

WAKE UP BREATHING
An Exploration of Breathing

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ABSTRACT

The piece *WAKE UP BREATHING* holds personal significance as an investigation of thought-provoking issues of breathing through film installation, video and live performance. This research specifically addressed how breath training exercises enhance dance performance and improve a dancer's control of their body, as well as how these exercises can function as material for choreographic inquiry. During the creation of the concert, the choreographer employed breath building exercises and applied different breath techniques with a cast of nine dancers. The choreographer and dancers worked collaboratively to develop creative material, enhance performance and help members of the audience understand why breathing in dance is so meaningful.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

I am interested in researching the subject of breathing and how it relates to dance and more generally, to existence. My aim with this Applied Project was to make dancers and audience members recognize and value the role of breathing in life. In particular, I wanted to examine how breathing, as it manifests itself in different living things, connects with dance pedagogy and performance, and provides material to create an original choreographic work. This research culminated in a final 30-minute piece involving video projection elements and live dance performance, acting as a creative realization of my research on the various dimensions of breathing.

Different life forms have different ways of breathing. For instance, fish, snakes, trees, and flowers all have different ways of exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide to sustain their life force. Breathing is personal to all humans. There may be long-standing physical patterns, emotions, or trauma mixed into the way a person breathes. These all influence a person's behavior. Cultural differences in breathing also play a role in how people act, move or train to dance.

I believe dancers, as highly sensitive human beings, should be aware that breathing in different ways or according to the ways of different cultures and dance styles will greatly influence dance pedagogy, performance, and creative practice. In terms of pedagogy, breathing connects with health and wellness, the efficiency of movement execution, and emotional expressivity. Regarding performance, it relates to vitality and

enhances the dancers' movement qualities. Finally, breathing can be an exciting topic to explore choreographically to create innovative work.

In my project, I examined various pedagogical approaches to breathing, then used that experience to inspire my creative process, and ended by helping dancers refine their awareness of breathing in performance. I taught my dancers breathing patterns drawn from my Chinese Classical dance experience. These patterns were different from their previous experience. Then leading my dancers, who came from modern dance and urban styles, through an exchange of different cultural and stylistic experiences with breathing, I gradually built the work. The piece *WAKE UP BREATHING* ultimately mixed different movement styles as well as incorporated other ideas and images as they arose from the research. I believe that when dancers and choreographers emphasize the importance of breathing in dance training, the dance performance can radiate vitality from the inside out.

Background

The following literature review considers material that I read regarding breathing in dance and how it relates to health and expression.

First, breathing is a simple and effective way to warm up the body (Schmidt). As breathing becomes fuller and deeper, the level of oxygen in the body increases. This increased level of oxygen flow is used by muscle tissue for energy production. This energy is then converted into an internal physical force produced by the relationship of muscles and bones.

Secondly, breathing matters in dance because poor breathing leads to injury (Ingraham). Poorly executed breathing techniques can cause physical pain and can often lead to problematic functional problems of the neck, shoulders, and chest. Muscles, ligaments, and tendons have an important role to play in breathing; if they are too tight to function well, this can also cause injury. My personal experience suggests poor breathing affects the efficiency of training for physical strength, physical performance, and rhythm as well as a dancer's facial expressions. If a dancer's breathing is uneven or irregular it directly affects the blood and oxygen cycle in a dancer's body. The difficulty of breathing can directly result in the stiffness of the body, negatively affecting the fluidity of the dancing and the fluency of the movements (for example tension in the shoulders, body coordination). If the dancer lacks the focus of breathing, he/she is likely to miss the beat when transitioning between movements. Poor breathing habits can also lead to distorted facial expressions that are unintentional.

Third, breathing also affects dance through shaping, enhancing, and enlivening movement phrases (Robey). The sustained inhalation, a sudden exhalation, or the quick staccato bursts of a cough are all examples of natural breath phrasing. However, dancers who ignore the organic pattern of their breathing may perform the movement with a monotonous, dehumanized quality. By providing oxygen to working muscles, breath aids the body to work at an optimum level. Without this vital oxygen being supplied to their muscles and brains, dancers may not perform up to their true ability. Dancers who breathe in a shallow manner or hold their breath will deplete their body's oxygen supply and quickly weaken their physical stamina and slow down their mental processes.

In addition, through my experience in Chinese Classical dance, I believe the training of breathing exercises and posture training are intimately connected; both entail a long-term, detailed and complex step-by-step training. I have experienced three stages of Chinese Classical pedagogy that consist of: primary, intermediate and advanced (Tang & Jin 89).

- Primary stage: Breathing is with the music, and the mover is consciously in control of active breathing. For beginning dancers, breathing is “unconscious.” This primary stage breathing uses “conscious breathing.” So, learning how to transfer “unconscious breathing” to “conscious breathing” is important.
- Intermediate stage: The movement begins to be complicated; breath now is complex and variable in order to be consistent with movement. For example, a balanced, controlled dance movement, which consists of a slow rhythm and lyrical quality, requires slow and deep breathing. Jumping and running, in which the tempo is more upbeat, needs quicker and shorter breathing. Therefore, in the intermediate stage of training dancers should pay attention to the unity of breathing and movement style.
- Advanced stage: As dance movements are progressively more complex, more physically demanding, or more emotionally expressive, the movement training needs to go into more complex and comprehensive combinations. This entails the unified training of all three aspects of movement, skill, and emotion. While completing these techniques, dancers need to focus on emotional expression. Therefore, the use of breathing is more complicated and needs to be more detailed in the process of breath training.

Based on my experience as a student, I became interested in developing a method for incorporating these same breathing techniques into my teaching practice. There are many new forms of breath training, and the compulsive coordination of movements and breathing can easily lead to physical discomfort. A dancer might hold his or her breath because they think that a movement is going to be very difficult and this creates excess tension throughout the body. I believe that teachers need to use somatic teaching methods, such as body awareness and body sensation to increase the use of somatic vocabulary. Somatic training can enhance dance performance. The implementation of breathing, sensing, correcting and initiating principles within the dance technique class further enhances the dancer's body-mind integration.

Statement of Choreographic Intent

My piece *WAKE UP BREATHING* holds personal significance to me because, as both a dancer and choreographer, I believe it is essential to find new ways of performing and creating to demonstrate the pleasure of dance. My MFA project involved creating an original choreographic work based on an exploration of breathing. The questions guiding my creative practices were:

- 1) How do living things (like animals, amphibians, and plants) breathe and how might this be incorporated into creative practice?
- 2) Is there a universal training method I can develop to teach dancers to breathe in a way that will maximize their physical performance of movement and their emotional expressivity in any dance style or must I develop different breath training methods for each different dance style?

- 3) How does breathing affect a dancer's ability to perform movement both "correctly" from a physical perspective and "expressively" and with "vitality" from an emotional perspective?
- 4) How can research into breathing lead to the creation of original choreographic work?

Based on these questions, I developed breath training exercises to enhance dance performance. I used the breath to control myself and my own dancing body so that my piece would radiate vitality from the inside out. At the same time, I applied these techniques to my dancers. My piece was intended to assist the dancers and members of the audience to understand why breathing in dance is so meaningful. I hoped my piece would inspire people to give more attention to dance as an art form.

Dancing also teaches participants to respect their bodies and to understand that dance is the product of intentional and intelligent actions. Based on my own training, I developed methods to communicate the value of breathing to my own students at ASU. I also applied this method to my dancers, emphasized the importance of breathing in dance training, and promoted the use of breathing in teaching. When the dancer is performing low-intensity movements, few dancers care about the breathing process. This is because breathing occurs automatically and there's often no need to interfere. However, if the dancers are undergoing intensive physical training, the body needs more oxygen, so the breathing needs to be consciously controlled to prevent fatigue and meet the growing demand. By strengthening all of the breathing muscles (diaphragm and intercostal), the breathing becomes more efficient; this can help dancers relax, focus on breath, and develop awareness of how proper breathing enhances movement.

For some dance styles, it's neither efficient nor aesthetically appropriate to gasp or gulp air in preparation for exertion. This breathing will cause the dancer's chest to rise and expand significantly, which can distort the body's lines in relation to the stylistic ideal. The work of breathing needs to move further down to the diaphragm to improve dance performance. Control of a dancer's breathing helps combat emotional tension, which is one of the dancer's worst enemies. All levels of dancers sometimes feel anxiety in the dance studio or on stage. Pre-performance anxiety and on-stage nerves can leave a dancer in knots. All that tension causes muscles to tighten and restricts movements. Chronic stresses can also lead to faulty breathing, which in turn can cause muscular dysfunction and faulty posture. These stresses may impair performance and reduce dance training effectiveness. By training them to breathe sensibly and rhythmically, dancers can shed excessive tension and make their muscles more elastic. Dancers can feel the movement sensations more and appear more fluid onstage. Breathing has a tremendous impact on a dancer's movement skills and performance experience. The dancer's body can function efficiently when breathing mechanisms are free and well adjusted.

Definition of Terms

- Chinese classical dance breathing pattern (Tang & Jin 105)

One of the breathing patterns in Chinese classical dance - "Shenyun" (身韵), is an essence of Chinese art and culture that help people smooth their movements while performing the Chinese classical dance. In the "Shenyun" training of Chinese dance, most of the breath training is slow and more attention is paid to the rhythm of breath; dancers focus on internal rather than external breathing. When dancers perform an

explosive action or combination involving power, such as a jump, they usually adopt a pneumatic and slow exhalation method, which can make the movement smoother and more realistic. The dancer's inner breath should start from the middle of the body and extend to the end of the limbs. The key part of the performance should be a moment of cohesion and strong explosive force.

When the performance is soft and sustained, the breath is continuous like running water, easy and comfortable. There are also some special breathing techniques, such as breathing with a long inhalation during the rise of the diaphragm, quickly holding the breath for a short period so it has more power when exhaling. This so-called "Mouth Holding" breathing technique is an improved breath holding movement. Breath can increase the strength of reflective emotion, making abdominal pressure rise and promoting abdominal waist muscle contraction, which makes dancers breathe into a power of authority during inhalation and exhalation. The "Mouth Holding" of breathing includes inhalation, pauses, and exhalation, and it has balance, strength, and speed. Thus, in the "Shenyun" training, breathing is crucial.

- Urban style of breakdance breathing pattern ("Breakdancing/B-Boying/Breaking")

The urban style of breakdance, or as it is commonly called, breaking, seems to rely on musical rhythm to adjust breathing depth and frequency of exchange. According to my observations and experiences of breakdance in classes at Arizona State University, breakdance often employs movements that are twisted, cramped or virtuosic and acrobatic. When dancers breathe in, abdominal muscles don't close and get out of the way, rather, the chest expands on both sides. On the exhalation, the small abdomen

maintains a gentle tightening, making the form always in a natural and controllable state. When jumping, advancing, retreating and dropping, a break-dancer uses quick respiration. When the body is in the air or changing poses, dancers take control of breathing and exhale on the ground after the action is completed. Holding one's breath increases the stability of the rotational movement. Breakdancing requires a high standard for breathing muscles. In the process of learning, many dancers find that improving the ability of the respiratory muscles makes the breakdance more effective. Exercising breathing muscles is a slow process.

Assumptions

My experience with breath has lead me to be curious about whether there is a universal method of training that leads to a “healthy” and “expressive” way of dancing or if all forms of breathing are context specific, and how this might influence the creative process. My creative project *WAKE UP BREATHING* examines these ideas about breathing.

In order to be efficient, breath requires the diaphragm to be the primary muscle of respiration. The basics of diaphragmatic breathing can improve practice and leave the body with a sense of calm and ease. And at the same time, there are also secondary muscles of respiration including the sternocleidomastoid (SCM), scalene (both located in the front of the throat), the intercostal muscles (between the ribs), and the abdominal muscles. The primary and secondary muscles work together depending on the situation. For instance, if dancers are running or jumping that elevates the demands placed on the

dancers' cardiovascular and respiratory systems, causing the secondary muscles of breathing to become active in order to help out.

Inefficient breathing in dance is when the primary muscle of respiration, the diaphragm, is not functioning efficiently. How could this happen? Lack of use, loss of elasticity in the tissue, overly tight surrounding muscles including the psoas, abdominals, or the quadratus lumborum could contribute to reduced function of the diaphragm. What happens next is that reduced diaphragmatic breathing can cause the secondary muscles to start operating more like primary muscles of respiration. This leads to inefficient breathing. Inefficient breathing could result in muscular imbalance, altered motor control and physiological adaptations that are capable of modifying movement.

Limitations

Moving into this project I assumed there would be limitations, but it was through the process of making the piece that my limitations became clear. One limitation I had were schedule conflicts, as it's not easy to find a time slot that suited all nine dancers. When I designed my piece, I thought I needed at least eight hours a week to rehearse and cover all important points, however, because of schedule conflicts, getting all nine dancers together for eight hours a week was not realistic. I reduced the weekly rehearsal hours to four, and even with four hours sometimes I still could not rehearse with the full cast. So, in the end, I had to cut some time out of rehearsal.

Another limitation was music. The piece had a total of five sections that needed music. I composed the first and last sections myself using GarageBand. For the second musical section I chose a piece called "Petricor" by Ludovico Einaudi. For the third

musical section I used “To speak of solitude” by the artist Brambles, and for the fourth I used the piece, “At the door,” by David Karagianis.

Initially, I had chosen two pieces by Ludovico Einaudi. After the third meeting with my committee, they suggested changing one of these because the music was too cinematic and was overpowering the dancers. This is when I changed it to the Karagianis piece, and completely rechoreographed all the movement and the formations associated with that musical selection with only two weeks left before the show opened.

Finally, in order to better understand my dancers’ breathing experience, I needed to do a lot of observation and practice regarding breathing techniques used in the Modern dance style, since half of my dancers were deeply trained in modern dance before. So, during the first few days of rehearsal, I always started with a Modern dance combination. I asked my dancers to not only use a single part of the body, but also to integrate their arms, legs, spine, and torso together when performing the movement. But later, the limitation I found was that the Modern dance combinations were too fast, and it affected my judgment about my dancers’ breathing patterns. Therefore, instead of practicing Modern dance combinations, I let my dancers practice simple somatic training exercises, such as leading my dancers in inhaling and exhaling activities during the warm up, and curving in the middle of their bodies, or sitting on the floor and rounding the center of the torso. I also required my dancers to utilize their entire body and breath to make every single movement no matter how small it was. For example, when the dancers pushed their arms forward, I told them to exhale at the same time so their movement connection between their arms and chest could be smoother.

Delimitations

I chose to work with eight undergraduate students. The eight dancers were all trained in Western dance education, as I wanted a group of mature dancers who were able to accept new knowledge, be creative and who did not have a background in Eastern culture. As we communicated about how breathing training differs in our Eastern and Western training, we were able to bring some variety of interpretations and collaborations into the piece. This was wonderful, since creating an ensemble able to develop an overall pace and breath rhythm based on Chinese classical dance breathing method was the most important goal to me.

Chapter 2

METHOD, PROCEDURES, PROCESS

Preparation

In order to initiate my MFA project, I began my choreography step by step. I invited eight dancers, seven of whom were women and one man. All of my dancers were undergraduate students at Arizona State University and they all had different experiences of dance breathing. My dancers exhibited great reliability, dedication and maturity when working on my piece. Not all of them had training in Chinese classical dance before, so I worked with them to develop a movement vocabulary for my piece that combined elements of Eastern and Western dance forms. When selecting my dancers, I looked for people who were hardworking, quick learners, and willing to contribute their creative spirits and life experiences into the work.

Before working with the dancers in rehearsal, I spent time researching and developing my own movement ideas. I travelled to different places to study architecture, landscapes and dance forms new to me. I contacted and observed different people to better understand the experience of breathing. I read, listened to music, and looked at paintings, absorbing information from other artists and reviewing aesthetic frameworks that I wanted to inform my own work. For example, images from nature might be a source of inspiration or a story might provide a starting point. Images that generated movement ideas might come from mythology, from classic or contemporary narratives, and even from the life stories of dancers. I enjoyed improvising alone in a studio. I

always videotaped myself for movement research and then reviewed the material to find key movement ideas that expressed what I wanted to say.

During the rehearsals, I investigated breathing techniques, experiences, and functions, and also consulted many journal articles, videos, books, and other resources that related to breathing, dance movement, or design. I made appointments with my collaborators to discuss my artistic vision in sound, video and costumes. I also requested copyright permission for the music.

Breathing Exercises

Once I started the rehearsal process, my dancers and I did several types of breathing exercises that were central to my investigation. The exercises we did were to practice abdominal and thoracic breathing. For practicing abdominal breathing (also called diaphragmatic breathing) which is done by contracting the diaphragm, I let my dancers practice in two different ways; the first is to be practiced independently. Everyone was lying on the ground; putting their hands on their own stomach and feeling respiratory frequency. The second was to be practiced cooperatively. Each person chose a partner, and then put their head or hand to their partner's abdomen, and then felt their partner's respiratory frequency.

The thoracic breathing is the breathing that expands the thorax using intercostal muscles. I practiced thoracic breathing exercises in four different ways. The first practice is the most important, since I am making sure we are actually using the chest while breathing. I used a neutral position such as lying on the ground with bent legs and a relaxed body, putting both hands on the chest on each side of the rib cage. When I used

my nose to breathe in, I could feel my chest expand and my ribs horizontally open to both sides. I also practiced using voice and sound to help breath out of the body. When I used my mouth to exhale, my ribs relaxed and then returned to the original state.

The second practice I tried is to use one lung breathing. I laid on the side and then stood up with a twisted movement and put my hands at the lower part of the chest. Every time when I breathed, I only stretched one side of my rib and relaxed the other side, and in this way, I could feel tension from one side of my ribs that I stretched. Then I switched to the other side.

The third practice I tried is to use shoulder breathing, especially focusing on the shoulder muscles, such as levator scapulae muscle, scalene muscle, trapezius muscle, etc. When I used my shoulder to breathe in, I found it always led my shoulder up and distorted my dance movements, therefore, I believe it is an inefficient breathing pattern and may cause injury.

The fourth practice I tried is to lie prone on the ground, putting my forehead on my arms, relaxing my neck and making sure my body was a straight line. When I inhaled, I tried to feel the tension of my back, and I imagined there was a ball behind my back that is slowly inflating. I felt expansion from my back ribs, and then my back-side ribs slowly restored to their original position when I exhaled.

My breathing exercises also involved many respiratory exchange forms, such as inhalation and exhalation, pause and inhale, pause and exhale and so on. The rate of inhalation and exhalation were varied. With every four thoracic breathing exercises, I also changed my breathing frequency. The first was a rapid inhale and exhale, the second was slowly inhale and exhale, and the third was slowly inhale and fast exhale, the fourth

was quickly inhale and slowly exhale. The breathing frequency exercise helped me to have strong ability to control my breathing.



Photograph 1. *WAKE UP BREATHING* Breathing Exercises

Movement Approach

To approach creating the movement, I divided the dance into seven different parts according to the sections of the music that I chose for the piece. In each section, I used different methods and focused on different creative techniques. When I finished the seven-part choreography, I reviewed the composition of the sections to ensure that the movements and transitions were smooth and meaningful.

The first part of the piece was done by myself and my dancer Stephanie Silerio. When I choreographed Stephanie's solo part, we initially used a lot of movements, but when I finished the first section and reviewed her movements again, I thought the

movements were too complicated, and did not reflect my intention of expressing the dimensional space of the balcony upstairs and downstairs stage. So, I changed all Stephanie's movements to running naturally in place. A simple running movement better related the intention of the piece, and easily resonated with the audience.

My solo was the main part of the first section. When I initially began choreographing to highlight my intention, I used a model of lungs as my prop, and I also used a lot of movements emphasizing lung breathing in the first part of the dance. For example, I put the model in front of my body, and then showed the expansion and contraction of the lungs when I breathed. However, after discussion with my committee members, we all agreed that this prop was unnecessary since the prop was too small and might create confusion for the audience. The committee and I also talked about "superficial" or "literal" breathing, or the idea that how I can avoid letting the audience see the breath visually, and how I need to investigate deeper than this surface level exploration. After this showing, I explored different types of improvisation without props and approaches that avoid a "superficial" representation of breathing. This exploration process made my solo section more abstract and distinctive.

When I created the second section, Michelle Migliaccio and I spent three weeks practicing our improvised duet. We wanted to find out the consistent breathing rate and how to use one person's breathing rate to influence another person. At the beginning of the rehearsal, whether our movements were consistent or not, our breathing rate was always inconsistent. After repeated practice and modification, we finally found a consistent, shared breathing pattern and determined the final dance movement.

The third part of the dance movement came from our own idea and my committee members' criticism and feedback. When I first showed my piece to my committee members, they felt that my biggest challenge in the third section was how to again create less “literal” representations of breathing motions. For example, there was one part that dancers quickly ran from different corners to a tight circle and I had my dancers make “running” or “jogging” pumping arms as they crowded towards each other. My committee members considered the running arms to be too “literal” and the natural running arm motif was already present in the first section. So, after I got the feedback, we tried different arm movements. The end result was unexpected, because we didn’t use any recognizable and conventional arm gestures. I told my dancers to imagine that the center of the circle had the “oxygen” we needed, and that everyone had to crowd their way to the center in order to survive. When using their own imagery, each dancer's arms became less “artificial” and “literal” and better conveyed to the audience how it feels to be short on oxygen.

In the fourth part of the choreography, I mainly focused on the relationships between the dance and the music. This part of the music was slower in tempo than the other parts, so I wanted to explore slower motions in the movement, and let the breath and rhythm slow down together. Before exploring dance movements, I lay down in the studio with my dancer Courtney Ngai and listened to music repeatedly to feel the melody. Then we improvised the dance according to the rhythm and melody of music, then recorded it. When we watched the dance improvisations, we would pick up what we thought was a great movement cue and share with each other.

I also had different requirements for Courtney Ngai compared to the other dancers. She is a person with a unique body language. She had sixteen years of dance experience and was trained in the styles of contemporary, ballet, tap, urban movement, hip hop, jazz, and ballroom. So, I asked her to explore producing movements with breath in the present moment by drawing from her diverse background of various movement styles. I also asked her to find the risks within using the breath to guide her structured improvisation.

The fourth section shows a lot of weightlessness and balance, as well as some “tiny movements” that surprised the audience. For example, when Courtney kneels on the ground and stretches her arms, the audience will naturally think that the next movement is to bend her arms or to touch the ground according, but she quickly turns her head and changes the development track of the movement. The movements were smooth, small, and surprising to the audience while fitting in a well-balanced way with the music.

During rehearsals for the fifth section, I discussed different characteristics of human life with my dancers, including how people respond to the environment, as well as the basics of metabolism and breath so we could understand how the respiratory system works and how breathing affects people's lives. We connected with our way of life as well as our physical movement. After repeated investigation and practice, I decided to add more elements into my movements such as being knocked down, lying on the ground, chasing and running.

When I choreographed the sixth part of the dance, my dancers and I did two weeks of observational research. For the first week I asked them to observe their own breathing rate and find out what things or movements made their breathing efficient and inefficient. The second week I asked my dancers to observe the breath of others, such as

passers-by, gym-goers and swimmers. Through observational research, we identified physical characteristics of efficient and inefficient breathing, and let it influence the movements that we developed in the section. Also, this section of the music was created using recordings of the dancers' sounds when breathing and speaking. While speaking, they are talking about their personal understandings and feelings about breathing.

I initially thought the last section of the piece should be an exaggerated dance movement about breath, but later, I realized that powerful visual effect did not have to come with dance. In this case the dancers' natural expression appears more powerful. Therefore, at the end of the piece, we just simply walked together to the right corner of the stage and breathed audibly without any music or elaborate movements.



Photograph 2. *WAKE UP BREATHING* Movement Approach

Creative Approach

For me, creative inspiration comes from a number of sources. The desire to communicate through motion, the physical and kinetic potential of the human body, and the joy of virtuosic dancing all inspire me. In my creative process, I worked using a number of different methods in response to each dancer's changing understanding of his or her own breathing patterns. One of the most important creative methods I used was improvisation. I employed this as a method of background research to develop a movement language for each section of choreography and then led dancers to generate movement material through improvisation within that vocabulary. This brought dance to life through processes of description, demonstration, improvisation, and revision.

As a choreographer, I also appreciate collaborative creative efforts. Dance is a collaborative art form, because I think communication and interaction with all of the people involved in design and production is part of the choreographic process. For this reason, I collected data first through observation and interviews with my dancers to understand their breath training background and experience. Then I used this data to creatively explore breathing patterns and develop movement through experimentation and innovation. I held the creative vision and guided all the elements that go into the making of a dance.

I created a dance that is strong and asymmetrical, with bold moves that cut through space, suggesting disharmony and struggle. For contrast, I also included movements that are lyrical and light, used symmetrical patterns of movement in space, and evoked romantic, harmonious qualities.

In addition, I used classical and traditional techniques, which tended to start with the movement vocabulary of the forms as the dancers' basic language. In the process of extending the forms and movement vocabulary, I incorporated personal movement expression to allow each dancer to articulate his or her unique perspective. I believe that the resulting work is a highly individual and expressive way of communicating about breath through dance.

Costumes and Production

As a choreographer and also one of the dancers in my piece, I like simple things. The work *WAKE UP BREATHING* does not have elaborate props or technical devices. In choreography, choreographers often use props to make dance pieces more complex and diverse. But I wanted my piece to be expressed in a simple way. As explained above, at the beginning of the rehearsal, I was thinking about using the "lung model" as a prop, but after consultation with my committee members, I decided not to use it. I think audiences can feel the idea of the breath more profoundly by appreciating the dancers' body language and listening to their real breathing sounds.

My concept of costuming was also simple. The dancers just wore simple and unadorned dance clothes. I think that by making the costumes simple and not using any props, the audience can focus more on the movements. When I purchased the costumes, I choose each one carefully. I considered the body type of each dancer and chose dark blue wide-leg pants and a nude-colored top as costumes. The nude-colored top clearly shows the dancer's throat and abdomen. When the dancers put their hands over their ribs and do

the movements inspired by breathing, the audience can clearly see the changes in the dancers' bodies.

I also asked all the dancers to wear socks in different colors at the fifth section of the dance. I wanted to keep the sections novel and innovative within the simplicity. The fifth section is the penultimate section of the dance piece, so the socks not only help me express my creative intention, but also enhance the visual effect for the audience. When the audience watched the first four parts, I believe they can understand the intention of the piece. So, when I designed the fifth part of the dance, the dancers put on different colored socks, which easily aroused the audience's curiosity and attention. At the same time, I added the element of the dancers' feet shaking/trembling in the movement to show that every part of the body can "breathe," and once again clarified the theme of the piece.

I worked with the Dance Production Office to advertise the performance of the piece. I submitted program and publicity information and articulated the intention of my piece. I believed my work would attract people with its unique cultural references. I also designed two different posters. One was a photographic design that illustrated two of the *WAKE UP BREATHING* dancers and the second was a photograph of the nine dancers in this piece. In addition, I designed twenty fliers, one video trailer, and ten photos, all of which I also used on social media platforms to promote my MFA project. I also distributed fliers about the concert to my friends and fellow ASU students as well as at the Chinese Culture Center in Phoenix.

Chapter 3

THE FINAL PRODUCT

After over a year's time to collect, organize and conduct choreographic research, the work *WAKE UP BREATHING* was finally complete as a film installation, video project and live performance show. Here I will provide a detailed description and summary of the overall project.

Lobby Installation

When the audience entered the theater, the first thing they saw was the film installation in the lobby that I designed and edited. My installation had a total of two projectors at the entrance of the theatre; one on the left side in front of the stairs and the other one on the right side near the entrance wall. The two projections were about 12 feet tall and 15 feet across; they were hanging on the wall surrounded by eight chairs. The images were very clear as they projected on white plastic sheets used as screens.

The two projectors played the same film at different points in time. The imagery was mainly different shapes of clouds, a blue sky and my solo. The movement solo presented my own dance experience while using the breathing elements of Chinese classical dance under the quiet and serene music, "Arête," composed by Brambles. The projections utilize a lot of close up shots, layered effects, and panoramic shots so the audience can get a sense of my inner breathing world.



Photograph 3. *WAKE UP BREATHING* Lobby Installation by Zijia Kong

Video Project

When the audience entered the theatre after watching the installation, the show began with a five minute video that created a bridge to, and started, the live performance. The video shows the breathing of fish and I move mimicking fish underwater. Many audience members commented that it was an amazing connection to the lobby installation. Fish are underwater breathing animals and they don't have a diaphragm. They breathe by letting water pass through the gills and extracting oxygen, which transfers directly into the bloodstream. This video project illustrates an outsider entering into the aquatic environment in order to experience underwater breath. Yet as the outsider, there is the struggle to fill the lungs with air in a world that is not their own. The sound effects for the video were recordings of my own sounds, including the sound of me blowing bubbles underwater.



Photograph 4. *WAKE UP BREATHING* Video Project Exploration by Zijia Kong

Live performance

The live performance starts after the video. The first section is two dancers that start in a black out. One dancer runs on a fixed spot at the upstairs balcony until the end of the first section. The other dancer comes slowly out from the darkness, with the soundscape of breathing sounds, and shows focus and self-expression. The performer uses improvised movement to show how the lungs contract and expand while breathing. The audience can hear the real, live breathing sounds from the performer and subconsciously feel their own breathing rhythm.

This leads into the second section, which is a duet with two dancers who show that the frequency and rhythm of breathing can be influenced by others. One of the dancers walks slowly from the back of the stage to the front. The other dancer steps backward and slowly walks until the two meet, adjusting their breathing rates to each

other's. Next, the two dancers move in unison using a lot head-tail and upper-lower body patterns. Suddenly, one dancer increases the amplitude and frequency of the movements, and the other dancer, under her influence and guidance, increases the breathing rate. The two dancers' breathing changes constantly, and finally returns to the same frequency.

The third section is an ensemble of seven dancers. They enter the space one after another and slowly walk on with the palms of their hands held low in front of them, as if they are bobbing up and down, which is a visual representation of the breathing. In this part, the dancers change their formation eight times. Through multiple formations, the movements explore the connections between each part of the body with breathing. For example, there is a part of the dance where all the dancers are sitting on the ground, their legs bent naturally apart, while their left arms rest on the ground and the right-hand tremble violently above the chest. The dancers' chests are affected by the shaking of their hands, and their breathing rate accelerates dramatically. After nearly a minute of trembling, the dancers' rapid breathing gradually becomes "exhausted," and their breathing begins more and more slow.

This group section uses a lot of choreography that is based on the creative process. For example, there is a part where one dancer comes out after another from the right corner of the stage. Based on the creative process, the dance movements use both improvisation and set choreography. Each dancer's movements not only show the similar movement style, but also show the unique movement characteristics of each person.

The fourth section begins with a short solo by Courtney Ngai. At the end of the third section and the beginning of the fourth section, she slowly steps out of the corner and turns her head to look at the audience. She then stretches her right arm, using it to

pull her body to the right. Once she has control of her leaning, she lifts her left leg and continues to lean to the right side. Next, she shifts to jump without touching the ground. After a higher-level jump, her body moves suddenly into a lower space. Her legs form a squat and bend at the knees; her arms slowly extend and contract. After some space and level changes, her movements become static with the music, and the large body movements become smaller and smaller, while she moves slowly off the stage.

The fifth section is another group dance. The dancers come out from both corners to the beat of the music. All the dancers perform the same movements, but in different directions. At first, the dance moves are quick, sharp and clean with efficient breathing. Then, with the music changed, dancers reflect the breathing rate by changing the formation many times. After that, the dancers split into small groups, breaking up a uniform formation and movement, then quickly forming a diagonal line. In this part, the dancers wear different colored socks, and while sitting on the floor with their arms on the ground, they shake their feet together as everyone tries to breathe with this part of the body.

The sixth section is also a group dance. I with my other seven dancers show how efficient and inefficient breathing affect the dancers' moves. The dancers put their hands in front of their lungs and contract their hands to emphasize the organs breathing. Then, we use efficient breathing to bend different parts of the body, from the head to the shoulders and to the knees. After few efficient breathing movements, one of the dancers begins to move faster and adds a lot of floor movements. The breathing changes from smooth to intense, and the dancer gives the audience the feeling of a fish being pulled from the water. Gradually, driven by inefficient breathing, the dance moves become filled

with struggle, convulsive, and tense while the dancers start to hyperventilate. Finally, all the dancers move quickly from different spots and run to a tight circle where they stand shoulder to shoulder trying to get more “oxygen” in the center to keep breathing. As the crush gets faster and faster, the dancers fall away from the center in different directions to the outside.

In the last part of the dance, the dancers quickly stand up and form a tight square. All the dancers stand on the stage and keep their eyes focused while looking forward. Then the dancers move slowly together to the down stage right corner of the stage. At the same time, as they walk, they breathe in unison and show the audience their powerful breathing. This part has no background music, so the audience can clearly hear the real breathing sounds of the dancers. After ten orderly breaths, the lights dim, and the dance piece ends with the sounds of muted breathing.

Chapter 4

ANALYSIS

Was it a Success?

There are so many ways to measure whether a work is successful. I realized that after a long time of creative research and rehearsal, I had established a mental connection with my dancers. Everyone worked so hard to bring their best to the process and we created a fantastic team environment. When dancing in front of the audience, we felt like we were not only performing, but also sharing our experience with the audience and enjoying the time on stage. In this regard, I would say it was a success; we truly put ourselves into the piece. One of my dancers, Tiffany Velazquez, said: “When I was performing the last section of the dance, I could not stop my tears filling my eyes. When I was breathing, I was surprised that the first thing I heard was not my own breathing sound, but I heard the breathing sound of other dancers. At that moment, I felt the connection between myself and other dancers. This kind of link is not only with the dance movements, but also with the connection of spirit and soul. I believe all of us were trying our best, it is evident that we did it and gave it life.”

I want to keep developing and researching more efficient breathing methods to improve dance performance. The nine dancers in *WAKE UP BREATHNG* came from different dance backgrounds and they had different understandings of dance in general. Among all the dancers, I was the only one trained in traditional Chinese Classical dance forms. My style is influenced by my Chinese Classical dance training and trying to follow my style challenged the other dancers. The rehearsals and the creative process

required the dancers to use the concept of Chinese classical dance breathing techniques and understand the intention behind studying breathing. At the end, the feedback I got from my dancers was that they learned efficient breathing techniques and had a deeper understanding of Chinese classical dance. One of my dancers, Courtney Ngai, said: “I felt that the Chinese classical dance breath pattern was able to extend my movement beyond what I thought was physically capable and discover new boundaries beyond my kinesphere.”

Audience Success

I would say the influence of *WAKE UP BREATHING* on the audience was enormous. I know the feelings about breathing deeply affected people through from the audience feedback. For many viewers, the concept of breathing was strong to them; they could feel the clarity of the theme throughout the lobby installation, fish video, and live performance. One of the audience members shared with me that she was observing her own breathing while watching the piece. When all the dancers fell to the floor, covered their chests, and experienced laboured breathing, she found that suddenly she couldn't breathe. She didn't know why she could not breathe, but she felt like her breathing in that moment was linked to the dancers onstage. She said she felt the tension of the dancers' breathing, which let her re-examine her own breathing. In addition, some audience members expressed their opinions of dance movements. They thought the dance movements were stunning and could feel the choreographers' intention through the abstract and representational dance movements. Even though the piece is not directly

telling the importance of breathing, the pure dance moves clearly conveyed a sense of breathing to the audience.

Personal Success

As a choreographer, the success of my personal growth has been huge. First of all, by researching this topic, observing animals and discussing with other dancers, I developed several efficient methods of breathing that can improve my own dance performance. Since I was trained deeply by Chinese classical dance before, I thought that there is only one breathing method in the dance, which is called “Shenyun” (身韵). However, when I learned Modern and Urban dance styles, I found that “Shenyun” breathing method is not universally applicable, and it is sometimes inefficient for me to use in these different dance styles. The research proves that dancers should recognize that there are different approaches to breathing depending on dance style; for instance, breathing patterns in the urban dance style of breakdance illicit different qualitative effects, just like different pranayama have different effects on the energetic and physiological systems in the body in yoga. Through the process of *WAKE UP BREATHING*, I discovered that different dance styles have their own way of breathing and I successfully found out the breathing techniques that are suitable for Modern and Urban dance.

Second, I learned how to communicate and collaborate with other people, especially as a non-native English speaker. Communication is an important and also challenging part of the rehearsal process. In Chinese classical dance forms, some terminology is difficult to express in English directly. Since everyone’s cultural

background is different, we have a different understanding when dealing with things. I remember at one rehearsal, one of my dancers was ill, so she didn't come to the rehearsal. But that particular rehearsal was very important to me, as I needed to change all the formations before the last showing. My experience told me that this is my work, so if someone didn't show up, I could put them in another spot. Then I did it, and this is where things got trickier. When she came to the next rehearsal, I told her that I had moved her spot, and she was sad and upset. I don't think either of us is wrong, just the two of us have different opinions in dealing with this matter. After things happened I thought maybe I should have notified her before changing the formation, so I could have avoided this situation. This is a small thing in life, but it affects me a lot. Through communication with people from different cultural backgrounds, I have a different understanding of protocol and behavior and gained a lot of knowledge from the rehearsal experience.

Third, I learned how to create a seamless whole out of the different parts, especially in relation to the music. Initially, I had five different music sections and six different dance movement sections. In the process of choreography, I followed the order of music sections. When I re-examined all the sections after the initial choreography, I found that the transitions of each section were not very understandable. Therefore, I rearranged the transitions and the linkages to make the music and movements of each section more consistent and comprehensible. With the composer's permission, I modified the details of each music section, fading in and out the beginnings and endings of sections, cutting out sections of musical pieces and adding breath sound effects. Finally, with the guidance of my committee members, I overcame these choreographic and musical challenges.

Research Success

The research proves that efficient breathing is important for any peak performance activity and needs to be considered part of any conditioning routine for dance. Many dance theorists focus on breathing. For example, Somatic therapist and advocate Martha Eddy defines the origins of a new breathing field - Somatic movement education and therapy - and its impact on fitness, ecology, and performance. The breathing-awareness relationship connects one to his/her body, teachers, fellow students and viewers. Breath, whether one is aware of it or not, informs and supports all movement. After an in-depth understanding of other dance theorists' insights into breathing, I have found a phenomenon that few theorists have studied, namely the breathing patterns of many types of dance. Therefore, it is important to understand the breathing inherent in different dance styles. My study focuses on Chinese classical dance and urban dance, as well as modern dance breathing patterns. The following are several breath training exercises in dance that I discovered through my research which can be used across those three dance styles. Some were my ideas, and some were built on patterns I learned about in my study.

a) Individual Exercise: Using Breath in Movement

Spread the dancers and play soft music. Then, ask them to improvise movements while coordinating audible breathing. Encourage the dancers to experiment with the way they breathe, such as varying the speed of inhalation and exhalation, pushing air out in contrast with pulling air in, and changing the pitch of their breath sounds.

b) Partner Exercise: Using Breath to Communicate

Split the dancers in groups of two people. Again, play soft music. Then, ask the dancers to improvise movements while incorporating audible breathing in a conversation, or call and response, with a partner. One partner begins by improvising a movement that uses breath their partner can hear, and the second partner responds, also breathing out loud while improvising a movement. It encourages contact between the dancers during this exercise to form a more intimate connection between the pairings.

c) Encourage Experimentation

While the structure described in the rehearsal example above provides a great starting point for dancers to explore the connection of breath and movement, it is important to not always apply such a rigid arrangement for breathing. Everybody is different, and every dancer will find that a different, specific breathing pattern assists his or her technique and performance. Once a dancer understands the basic principles of using breath with movement, they can master this on their own body through discovery and experimentation. Ultimately, this process will lead to a deeper understanding and enjoyment of the dance.

d) Somatic Breath Therapy

Dancers can strengthen respiratory muscles and increase breathing awareness with a simple exercise. Lying on their back in bed or on a floor mat, have dancers rest their palms on the lower abdomen. Relax and feel the body sink into the mattress or mat. Inhale slowly through the nose for a count of two, letting the abdomen gradually expand.

Watch hands rise. Hold briefly and then slowly exhale through the nose for a count of four. Try constricting the throat slightly to slow down the release of air. If one prefers to breathe out through the mouth, try to make a soft hissing noise as the air passes between the lips. As one exhales, work on consciously flattening the abdomen, but don't forcibly expel air at the end; doing so denies the body the oxygen it needs.

EMERGING ARTISTS I

WAKE UP BREATHING

MFA Dance Thesis Concert by Zijia Kong

Arizona State University Nelson Fine Arts Center 122

Nov. 2-3 at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 4 at 2 p.m

\$8 Students, \$16 General, \$12 ASU faculty, staff and alumni



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Photograph 5. *WAKE UP BREATHING* Marketing Poster by Zijia Kong

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Through the artistic creation of *WAKE UP BREATHING*, I discovered a set of methods to teach breathing that supports dancers with certain physical and emotional aspects of their performance. *WAKE UP BREATHING* germinated within my daily life, formed by my previous educational experiences, and was influenced by the culture of both China and the United States. As a dancer, I believe breathing in different ways has different effects on dance movements. When I started to learn dance styles other than Chinese classical dance, I found that their breathing styles were so unique. So, I decided to find out if there is a universal training method to learn to breathe or if it is always dependent on a specific style and pedagogical approach. Throughout a year of research and ten months of rehearsal, I learned to collaborate with non-Eastern dancers and to publicize works. I also established a systematic methodology of breath that also supports personal interpretation. More importantly, the work *WAKE UP BREATHING* helped my dancers and the audience recognize and value the role of breathing in life and also understand why breathing in dance is so meaningful. In my future works, I will continue to research breathing patterns in other dance styles, such as Jazz or Salsa. This access can lead me to explore more, find out more questions and create more valuable dance pieces.

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