Representing Self and Community Through Aerial Dance

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Artist’s Statements
Ellery Temple

A Letter to Myself: December 15th, 2023

As an aerial dancer, it is important to me to represent myself in my choreography. This piece began with a poem I wrote at a difficult time in my life. The poem is a dialogue between my past self and my current self, and intends to show the growth I have made in the last few years and inspire hope that I will continue to grow. Aerial dance provides evidence that I am capable of growth. Since I started dancing, I have grown so much as an aerialist and performer. Thus, I decided to integrate the poem into an aerial dance piece. This is the result. I tried to complement skills in the piece to lines in the poem, to represent the words with movement. For example, I paired the line, “It’s easier to fall forward and trust myself/than it is to stop moving,” with a forward drop—literally falling forward and trusting myself to catch it. The dance was also designed with simple movements. I wanted enough of the audience’s focus to be on the words of the poem and didn’t want the choreography to distract too much. For this reason, I also chose a simple, all black costume.

The goal of this piece was to represent myself and connect personally with the audience. There is an inherent personal connection the dancer shares with the audience through the vulnerability of live performance. You are trusting them to accept whatever flaws may arise in the moment. In this case, the vulnerability was furthered by sharing such a personal poem. It details fears that I have, my emotions, and things I am trying to learn about myself and the world. The poem is also a big part of the personal representation in the piece. Fears, emotions, and learning are huge parts of what makes me me. I chose to recite parts of the poem aloud, as opposed to all of it being recorded, to further represent myself. Not only am I sharing my poem, my dancing, and my physicality with the audience, I am also sharing my voice. This also enhances our connection—I am talking directly to them, instead of being a body on a stage only to be watched. It encourages them to listen to the words, and emphasizes the importance of what I have to say.

Eat Your Young: June 15th, 2024

This piece started with interviews of professional aerialists to gather an understanding of their experiences and the culture of circus spaces. I used their responses to shape my movement. For example, both women I interviewed described the struggle to find an identity outside of circus once it becomes your career. This informed the narrative I chose to represent in my piece. I begin as a marionette, tied to the silks. Throughout the piece, I continue to demonstrate the phrase, “tied up in this”, which both women used to describe their relationship to aerial. Finally, at the end of the dance, the marionette becomes free from her ropes, represented by me stepping away from the silks and finishing the piece on the ground. My interviewees described the importance of finding pieces of identity outside of circus arts. Thus, I wanted the dance to end away from the silks, to demonstrate that performers are people outside of their art.

This piece was also shaped by the song I chose: “Eat Your Young” by Hozier. I appreciated the duality of sharp instrumental beats and more fluid vocals. This allows for a mix of stiff movements (like those of a marionette) and softer, more human movements, which enhances the narrative of a puppet freeing herself to become human. Also, there is an abrupt transition at the end of the song to classical violin. This supports the transition of movement from on the silks to on the ground.

The theme of this piece is the importance of having a complex identity. A marionette, tied to her ropes, is trapped. A performer who only sees herself as that is also trapped. It is human to have many different facets of identity.