



# Outside Influences, Inside Transformations

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## Outside Influences, Inside Transformations

In the spring of 2014, I began creating a choreographic work called, *With In*. This piece was site specific, set in the Barbara B. Smith outdoor auditorium at The University of Hawaii at Manoa. The piece was set on the cement steps of the auditorium, with the audience using the stage area for seating. There were four dancers in the piece, two men, Wailana Simcock and Gabe DeRego, and two women, Faith Im and Blythe Stephens. The men wore black pants and black tank tops and the women wore short brown dresses with black leggings, and all of them wore black dance sneakers. The music was a mix of composers; A.R. Rahman, Rhian Sheehan, and Zakir Hussain. The final performance of this piece was Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2014.

As the December 9th performance date drew near, I recall looking around and realizing how the architectural and geographic influences surrounding this space had affected my choreographic processes throughout this piece. I recollect many times simply sitting in the space to choreograph, watching the wind blow the tops of the Eucalyptus trees that reached above the building tops and noticing the occasional flock of parrots flying by, while above me, the vibrant blue sky welcomed the many clouds gliding across its surface that sporadically released misty rain or a constant downpour. At the culminating performance, an unspoken but very clear awakening occurred as I recognized how these geographic and structural voices spoke through the work. Did I really create it, or was I just a venue for the creation? In Martha Eddy's article, *Somatic Practices and Dance*, she quotes Yuasa Yasuo, an influential Asian thinker: "True knowledge cannot be attained simply by means of theoretical thinking, but only through 'bodily recognition of realization' ... Simply stated, this is to 'learn with the body,' not the brain."<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will explore how outside influences stimulated various inside transformations of my

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<sup>1</sup> As stated in *Somatic Practices and Dance: Global Influences* by Martha Eddy, *Dance Research Journal*, pg. 8.

choreographic and creative process, including geographical and architectural effects, which in turn generated the movement in this piece.

In retrospect, I can see how the outside influences structured or influenced my choreography. One realization I have had is how emotions gave a perception to the outside influences. So, which one is really effecting or bouncing off of the other, emotions or outside influences, or is it because they are both organic that they combined to influence my creative process? A section from Anna Halprin's school website states: "When explored and expressed consciously and creatively, the connection between body, mind, and emotion make a vital contribution to the artful development of the self."<sup>2</sup>

The outside space was perpetuating the inside awareness of my body, which in turn gave a spatial meaning and specific vocabulary to the movement used in my piece. It is in this space that my body became the mind and the mind was quieted down, letting the body and organic essences of nature influence perception, emotion, and the creative process. It makes me wonder if at these creative moments, my mind emptied itself and the connection with nature, body, and creativity were unified expressing themselves through movement of this piece.

Yuasa Yasuo addresses the subject of emptying one's mind in *The Body*. He shares the theory by Fujiwara Shunzei. A part of that theory states, "the first step in learning [to compose] waka, above all, to have a very clear mind."<sup>3</sup> (Waka is a Japanese way of poetry concerned with the form and style of the creative process for poetry instead of the format.) This can be the same for the form and style of the creative process in dance as well, which is something I believe I experienced during the creative process of *With In*.

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<sup>2</sup> In the article *Somatic Practices and Dance: Global Influences* by Martha Eddy, Dance Research Journal, pg. 4 (<http://www.tamalpa.org>).

<sup>3</sup>*The Body*, Yuasa Yasuo, pg. 100.

While working in this outdoor site, I often went and sat on the cement steps and quietly observed my surroundings. I felt the organic vibrancy of nature amongst the architectural contrast of the cement which made up the outdoor theater. Even the cement was influenced by nature. Many times I sat on the cement stairs, usually in the shade, and though shaded the warmth of the cement from being in the sun for the afternoon radiated into my body. Often, I closed my eyes and felt the wind while listening to the selected music, and allowed everything to flow inside me, which helped me come to a decision in my mind that reflected itself as movement. Other times, I watched the tops of the Eucalyptus trees blowing back and forth in the wind while various birds landed on them. This picturesque moment influenced transitions in my piece, as the bird landed on these windy branches, so the transitions between movements became picturesque and natural. During some rehearsals, an occasional misty rain or constant down pour washed over, which brought out other aspects of creativity such as intricate footwork and spatial awareness of place and body. What I most felt there was peace; peace in sitting in such an organic environment while creating.

It was actually one of my professors, after seeing the first movement, which brought to my attention how my movement portrayed the architectural structures of the surrounding walls and buildings. As the next two movements developed, I continued to focus on the site awareness. At the performance I experienced an incredible awakening of how the piece, the architectural structure, and nature all combined for an inner body spatial experience for me, and I hoped for the audience as well.

Recently, I listened to a book on C.D and heard this quote:

“The good news is that the moment you decide that what you know is more important than what you have been taught to believe, you will have shifted gears in your quest for abundance. Success comes from within, not from without.” Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The Secret*, C.D. 3, Chapter 5, Rhonda Byrne.

What impressed me from this quote was that as I watched the performance of this piece, I felt a shift from former boundaries, such as a proscenium stage and lighting for full production, shifting and giving way, reinventing into vibrant beliefs of natural sunlight, wind, and outdoor space, which combined to stimulate my creativity as a choreographer. The aspect of success coming from within, I realized, was such a large part of my choreographic process. The movement stimulated my mind to relax and the surroundings gave creative work from within me and visualized itself through movement. The dancers became a part of this process as well through suggestions and ideas for various transitions and points that did or did not work well with the site. It was such an encompassing development. My choreography came from within, and the more I let that flow, quieted my mind, and let my body transform these influences into movement, the more it revealed itself through my work.

While reading Yasou's work, I realized I am frequently stuck in my head, and the need to increase my spatial awareness of my body. I needed to be more present, reduce my anxiety, and increase my breath. He spoke about spatial awareness of our bodies, and how often the western culture is so concerned about the importance of the mind, and minimizes the vital importance of the body and spatial awareness it has.

With this in mind, I decided to try an experiment on myself, and it is something I continue to do in my personal practice. Ten minutes before going to bed, I put my facebook and electronics away, I burn incense and sit on my bed and take deep breaths. I let my thoughts flow with positive affirmations to myself while breathing deeply. If anxiety presents itself, I take slower, deep breaths and continue connecting with positive affirmations. During this time, I let my breath direct my mind as to what I need to think about in order to help my body heal and be calm inside. It is very helpful in increasing my sleep, feeling rested, and waking up with joy in

my life. If I am feeling thoughts of sorrow or pain, I continue to let that work through me as well, with loving thoughts to honor what my body feels and help it progress and flow through my body to work itself out. Presently, I continue to practice this meditative connection of body and mind, finding it vital to my everyday personal well-being.

This exploration and experimentation has been a very intimate and profound, reinforcing the spatial awareness of my body to my mind, and my mind to my body, connecting this system. “Somatic awareness allows a person to glean wisdom from within.....at the center of the field of somatics is the soma-an integral and individual process which governs its own existence as long as it has existence.”<sup>5</sup> This has allowed me to give more spatial existence to the body that make up me.

I had a living experience in creating the work, *With In*. This experience, realized at the end of the process, was the tip of a somatic experience that has inspired reflection and motivation for me, with a desire to awaken a more spatial awareness of body and spirit, to relax the mind, and trust the insight that knowledge and creativity will come from within me during my creative process and as a reflection in my current and future works.

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<sup>5</sup> As stated in *Somatic Practices and Dance: Global Influences* by Martha Eddy, Dance Research Journal, pg. 8.