

**EXPLORATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DANCE  
AS A TOOL OF COMMUNICATION**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### Exploration of the Effectiveness of Dance as a Tool of Communication

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Visual art is one of the most iconic and widespread forms of art in the world. However, some may claim that it is losing its relevance and place in the current art scene due to technology and instant gratification courtesy of the internet. We hope to translate iconic and propagandist artwork from the time period of the Space Race, into a form that we most closely understand and may be more relevant for a wider audience through dance. We look forward to incorporating other artists in this project and, as a team, produce artwork from a piece of choreography and create a new work ourselves based on an influential painting from this era to translate meaning, context, and feeling. There are so many opportunities for collaboration between dancers, painters, and historians. By bringing together paintings, photographs, and drawings, which many consider to be stagnant and two dimensional, and dance, which has live bodies and constant movement, history and art can be brought to life in a new way. By using artwork from this era as our inspiration, we are able to not only express the history of the era, but convey the feelings and emotions this event had on various cultures during that time. In doing this, we can allow audience members to immerse themselves into the context of this historical era that they may otherwise never understand. This would revitalize both mediums of art and merge the two art audiences and build a new bridge between artists and historians.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We also want to recognize the eight dancers that gave up their Friday afternoons to make this piece possible, as well as the artists that will be involved at our final showing.

Finally, a big thank you to our families, friends and each other for always showing their support and encouragement.

## **KEY WORDS**

TRANSLATING

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

VISUAL ART

SPACE RACE

CHOREOGRAPHY

## SECTION I

### RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

#### **Question**

In history, textbooks often relay straightforward historical facts with little to no emotion relating to the event. When history is being taught in schools, the events that are taught to students are left as almost a “bare-bones” structure and not the full historical context that can be conveyed. This can be considered a disservice to both the event and all who experienced it, as well as historians who spend their whole careers researching and ensuring that all aspects of that event are preserved. By using the art form of dance, we are hoping to evoke an emotional response in our audience that would bridge this gap so that all aspects of historical events can be learned and experienced instead of just memorization of facts. This would also help ensure that large pieces of history are not forgotten, especially when tied not just to words, but also tied to feelings and actions. Through our research, we will to determine if dance can be used as a valid method of relaying information about historical events. If it can, the implications can reach far beyond just the teaching of history, but can also affect the preservation of historical events and stories passed from generation to generation. It can also help to create connections across generations potentially spanning several centuries that would never have been made previously through historical text alone.

#### **Motivation**

In most previous dances that are centered around a historical event, the audience is already aware of what the event is (e.g. Holocaust pieces, Stonewall pieces, etc.). For us, we are

keeping the event unknown to the audience so we can really explore the emotional response that results from our work. We will then be able to determine if it falls in line with the research surrounding the Space Race. The work will be created using artwork from the two main perspectives of those involved, and will specifically be based off of 6 pieces of artwork (propaganda materials, photographs, and paintings) surrounding the Space Race era. We specifically chose the Space Race era because in our experiences as students, we weren't taught much about it in school beyond one perspective. Also, through our own personal experience as dancers, we have not seen any dances that surround this particular historical time. This is an important component for us because we want this work to be based solely off of the knowledge that we gain from our research and not from outside influences from pieces that we have seen before. Our research question refers to the ability of the art form, dance, to tell a story and in this case, a timeline and description of the Space Race era.

Dance artists and companies, as well as other visual and performing art forms, are constantly work to validate their importance in society and even more so in education. If we can accomplish our goal of relaying information regarding the Space Race era of the 20th century, this will help to credit dance as a viable kinesthetic way of learning through interdisciplinary studies of history.

This research is also important for us as dance students. We are constantly looking for ways that our dance education can cross over into our other studies. This process will help us to develop tools so we can begin to use dance as a way of learning and teaching other subjects, much like we are trying to teach our audience about the Space Race through our work. If we can begin to establish these tools beyond the scope of historical use, they can be used for learning and teaching by means of dance education. Specifically, these tools can be utilized by other

teachers and students for a variety of subjects. This will be especially important to keep dance relevant beyond just a way to stay physically active because it will help to ensure that teachers and students are actively engaged in the teaching and learning process.

## **Artifact**

We hope to educate our audience about the Space Race through a choreographed modern dance piece. Throughout our creative artifacts, the artwork we have chosen as our inspiration, we will be utilizing and supporting other art forms such as painting, drawing, and photography. We will use these elements of visual artwork, influenced by our historical event, to inform our creative process by creating specific motifs and phrase work which will be our movement vocabulary for the piece. Our work will be a vessel through which we can communicate the emotions and perspectives experienced during this time period. Throughout this process, we will research the historical event of our choice, the Space Race, and explore the two main perspectives of this event, the Russian and American perspective. In order to better understand the effect this event had on the different cultures, we will be picking artwork from both of these perspectives.

We plan to choreograph a dance piece set on eight of our peers. The entirety of the process will continue to be informed by all of our creative artifacts. We plan to “finish” the piece early so we will be able to have an early showing of our work as a self-checkpoint. This will be a good way to compare our whole piece to our six creative artifacts to ensure that we are staying true to the historical facts of the research, as well as the emotional components and visual images that are shown through the artwork. This step is crucial to maintaining the integrity of



our results when we present our final product and get our feedback responses from the Q&A session following the performance.

Our end goal is to explore if dance can be used as a way to translate the emotional aspect of historic events and have educational value through an interdisciplinary approach to education. We are already sort of doing so by utilizing the creative artifacts to inform our process, but by using the artwork to create the piece and develop the story behind the event, we will be able to learn if dance can be used in this same way.

## SECTION II

### LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

#### History

The Space Race era was a time of stress and anxiety across the globe as two of the world's leading powers, following World War II, continually sought to have more power than the other. The race to space stemmed from the Cold War, which was centered around becoming the world's greatest global superpower (The Space Race, 2010). On the heels of World War II, this was a pivotal time in world history as each nation had their own agenda for power and what they would do with it.

In 1945, the second World War ended and tensions were as high as ever between the allied nations, the United States and the U.S.S.R. As post war treaties were signed and clean-up continued, friction continued to increase between the two countries that had previously fought on the same side. The United States and the Soviet Union entered into a Cold War that would last years and frighten many people all over the world. While the U.S. had been very public about their pursuit of space, the U.S.S.R's launch of Sputnik came as much of a surprise to the public in the U.S. On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union "won" the first round of the space race with their launch of Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite to be launched into elliptical low Earth orbit (Timeline: 50 Years, 2012). According to NASA's *Sputnik and the Dawn of the Space Age* (2007), it was this event that officially began the race to space between the two rival countries. Shortly after, the Soviet Union sent another satellite into orbit, this time holding a dog named Laika, on Sputnik 2; Laika became the first living thing to enter space (Zak, 2007). This was a key point in the Space Race as it put pressure on the United States to step up their inventions in

order to keep up with the U.S.S.R. In January of 1958, the U.S. formed NASA, the National Astronauts and Space Administration. The U.S.S.R. continued on their trajectory of increased space exploration with Vostok 1; this made history by sending the first man, Yuri Gagarin, into space. In response to this news, President John F. Kennedy announced that the U.S. would send a man to the moon by the end of the decade, knowing that if they beat the U.S.S.R. to the moon, they would surely “win” the race (The Space Race, 2010).

The space race inevitably ended with the United State’s successful launch of Apollo 11, putting the first man on the moon. With the landing of Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins, the world heard the famous words spoken to NASA, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” (Loff, 2017, para. 3). This historic event, that occurred on July 20, 1969, marked a milestone for the U.S. that unofficially ended the Space Race with a U.S. victory. The U.S.S.R. had four failed attempts to land a man on the moon in the years following Apollo 11. As interest declined in the 1970s, one mission should still be noted; a joint Apollo-Suez mission was launched and came into orbit with a Soviet vehicle. The two commanders exchanged a handshake which symbolized peace and an effort towards resolution after years of fighting and brought an end to the hostile race between two nations (The Space Race, 2010).

## Art



Figure 1 *"In the Name of Peace"*

Figure 1 is an example of a Russian propaganda painting titled *"In the Name of Peace."* Historians believe that *"Mother Russia Calling,"* a famous World War II poster, was the inspiration behind it, as the female figure is wearing the same red outfit and scarf (Sidlina 2015).



Figure 2 American propaganda poster

In Figure 2, the victory of the Apollo 11 moon landing is clearly shown. The American propaganda poster is aggressively prideful and patriotic in its display of the ultimate and final victory of the Space Race.



Figure 3- “*Conquistadors de la Luna*” movie poster

Figure 3 is a movie poster from the Mexican film “*Conquistadors de la Luna.*” This is a great example of how the rest of the world had its eyes on both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. during and after the Space Race. The aliens pictured also represent the world’s fascination and imagination of extraterrestrial activity.

## Dance and Research

Many pieces have been based around historical works, but unfortunately there is little to no written research published that can be cited. Luckily, there is plenty of video evidence that can be analyzed and creative tools that can be utilized from these works. One specific work that can be referenced is the BalletBoyz full length feature film, *Young Men*, that tackles the telling of war through dance. The choreographers successfully utilize lighting, music, and a specific

movement vocabulary that really move the audience to feel what it might have been like to have been at war. In an interview with an artistic director of BalletBoyz, he stated that even their random mix of talent and range of skill mimicked that of conscription during the war (Nunn and Trevitt 2016). One advantage the choreographer was allowed was the ability to work with a composer to create a score for the original stage production in order to enhance the emotional impact of the piece. When adapting the piece for film, the storyline had to become more focused in order to fulfill the narrative for the audience in the most impactful way. When performed, this company left their army and storyline nondescript to allow the audience to make their own personal assumptions about the storyline, as most successful art pieces do. This particular work is a great resource moving forward with our piece as it is a successful example of a work portraying a historical event.

Hanna's *A Nonverbal Language for Imagining and Learning: Dance Education in K-12 Curriculum* (2008), discusses the possibility that dance could be an effective tool to further educate the upcoming generation. Complimenting this idea, the author states that learning dance helps students "learn effective communication skills, gain self-confidence, and increase their awareness of different cultures" (Purcell pg 1, 1994).

Since there are various types of learners (kinesthetic, visual, auditory, etc) and various ways of teaching, using "dance as an art form for...social science research" could prove to be more effective for certain people (Cole and Knowles, 2008). In the Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples and Issues, the authors discuss the opportunity to include research into the choreographic process. Dance is unique in that it is not always an intellectual experience, but more so a sensory one. Therefore, this gives the

choreographer further opportunity to communicate academic information such as history, scientific research, or in this case, both, in a non-traditional format.

## SECTION III

### EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

#### **Choreography**

The choreography for this piece is built to follow the timeline of the Space Race. The piece begins with dancers spread around the stage giving the audience no notion of the two groups: Russia and the United States. As the first section progresses, dancers begin to move into their two groups. The first section is inspired by the building phase of the Space Race as both groups sought to create technology and satellites that would put them in space first. Each group gets their “highlighted” time to the audience. There is little interaction between the two groups because at this point in the timeline, the United States was not aware that Russia had any plans to go into space. During this section, the downstage right corner is established as the metaphorical goal of each of the two groups by having each group reach toward the corner within their set movement vocabulary.

With the second piece of music that begins the second section of the work, the group representing Russia begins by entering the stage that was previously only filled by the group representing the United States. Throughout this section of the work, the two groups begin to intertwine in the stage area as they work toward a common goal, putting the first person in space. The final moment of this section is reached as the two groups are weaving within each other up the diagonal and ends with the Russia group lifting a dancer, signifying putting the first person in space.

The third section of the work focuses primarily on the groups actually being in space. The movement vocabulary becomes more fluid and connected at this point in the work as



opposed to the overall rigidity of movement in the first two sections. There is also greater interaction of the two groups as the two are clearly in a race to hold the most power. Choreographically, tension is built in the section with small “face-offs” or duets of dancers from separate groups. The work ends with the famous landing on the moon by the American astronauts, effectively ending the Space Race. This event is signified by one dancer in a pseudo-lift as she is posed like she has just planted the flag on the moon. The group representing the United States is again placed most downstage, closest to the established end goal. The group representing Russia is posed reaching for the corner and is most upstage, farthest away from the established end goal. We chose this ending for the Russian group because, historically, they continued to reach the moon, but suffered four failed attempts.

## **Music**

The music that was chosen for this piece was done with the intent of aiding the tension we are trying to create with the movement. The music also heavily influenced the movements we created for each section. The first piece of music begins quiet and builds as it progresses. It also begins with a sense of slowness, but as more instruments are added in, it creates a sense of urgency and tension. The second piece of music continues that sense of urgency as it drives the tempo. The third piece of music for the section is actually two pieces of music edited and overlaid. This was done to allow for the “spacey” feeling of one piece of music, but keeps it building as it goes on so it does not become stagnant.

In addition to the composed pieces of music, we opted to include voice clips from the launch of Apollo 11, the mission that put a man on the moon, and from the audio transmission from the moon landing. The audio is spliced and inserted in the first and third sections of music.

The first section begins with a clip of “thirty seconds and counting”. This gives the audience a sense of urgency, without giving away what the piece is about. The voice clips re-enter in the third section, continuing the countdown with “fifteen seconds and counting” and counts down to zero throughout the third piece of music. The third piece of music ends and the dancer’s end to the transmission of the famous quote “that’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind”, finally letting the audience know that the piece was, at least, about space.

### **Costumes**

For our piece, we decided on the color scheme of blue, grey, and black. All dancers are wearing blue leggings, the easiest legwear to dance in, and either black or grey tops. The black tops are for the group representing Russia and the grey tops are for the group representing the United States. This keeps the colors neutral and doesn’t favor either “side” or perspective that we are portraying within the piece. This is an important aspect of costuming as we want to remain as unbiased as possible within our research. We also don’t want any particular side to stand out to the audience that would give away what the piece is about because we want them to decide for themselves what it might be.

### **Lighting**

The lighting that has been designed for this piece was created with the goal of following the tension of the piece. The brightness of the lights grow as the tension of the piece grows. Within the second piece of music, there is a single spotlight that creates a diagonal of light on the stage that the dancers begin moving toward as it symbolizes a particular end goal for both groups on stage. In this particular instance within the piece, it symbolizes the goal of being

the first country to put a human into space. The lighting continues to grow within the third section of music as the groups strive for what we have set as the ultimate goal of the piece: putting a man on the moon. The piece ends with the group representing the United States most downstage and within the light pool of the diagonal spotlight and the group representing Russia most upstage in a darkened corner of the stage.

### **Performance Space**

We will be showcasing our final product in a black-box theatre located in the Physical Education Activity Program building on the Texas A&M campus. As students in the dance program, we are fortunate to have access to this space for our rehearsals each week and then convert it to the performance area for our show. We will have seating for about 90 guests, which will keep attendance small and create a more intimate environment for the show. This intimate space will be more ideal as it will give our audience the chance to be up close to the performers so they can experience the kind of tension we are trying to create within the piece. This should allow them to feel more open with receiving the intention behind the piece as the dancers become more humanized. Because our research is based around conveying emotion with dance, this is an important aspect of this specific space we are using for the performance. The overarching goal of this research process has been to humanize historical events by putting audience members in the closest proximity possible to the event in order for audience members to gain emotional context and understanding that might otherwise be lost to time.

This space will also be advantageous to the reflective art that is a result of this piece. It will give our artists the ability to see the piece up close in order to create their pieces based on the work we have outlined as their inspiration. The space allows for the artists to be placed in

“non-traditional” viewing areas for the piece as they will be located in various places to gain different perspectives as opposed to sitting in the seats directly in front of the dancers. The final product of the artists is another tool we will be able to use to evaluate if we were successful in recreating the emotional aspect of the Space Race as it unfolds before our viewers.

This space will also be ideal for our question and answer session as it should provide our audience members with a more comfortable, humanized atmosphere. This will allow for open communication during the session so they get the most out of the experience. Additionally, this will be beneficial for us as researchers as we also gain valuable feedback if we start with an open communication environment and a comfortable audience.

## SECTION IV

### REFLECTION

#### **Research Process**

Our research process started with an idea of what we wanted to create. We knew we wanted to create some kind of lasting visual art based on our dance piece. From there, we started brainstorming what we could do to make this happen. We then decided that we would take artwork from a specific historical event that happened during the 20th century to serve as the basis for our choreography. We ended up deciding on the Space Race as our historical event as it is a very critical time within the century that is also not frequently, if at all, used to create dance pieces. This was also an important event to choose knowing that a good portion of our audience would have actually lived through this event since it was in the latter part of the century. It is also a historic event that is taught at the high school level in U.S. history so we knew that our audience members that had not lived through it would still be able to understand the piece and what it was about.

The next step in our research process was to find propaganda used by both the United States and the United Socialist Soviet Republics that would be the basis of our choreography and serve as “motifs” , or themes, that appear frequently throughout the piece. We then developed a chronological timeline of events that would serve as a structure for our piece to keep it historically accurate.

Once we had a good structure for our piece set, we found dancers that were available to be in the piece based around their class and rehearsal schedules. We separated the dancers into two groups based on their strongest movement style (e.g. placing dancers that looked better

moving more fluidly in the “U.S.” group and placing dancers that looked better with rigid, sharp movements in the “U.S.S.R.” group); this was taken into account in order to make the piece as successful as possible.

Another important aspect to our process in creating the piece were several checkpoints along the way in which we received feedback. Our faculty advisor would frequently talk with us about our choreographic plans and how we felt the process was unfolding, but only once or twice a month would view the piece. This kept her eye fresh so she could give us useful feedback regarding our specific goals for the piece and how it was working choreographically. We were also able to show the piece twice before the actual public presentation; we presented once at our composition three show and once at an informal showing as part of the American College Dance Association South-Central Region Conference. Both of these showings helped us to grasp how our piece was being received by audience members and if it was being interpreted correctly or not. One of the major pieces of feedback we received after our composition presentation was that the audience members generally got more of a military vibe from the piece than anything about the Space Race. This prompted us to really work on our third section, which we began to create after winter break, to incorporate more space aspects in the choreography, find more instances to create tension amongst the dancers, and to add the audio clips from the Apollo 11 mission from the launch and the moon landing.

The addition of the audio clips further enhanced our research as it helped to give the audience a sense of urgency throughout the piece, which we used to help communicate to the audience the tension and urgency many felt across the world during this time. It was also a way to inform the audience that the piece would reach a climax where the piece would, logically, end. This followed the historical events of the Space Race, which effectively ended with the Apollo

11 moon landing. The final voice clip finally informs the audience that the piece was about the Space Race.

Our final checkpoint, the informal showing, was our last chance for feedback before our presentation. This gave us one last opportunity to ensure the piece was as perfect as we could get it. The major points of feedback we received after this showing revolved around the emotional aspects of the piece, our main research focus. This was a focus that went beyond the choreography. During our last rehearsal, we spoke with our dancers about what this event meant to people around the world and how important it was to global politics. We really stressed to them just how much the world watched and waited in suspense for how the Space Race would end. In our final rehearsal run, this helped our dancers to implement all of the moments creating tension that we had been working on and helped them put that emotion behind their movement within the choreography.

This whole process was rewarding in a variety of ways. Not only were we able to create a piece to strengthen our compositional skills, but we were able to work on them in a way that we had not utilized yet. We were able to challenge ourselves to create a factually accurate piece, which was much harder than we thought it would be. In the beginning of the process, we feared it was limiting our creativity but taught us how to work within certain boundaries; we were able to explore within those boundaries to use our creativity in a way it had not been yet used. This process also taught us how to collaborate and work with team members since most of our compositional work up until this point was done individually. This was an important skill for us to utilize during the process so we could stay efficient with our time in order to respect our dancers and the deadlines we had been given. Finally, it gave us the opportunity to conduct non-scientific based research. Our program focuses heavily on scientific research so this was a good

opportunity for us to branch out into more historical research. We were able to learn how to conduct historical research and how that can in turn influence the dance world.

### **Public Presentation**

We believe that the public presentation, followed by the question and answer session was a success because of the positive audience response and artists' work that reflected the emotions and spatial ascent we worked so hard to inspire in our choreography. We really enjoyed the opportunity to discuss our research and artistic process during the Question and Answer session, and were pleasantly surprised by the amount of interest from our audience. Some of our favorite topics to discuss included our initial choosing of the Space Race as the historical event, why we included certain choreographic elements, our music choices, and our biggest challenges in creating this piece.

Since this was our final time presenting the piece, we did not make any changes to our choreography. If we were to create the artifact again, knowing the information from the feedback session, I'm sure we wouldn't have done much differently, since the end result and audience feedback showed that our artifact was a success. In fact, it all went much better than we had hoped it would since we received so much positive feedback and were impressed by the work produced by the artists' that were created as a result of our artifact. In retrospect, one of the things we could have done to make the process easier on us and our dancers would've been to include more allotted rehearsals in order to keep our progress moving a little faster. This might have helped over the last two semesters as there were a couple of times we had to replace dancers with understudies due to illness or scheduling conflicts. It could have potentially helped our dancers to grasp their emotional connection to the piece and influence their movement to



improve performance quality sooner, but since it was there for the public presentation, it was still successful in that aspect.

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## CREATIVE ARTIFACT

\*VIDEO OF PERFORMANCE AND Q&A SUBMITTED SEPARATELY

Below are photographs of the artwork created by the local artists who attended our show.



Figure 4- Artwork by Krista Fay Simandl



Figure 6- Artwork by Mallory Kohut

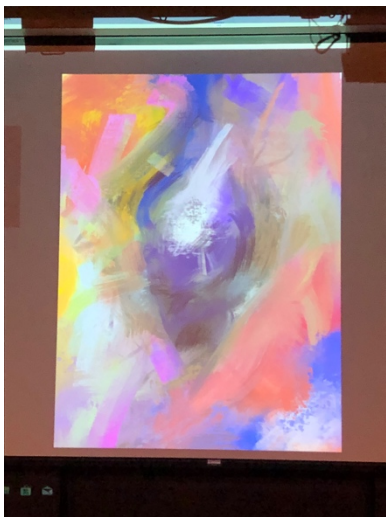


Figure 5- Artwork by Chris Gowen