsal. In enacting easy, effective processes such as this, the group was ultimately able to ensure that each creator felt both safe and secure while exploring the concepts brought forward during the group’s time together.

The concept of treating each-and-every person in the process as a creator in their own right was even extended into the more production-based elements of the final version of the project, too. For example, the costuming was entirely provided by the dancers, given the limitation that the costumes be in the tan/sand/beige color range (see Appendix E). Moreover, the pillows and blankets for floor seating were provided by the cast and crew, and the chair seating was also set up by the cast and crew. It is also worth mentioning here that four of my peers graciously volunteered their time to help run technical elements during the final performance of the piece. The crew also helped tremendously in collaborations related to how both the invitations and programs for the performance would not only look, but also how they would be distributed (see Appendix F, see Appendix G). Regarding the technical elements that the crew was responsible for, one of the most intensive technicalities handled by the crew had to do with ensuring the safety of the dancers during the final movement of the project when the dancers were drenched with water.

When the final movement first premiered in the Dance Underground concert in Fall of 2022, the original mechanism for the water element of the final movement was having the dancers dunk their heads in tubs that were situated on a table backstage. This mechanism developed into utilizing a children’s pool to catch water under the dancers while the crew dumped water over their heads at the final showing (see Appendix H). This ended up feeling like
a much safer, more efficient, and more effective development in the process that truly could not
have been achieved without the generosity and commitment of my fellow students who
volunteered as crew. Furthermore, it was also quite an enlightening experience to reserve the 005
“Open Space” dance studio for the final showing of the work.

I was quite grateful to have been approved by the executive committee of the School of
Theatre and Dance for the date of April 15th, 2023, for the showing (see Appendix I). In
proposing this date to the executive committee, though, I learned a tremendous deal about what it
takes to secure space for merely one night of performance. The amount and variety of details that
go into navigating how a space will be utilized for a performance are seemingly never-ending,
and getting to experience them firsthand as the facilitator of this project felt like a challenging
learning curve that will no doubt inform my considerations for reserving space for future
performances.

In concluding this examination, I feel it important to reiterate the many moving parts of
this project so as to drive home how their functional relation to one another was what influenced
the process most prominently. This project was meant to explore how a collaborative
choreographic process functioned among a group of eight individuals as they interpreted
thematically-related source materials, specifically *The Old Man and the Sea* and *La Mer*. In being
motivated to collaboratively approach choreography, the group utilized various methods of
dance-making that interfaced everyone’s unique sense of creativity. Among these methods, two
notable influences were the concepts of chance and improvisation. Chance, as stated earlier,
involved me as the facilitator giving a certain amount of autonomy to the dancers (or fate) in the
finished version of the work. Improvisation, much like chance, also required that I redirect my
attention away from authoritative modes of setting movement and toward creating a space in rehearsal where the dancers felt comfortable engaging in freeform exploration. In highlighting authoritative modes of setting movement, it is also important to note that the methods of this project were intimately intertwined with the ethics of this project. One of the most prominent ethical considerations was in regard to implementing practices in rehearsal that ensured participant comfortability when exploring relationships involving touch, lifting, and close-quarters interactions. In order to achieve this, certain ethical frameworks were put into place to ensure that the group always functioned within a space that had open communication, empathy, and self-awareness as top priorities.

There are many future research directions that could be taken now since the project has reached its completion. One particularly intriguing future research direction could be exploring if/how the project changes when choreographically set with a different group. This direction would be especially interesting due to the fact that the performance of this piece hinges heavily on the dancers’ personal interpretations, which could drastically change depending on the size and makeup of the group interacting with the process. With these future considerations in mind, it remains important for me to remember that in any iteration of this project, the creative input of the participants is meant to be of equal importance as my artistic inclinations as the facilitator. This concept is what ensured that the creative process I embarked upon this year was truly centered on both collaboration and a sense of total group engagement. Moreover, it is a concept that has the potential to continually ensure that future directions for this project (or other projects) remain aligned with the virtues of choreography that I have come to learn and appreciate while facilitating this process.
Works Cited


Debussy, Claude. La Mer [Trois Esquisses Symphoniques], Eulenberg.


Appendix A: Original Artistic Proposal

The original proposal from Fall of 2022 read as such: “When I was an early teen, I walked into the ocean under red-flag conditions. I did not know as I ventured into those waters that I would be imprinted upon by the power of the ocean; by the power of water; by the power of the vast, ruthless, headstrong nature of nature itself for the rest of my life. Never before and never since have I felt more free and futile as a being than when I was thrashed around by the whitecaps of the waves, pulled every-which-way by currents that were indifferent to my existence among them. This is the seed of what I am currently - but not indefinitely - calling “The Old One and La Mer.” Inspired by Ernest Hemingway’s text *The Old Man and the Sea*, and set to the Claude Debussy symphony *La Mer*, this modern dance program will explore a variety of themes, including but not limited to: the human reverence for nature, the perseverance of humans, and the human relationship with water/the ocean. The program will be divided into three segments that align with the three movements of the symphony, and multimedia elements may be introduced as the process develops further!”

Appendix B: Improvisation During Rehearsal

Youtube link to improvisational structure during rehearsal: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j25Jfgi177Q&list=PLDABhyvoMYeUpUrl6_sF_0pb_8xJnlhv&index=14](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j25Jfgi177Q&list=PLDABhyvoMYeUpUrl6_sF_0pb_8xJnlhv&index=14).

Appendix C: Word List for Improvisational Structure
Appendix D: Links to First Phrase Created for Project

Youtube links showing development of first phrase: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3wK2S3aUM0&list=PLDABhyvoMYeUpUrl6_sF_0pb_8xJnlhyh&index=18 ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcpLki4fHYw&list=PLDABhyvoMYeUpUrl6_sF_0pb_8xJnlhyh&index=19 ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcpLki4fHYw&list=PLDABhyvoMYeUpUrl6_sF_0pb_8xJnlhyh&index=19 ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xtk8gOToo4o&list=PLDABhyvoMYeUpUrl6_sF_0pb_8xJnlhyh&index=21

Appendix E: Photo of Costumes Provided by Dancers (Taken by Hannah Dusek)
Appendix F: Invitation Sent to Audience Members

Your Invitation to:
THE OLD ONE AND LA MÉR
A DANCE SHOWING BY KARTER ~BERNHARDT

Saturday, April 15
8:00 PM (Doors @ 7:30)
PARTY
Open Space

Appendix G: Program Distributed to Audience Members

THE OLD ONE AND LA MÉR

Conceived and Directed by Karter Bernhardt
Solo Piece in Collaboration with Partnership

When I was a young teen, I walked into the ocean under red-flag conditions. I did not know as I ventured into those waters that day that I would be imprinted upon by the power of the ocean; by the power of water; by the power of the vast, ruthless, headstrong nature of nature itself for the rest of my life. Never before and never since have I felt more free and full than when I was thrashed around by the whitecaps of the waves, pulled every-which-way by currents that were indifferent to my existence among them. This is the seed of inspiration for The Old One and La Mer.

PERFORMED BY: Jesse Careri, Zoe Dohler, Seth Garret, McKenna Johnson, Eryn Laramie, Anika Libby, Isabela Sant’Anna-Skirs

I. HE WAS AN OLD MAN WHO — FISHED — ALONE...
“De la vie a midi sur la mer”
Michael Tilson Thomas & Philharmonia Orchestra

II. I WORKED THE FROM DEEP WATERS FOR A WEEK...
“Jeux de vagues”
Michael Tilson Thomas & Philharmonia Orchestra

III. HE LOOKED UP AT THE SKY...
“Nothing Can Change This Love (Alternate Version)”
Sam Cooke

IV. THE SHARK WAS NOT AN ACCIDENT...
“Dialoque du vent et la mer”
Michael Tilson Thomas & Philharmonia Orchestra

SPECIAL THANKS TO: McKinley Biddulph, Brooklyn Desper, Hannah Duex, Heidi Jones Eggert, Kyll Mantfeldh, Emma Ploof

Appendix H: Water Element in Final Performance

Youtube link to video of water element as utilized in the final performance of the piece: https://youtu.be/xWIsS5AHPWE.
Appendix I: Space Request Sent to Executive Committee

The proposal sent to the School of T&D read as such: “I, Karter Bernhardt, hope to reserve the 005 studio space (the “Open Space”) in the PARTV building for a free, public performance of my Senior Project - entitled The Old One and La Mer - on the night of Saturday, April 15, from 5:00 pm to 10:00 pm. The performance will begin at 7:30 pm on the night of April 15th, with doors opening for the audience at 7:00 pm. The performance will run approximately 45-60 minutes in length. The cast and crew for the performance will total approximately 12 individuals, including me, seven performers, and four crew members. The cap for audience attendance will be 73 individuals. This puts the maximum total bodies in the space at 85 individuals for the night. The seating plan will be a hybrid plan that includes both floor and chair seating. This arrangement will require that the scrap marley from the 005 stairwell be laid down, and approximately 35 chairs from the brown wall of 005 be placed on the scrap marley. Carpet squares, pillows, and blankets will be used for floor seating. The cast and crew of the project will be responsible for setting this arrangement up, as well as for providing pillows and blankets for floor seating. The performance does not include any lighting design that has to be operated from the 005 lighting booth. The side panels in 005 with warm-, cool-, and neutral-toned lighting plans will be utilized for the project. The sonic elements of the performance will be operated using the auxiliary connection located in the back corner of 005. I am also hoping to utilize both the white cyclorama and black wings in the space, which I have had numerous experiences raising and lowering throughout my time in the Dance program. Onstage elements that will be utilized during the performance will include: a book, several Brita water filters, plastic cups, and water itself. The performance will involve me being dripping wet during the end of the first act, and the performers being dripping wet during the finale of the second and final act. All of the prop elements will be provided by the cast and crew of the production, with the water coming from the faucets in Dressing Room A. The cast and crew will also be responsible for cleaning up and handling the water during the performance. The cast and crew of the production will set up all elements of the performance from 5:00-7:00 pm on April 15th, and will also strike all elements of the production after the performance has finished (approximately 8:30-10:00 pm). I, Karter Bernhardt, will oversee both setup and strike for the performance. No concessions or merchandise will be sold at the performance. I, Karter Bernhardt, will also provide programs for the performance in a digital format. Alternative dates for the performance include Sunday, April 16th, and Saturday, April 22nd. The same times and setup/strike procedures mentioned above will be used if an alternative date is deemed more suitable for the performance.”