

**IN FLIGHT:
CONTEMPORIZING WINGED MOTIFS IN PHILIPPINE FOLK DANCE
FOR THE CANADIAN STAGE**

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Abstract

This thesis is a choreographic and filmic exploration of contemporizing selected Philippine folk dances that have winged motifs. It examines dance rehearsals as a site for ethnographic research. Metaphors of birth, growth, life, immigration, struggle, failures, resilience, and hope will be manifested and expressed. The output of this research is a dance film. Titled *In Flight*, it critically responds to themes of isolation, limited movements, the precarity of flight, restricted travel, acts of transferring from one place to another, and the ways in which dance artists adapt to quarantined movements of life. Its aim is to identify an increased knowledge of natural movement of the avian species paralleled or in discussion with how humans translate the naturally occurring movements of birds into human expressions and dances.

Keywords: Philippine folk dance, contemporizing traditional dances, winged motifs, avian species, COVID-19, isolation, precarity of flight, dance ethnography

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late sister Lara. Thank you for sparking my love of dance. Thank you for your unconditional love even if it was cut short. I wish you were here to bear witness to my own flight as a dancer and now a choreographer. I also dedicate this thesis to my brother Patrick who paved the way for me to pursue my graduate studies. Thank you for your unceasing belief in my artistry, being a constant inspiration of excellence, hard work, and dedication, and for maintaining an ethical relationship throughout my graduate studies. I love you both.

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Introduction

Secluded from the world, no windows, no love

a simple but a major mistake of a dove.

Flew off carelessly on the road.

dove...oh...dove...

When will you realize that the éclair was sweet,

only when taken with a careful and mindful beak. (Paulo Perez Alcedo)

This poem that launches my thesis was born out of the need at a time when I was looking for my identity—as a Filipino, as a homosexual, and as a dance artist. This theme of escape, which is very much linked to forced isolation, has always governed my person. I have always looked into how life could be lived in a different way and how it could be seen with an unfamiliar set of lenses. I would start to search for something new, to find a different route to reach the same destination. This range of life-changing searches took the shape of deciding my next career step as I reached a ten-year milestone at the dance studio where I taught to as simple as choosing a different route on my journey from home to work. I see these varying searches for newness as part of defining one's life and its complexities. For me, finding this newness could be the reason why I wanted to escape, change, and find “it” before repeating the cycle.

As dance has always formed the core of my being—it is imbedded in my DNA and part of daily life ever since I can remember—dance and dancing became a refuge for me to escape these thoughts and impulses. I found dance to be a healer, a sacred paradigm, a set of wings, a conduit that allows me to fly like a dove.

Dance is what makes me see life in colour and see life in patterns, shapes, and movement qualities. It mobilizes my identity as a Filipino artist—transnationally dividing my home between the Philippines and North America.

My passion for dance began watching my eldest sister, Lara, perform Philippine folk dances at various social functions and community events in my hometown of Kalibo, Aklan in the central Philippines. Her dancing moved me so much that I eagerly joined my elementary school's folk-dance group. I was soon competing within the province of Aklan as well as representing my home province in regional competitions. During my early teens, my older brother Patrick was accepted to the University of the Philippines (UP), where he furthered his dance training with the internationally touring UP Filipiniana Dance Group, which regularly toured internationally. After high school, the same dance group accepted me and I joined an exciting ensemble that opened my eyes to different dance genres such as jazz, contemporary, and modern.

Filipinos love to dance. Folk-dance in particular, is practiced widely in the Philippines, in part as a preservation of the country's unique cultures. Dance festivals like the Ati-atihan in my hometown of Kalibo, Aklan and Sinulog in Cebu are very popular. Dance is also a way to transfer the richness of Filipino cultures to the next generation. Children are encouraged to take dance lessons from a very early age and dance is included in elementary and secondary school curriculums. Physical education classes include Philippine folk-dance and calisthenics, both of which help students to become more aware of their bodies.

At the age of 17, I joined Douglas Nierras Powerdance Company (DNPD), the Philippine's leading jazz and modern dance company, where I started my professional dance training. In DNPD, I trained for six hours a day and taught jazz classes. There, I performed on major television networks, at industry events, for print and video commercials; I even danced for a princess of Brunei

Darussalam. With DNP, I was able to travel to North America, the USA, and here in Canada. In 2002, I was accepted into The Edge Scholarship Program in Hollywood, California. After graduation, I was able to perform in major arenas in the United States and the Philippines and I danced for a feature film, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* directed by Steven Spielberg. I also joined multiple dance companies in Los Angeles like the Los Angeles Contemporary Dance Company, which is based in contemporary dance, Hysterica Dance Company which is based in contemporary jazz dance, a modern dance company Rosanna Gamson Worldwide, and Marshall Dance Company which specializes in African-derived dances and Dunham technique which are different from Philippine folk-dances. My engagement with these dance companies broadened my movement vocabulary, which I enmeshed with the richness of the cultural dances of my homeland resulting in a deepening of my dance education and increasing my movement vocabulary. Oftentimes when I choreographed a dance piece, I would draw from modern, jazz, Dunham, and African dance influences.

In 2017, I had the opportunity to perform for and collaborate on *Luzviminda: The Philippines Dances for Canada 150*, which was held at York University's Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre. During my stay for the rehearsal process, I had the privilege of assisting my brother Patrick, who is a professor in York University's Department of Dance, with his classes in Philippine dance. I taught a jazz class for the Department's Dance Students' Association. Professor Susan Cash asked me to participate in her choreography for the York Dance Ensemble (YDE) as a guest artist during my visit. I was impressed by the level of collaboration and inclusiveness demonstrated during YDE's dance rehearsals. I had not been in an environment often where one was able to contribute their own movement material to the dance in such a free manner. These experiences of the making of Professor Cash's piece not only deepened my passion for teaching, dancing, and choreography, but also

enriched my understanding of improvisation and choreographic skill. As a result of these earlier positive dance experiences and my quest for a “new route”, in 2018, I decided to take the next step in my career and my training. A thirst for education and positive earlier experiences led me back to York University where I was accepted in 2019 to the Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) in Dance Choreography|Collaboration|Creation. During my studies in early 2020, I was given another opportunity to dance a duet that Professor Cash choreographed, entitled *The Space Between Above*. Working on this piece gave me further insight into choreographic detail and the ways in which choreographers create with their movers.

After engaging with dance as performer and as a teacher for close to three decades, I wanted to pursue the academic side of dance, specifically choreography as well as to read, research, and write about dance. I believe that I can be a better choreographer if I am able to translate my movement ideas through theoretical knowledge and the nuanced exploration gained from a dance graduate degree such as the MFA at York University. In 2017, I met Professor William Mackwood who was instrumental in sparking my interest in pursuing graduate studies. With his encouragement, I applied in 2018 and was admitted in 2019.

Graduate training in dance has enhanced my creative journey through rigorous, scholarly “critical skills.” It has also improved my skill in articulating my work, its process(es), and related outputs. I now have a broader foundation and a toolbox from which to draw from to create and explore choreography through various lenses, especially in our ever-changing technological world. Throughout my dance career, I was able to make dances geared towards the commercial scene. An impetus, therefore, to engaging in graduate studies was to give me a platform to understand dance as interdisciplinary and multifaceted, especially those works that are

collaborative and technological in nature. My MFA studies have afforded me the opportunity to see dance and dance making through these different lenses.

In Flight, the choreography and the film, is an exploration of contemporizing selected Philippine folk dances that have predominant flying movements and thus winged motifs. I have always been fascinated with birds and how they can easily assimilate to their environment, whether that is a temporary site of refuge for them or a permanent nesting place that they can call home, they can adapt to their environment. I wanted to connect with, choreograph around, and gesture to movements and motifs that I see as parallel in my own life. To explore themes of immigration, refuge, strength and resilience amidst crisis and survival, as well as the idea of moving from place to place to find a different nesting ground, is what I seek in my life and work as a dance artist. I see that these images of birds in flight can signify themes that are relevant not only to me as an individual but can define whole cultures, like in Canada where its very fabric of society has been woven by immigrants and migratory or temporary residents such as myself.

Originally, I intended to return to the Philippines in the summer of 2020 to conduct research on traditional dance forms in the southern and northern regions of the country, particularly among the Cordillera, T'boli, and Manobo indigenous communities, which are mountainous and close to large bodies of water like lakes and rivers. However, due to the incredible, global impact of COVID-19, I found myself locked down in Toronto. At the time of writing my thesis, travel outside of Canada has been largely discouraged, with flights cancelled and borders heavily monitored for international travel. As an international student, I was left with no choice but to remain in Toronto, or else I would have taken the risk of maybe not being able to return to Toronto.

What was happening in the world at that moment forced me to rethink my project, to further problematize and explore my initial understanding of flight. The idea of conducting research virtually and electing dance film as my thesis presentation immediately came to mind. I found plenty of inspiration to draw from online. For example, YouTube and other online platforms host an abundance of research materials like Philippine folk dance videos created by the indigenous people across the Philippines. Through this thesis and its accompanying dance film, I intend to re-examine the body that is now forced to distance itself from other human beings. How can one mine the body's potential to make apparent issues of immigration, and now lockdown, and quarantine. All of these aspects serve to mold me as an artist and as a Filipino transnational being constantly in search of home.

I am still like the dove that is secluded from the world. I'm still the dove that has no windows to see love. I'm still the dove that is longing for home and searching for a constant. However, now that I have had the opportunity to grow as an individual through my experiences in my graduate studies and to be in an inclusive environment where homosexuality is widely accepted and nurtured, it has given me the space to plant my roots more securely and develop a more focused artistic voice. The dove will be more confident when traversing the wind and will find it easier to realize peace and happiness in one place. This time, the dove will eat the éclair with a careful and mindful beak.

Literature Review| Philippine folk-dance and dance ethnography

In creating and writing about my thesis project, I had the opportunity to read, analyze, connect to, and understand the multitude of literature that comprises this research. Reviewing a blend of books, academic articles, newspaper stories, YouTube videos, encyclopedia entries, and Philippine folk-dance publications helped in developing a deeper understanding of my choreography. Moreover, this literature had shaped not only my choreographic journey, but as well helped to organize my thoughts and point of view for my own writing.

In the summer of 2020, Professor Cash advised me to start reading related literature about Covid-19 and Philippine folk dances that have bird elements and to begin writing the Introduction and Chapter one of my thesis. I immediately followed her advice and began my research. I perused books about Philippine folk-dance history as well as newspaper stories about the Covid-19 pandemic. The Cultural Center of the Philippines' (CCP) Encyclopedia Volume 5 on Philippine dance, CCP Encyclopedia and Volume 7 on Peoples of the Philippines, *Philippine Dance* by Reynaldo Alejandro, *The Dances of the Emerald Isles* by Leonor Orosa Goquinco, and the several books on Philippine folk-dance notations by Francisca Reyes Aquino are among the great array of resources that I drew on to write Chapter 1. The *Globe and Mail* and *New York times* were my trusted sources on the ravaging effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on travel, the arts, culture, and racialized groups and front-line workers in Toronto. In addition, the expansive research materials available virtually served as great sources for dance performances and provided inspirations for crafting the choreography. These multimodal forms of research materials have been a tremendous help to me in completing my beginning chapters.

In the fall of 2020 and concurrent with my dance rehearsals with the YDE, I completed my abstract and introduction. My readings in the summer of 2020 helped me articulate to my

dancers the themes, movement background, movement nuances, hand gestures, and body posture required for the folk dances which are specific and traditional in forms that I would contemporize. In building the choreography, I wanted to draw on everything that I had read and know about dance—that which is innate within me as well as the skills honed as part of my North American dance training—in order to be expressive at this particular time and place in my life with all of these histories. The dancers quickly absorbed these ideas and applied them in the choreography.

During the last term of my studies, I was enrolled in a graduate dance seminar course, GS/DANC 6400 Issues in Dance Ethnography and Cultural Studies, taught by Professor Patrick Alcedo. This course was significant in my realization that dance rehearsals are a form of ethnographic research. The authors who I will review—Liz Przybylski, Susan Reed, Linda Dankworth and Ann David, Paul Atkinson and Marty Hammersley—introduced these ideas: empathy to the participants, becoming a marginal native of the research, and what a researcher faces when leaving the research field site.

How did these books and articles in GS/DANC 6400 inform my current research? How do I find a discourse plot with them and create an intersection between the ideas and thoughts that the authors provide? What are my critical views on and understanding of these readings as they relate to my own perspective of art making and a life lived so far? Finally, how did these readings provided me with the tools that I needed to navigate the rehearsal process and filming day, both of which were conducted via the virtual platform, Zoom?

Ethnography and empathy to the participants

“The Politics and Poetics of Dance” (Reed 503-32), “Research Design: Problems, Cases and Samples” (Atkinson and Hammersley 20-40), and the chapters from Liz Przybylski’s *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between* provide useful tools in the ways in which one can approach dance ethnography. These tools assisted me in navigating ethnographic research especially in our pandemic times. Several methods coalesce in the authors’ approaches to research: outsider and insider, positionality and power, foreshadowed problems, difference between the preparation of research with “armchair” knowledge versus seeking out materials in the field. These sources offer various ways to document the research, including mapping, synchronous and asynchronous meetings, video, and social media. Aside from this web of tools, issues in dance politics, nationalism, ethnicity, and gender identity are addressed.

Przybylski and Reed continuously mention the word hybrid. Przybylski defines hybrid as composed of fieldwork and online qualitative research methods. Reed writes about hybrid dances that are predominantly seen in the Western world, especially Europe and the United States, which have similarities with and which draw from African dances. The early 1900’s famous dance cake walk for example, and the military parades both have similarities to the “drum band” complex of East Africa. Reed also explores dance as politics. She provides the ways in which dance can be a tool to address issues of power and protest, resistance and complicity. This reminds me of Akram Khan’s¹ work in “Father: Vision of the Floating World” where he choreographs an eight-minute piece to reenact childhood stories that his family shared from the period of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

¹ Akram Khan is a dancer and choreographer who fuses contemporary and khatak dance forms. He is based in the United Kingdom.

I read these articles written by Atkinson and Hammersley, Przybylski, and Reed in January 2021 while I was choreographing for the YDE, who would perform *In Flight*. With all of these tools and this set of readings, I saw interconnections of hybrid ethnography in my rehearsals because we had been conducting them via Zoom—an online platform—which I now see as a part of this method. Atkinson and Hammersley call this selecting setting and cases, and while Przybylski refers to it as identifying a specific scene. Selecting setting and cases and identifying a specific scene are important factors when conducting ethnographic research. Once the researcher has solidified these factors, he or she can begin to recognize foreshadowed problems and access to the participants. In the case of my research, the setting was Zoom, and access was approved for the participation: York Dance Ensemble dancers and Justine Del Rosario. I would argue that through the creative process that culminated in *In Flight* and this thesis, I have identified and proven viable a way to choreograph and direct a dance film that is hybrid, highly mediated, and performed via a virtual platform. With my dance rehearsals and dance film, I delved into a world of choreography, creation, and collaboration that are traditionally enacted in-person but in our COVID-19 reality, were instead transposed to a remote setting, in this case Zoom.

As I continued my rehearsals, I utilized the method of foreshadowing problems during research as introduced by Atkinson and Hammersley introduced. They defined this method as the researcher's empathy of the researcher for their participants. These two methods are inextricably linked to be able to solve current problems and build rapport with the research participants. These for me as a researcher are important, especially amidst a pandemic. To show empathy, I choreographed the week before each rehearsal so when it was time for me to rehearse with the dancers, I was ready to teach the choreography and not create it on the spot. To apply the method

of foreshadowing problems, I choreographed the movement phrases in a smaller space knowing that my dancers will be rehearsing in their homes. These extra efforts successfully helped the dancers learn the choreography with ease.

On the filming day of *In Flight*, knowing that I only had four hours to film, I created an excel sheet that comprised a detailed time slot for each solo and group dance shots. (see p 73) Each act needed to be filmed in three camera angles with only four dancers at one time plus the video and lighting crew. With these factors in mind, I came up with a schedule which had thirty-minute increments for each solo and group shots.

Being a marginal native and leaving the field site

The following articles: “Access” and “Field Relations” (Atkinson and Hammersley 63-96), “Global Perspectives in Ethnographic Fieldwork, Theory and the Representation of Traditional Dance” (Dankworth and David 1-10), and “Embodied Traditions: Gujarati (Dance) Practices in *Garba* and *Raas* in the UK Context” (David 13-36) provide substantial examples of ethnographic research and answers the 5w’s (and how) when conducting fieldwork. In addition, they identify and add detail the realities a researcher faces when leaving the field. In Ann David’s article, “Embodied Traditions: Gujarati (Dance) Practices of *Garba* and *Raas* in the UK”, she uses dance ethnography and the larger field of ethnographic methodology to conduct research, a common denominator found in all the of these articles. Furthermore, they touch on studies about culture and being a marginal native to the field of study, which Hammersley and Atkinson illustrate. Brewer’s 1991 study about the police, Sudarkosa’s 1986 research in Nigeria, Hoffman’s research on surgeons, Hansen’s experience in Catalone and Barrett’s research in

Bernabarre, among many others, were studies of people and places that all belong under the big umbrella of how one can define a culture and how the researcher becomes part of the studied community.

Atkinson and Hammersley define ethnography as a frequent study of situations and groups. I mirrored this definition to the readings in the prior section that enumerated useful tools in conducting research which these articles in this section also provided. The examples of which are methods in gaining access to the participants and spaces, establishing rapport with the research participants, how to deal with the “gatekeepers” who are most often the key to gaining access, how to deal with one’s initial responses as an ethnographer, how age can impact the initial impression of the participants to the researcher, identifying field roles, managing realities while in the field, and the challenges in ending the research such as physically leaving the field work leaving the field of research. Atkinson and Hammersley consider leaving one’s field site to be one of the most challenging aspects in ethnographic work because the researcher, even if his or her research is done overtly or covertly, becomes a marginal native of the people and the space he or she is studying.

As much as ethnography is a study of relationships between people (Przybylski 3-4), it is also a study of culture because of the involvement of people and spaces. As a dance artist, an emerging choreographer, and soon-to-be dance ethnographer, my previous statement about dance rehearsals as a form of ethnographic study is solidified because of the people involved and the community that is built during a rehearsal process.

When I read these articles in January 2021, my dance rehearsals with the YDE were at their peak. A particular section of the Atkinson and Hammersley’s readings was about access,

and it helped me to articulate the challenges that I encountered in gaining access, not just to rehearsal space, but to the participants, in this case the YDE.

The Thesis/Dissertation 1 and 2 forms that I created prior to my research and the pandemic were initially approved. However, when the university closed to all in-person activities, I had to rewrite my proposal with an eye to the safety protocols I had to adhere to during rehearsals and on filming days. After numerous revisions, the Office of Research Ethics Board approved my forms, and I continued with my research. Atkinson and Hammersley call this negotiating access, field roles, and recognizing positionality and power in a research field.

The YDE dancers became part of my life in October 2020. They welcomed me like a member of their ensemble, and I became a marginal native (Atkinson and Hammersley 89) to the YDE's cultural makeup. At the same time, my rehearsals with Justine Del Rosario became a regular weekly schedule for my calendar. I faced a sense of loss when our filming ended in the first week of February 2021, a loss that I will be negotiating within me for some time. I am learning that this is all part of negotiating ethnographic research. I discovered that as a choreographer, I also created meaningful movements for my dancers and invested the time and energy required to realize my carefully developed choreographic and filmic visions. Leaving a field of site, such as the creation and production of this thesis, is indeed one of the most challenging parts of conducting research.

CHAPTER 1 | The Philippines and its dances

This chapter will share my experiences and contributions in my quest to spread the fascinatingly complex culture of the Philippines through its dances. It introduces the Philippines and its history of folk and the other dance forms that comprise Philippine dance like ballet, jazz, modern, and contemporary forms. It also identifies the pioneers, artists and scholars who have been instrumental in the Philippine dance culture. Finally, it will present a mentor, choreographer, teacher, and director Douglas Nierras who was a great teacher and encourage my identity as a dancer and performer.

My love for the Philippines has never wavered despite two decades of absence from my motherland. As a professional dancer and an emerging choreographer who grew up dancing Philippine folk dance, my way of preserving my love and honouring its history and importance is to share this traditional dance form. I danced in the Philippines until the age of 24 and moved to Los Angeles to further my training and to pursue a professional dance career. After living, working, teaching and dancing in Los Angeles for twenty years, I am very grateful to pursue graduate studies here at York University, which is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I am also fortunate to have been appointed as the Artistic Director of Culture Philippines of Ontario (CPO), a not-for-profit dance organization based in Mississauga, Ontario. CPO is composed of first- and second-generation Filipinos who share a passion of preserving Philippine culture by way of performing Philippine folk dances in various locations in Canada, including at festivals like the Carausauga Festival- Festival of Cultures. CPO is also active in sharing Philippine dances internationally; the International Council of Organizations of Folkloric Festival and Folk Art (CIOFF) sponsored the group's international trips. CPO members travelled to Mexico, Spain, Italy, and Portugal to represent the Philippines and Canada in CIOFF festivals.

Aside from my involvement with CPO, I have been thinking of other ways of sharing Philippine dances that I have been fortunate to learn. One event came to mind. It has always been a dream of mine to bring together the dance worlds of the West and of Southeast Asia, the Philippines. I called this dream “West Dances East.” My training in the Philippines during my formative years as a dancer and my twenty years of dancing and teaching dance in North America fueled the idea of melding these two worlds. Being a transnational artist, my love for Philippine culture, history, geography and its dances never died while being apart from these influences.

It was a cold and rainy Los Angeles day in February of 2010 when this dream became a reality. I was browsing through my social media feed when I saw an alert that notified me of a new direct message. The message was from a former choreographer from the Philippines whom I had collaborated with at the beginning of my professional dance career. I was so elated and excited to know that the message came from her since it had almost been a decade since our last communication. Her name is Joane Laygo, and she is now a very successful and much-sought-after choreographer/director in television and live events in the Philippines. She wanted to hire me to dance for a major fashion show called “Bench Uncut” (equivalent to a Victoria Secret fashion show) that she was choreographing for Bench Philippines. She also gave me the task of hiring and casting ten professional dancers who could dance ballet, jazz, modern, funk, and hip hop with the caveat that all the dancers that I choose were diverse in cultural backgrounds and height—the show’s writers, producers, and directors were seeking a “United Color of Benetton” look which is inclusive of all racial and ethnic groups. The joy I felt when I read her direct message made me jump off my computer seat. I immediately replied and began my search for the dancers.

After a series of auditions, meetings, looking at headshots and video submissions, the casting of the dancers was completed and ready to be submitted to Joane. Shortly after the submission, she emailed back and approved everyone who I selected alongside a series of choreography video attachments for us to study and practice while in Los Angeles. We were to learn and master these choreographies and create our own sets of movement phrases prior to our arrival in the Philippines. Before the first rehearsal, I learned Joane's choreographies so I would be ready to teach them to the cast.

After a series of phone calls to the selected dancers, the first day of rehearsal arrived. I felt the excitement in the room as we gathered in one space to share movements. We learned Joane's choreographies while learning each other's movement phrases. After two months of dance rehearsals, we were ready to travel to the Philippines. The day before our flight, I shared with them what I know about Philippine culture, its geography, some common and easy Tagalog greetings like "kamusta po" (how are you), "salamat po" (thank you), "walang anuman" (you're welcome). I also shared with them expectations like the hotel where we will be staying in, hours of work, vacation, and the technical rehearsals and performance days while we were already in the country. We couldn't wait to arrive.

Fast forward to an eighteen-hour flight from the Los Angeles International Airport to the Ninoy International Airport, Manila's international airport; we landed safely. After clearing immigration and customs, we proceeded to the airport's arrival section where the Bench production staff greeted us with a warm welcome.

Our month-long journey had begun and my dream of "West Dances East was coming to fruition. I was ecstatic, at peace and ready to share the Philippines, its beautiful land, people, culture and dances with these American dancers who had never visited the country.

The show was a huge success; attendance was over 10,000 people who included A-list celebrities, including the top models that the producers hired to grace the runway of the show. In addition, there were one hundred professional dancers who were hired from numerous ballet, modern, commercial, and folk-dance companies. The dancers and I were grateful for this blessing.

During one of our long breaks during this trip, I invited the dancers to my hometown of Kalibo which is in the Visayas region and a one-hour flight from Manila. I brought the dancers to my parents' home and my father prepared a seafood feast for us. After visiting my parents, we proceeded to Boracay, known to be the best beach in the Philippines. With its powdery white sand, clear blue waters and affordable accommodations, we had the experience of our lives.

A month passed quickly and soon it was time for us to return to Los Angeles. With the success and the audience and the producers' overwhelming response, we were asked to return to dance in another Bench show in 2012, this time with 24 dancers. The show was called "Bench Universe" and was held at the SM Mall of Asia Arena which is considered to be the 14th largest mall in the world². The first set of the dancers for "Bench Uncut" were ecstatic to know that they had another opportunity to return to the Philippines and agreed to this second trip without hesitation. They shared their positive experiences of their wonderful impressions of the Philippines with the second batch of dancers and much to my surprise, the former even acted as tour guides when we returned in 2012. I realized my dream of bringing these dancers to my home country came to a fruition and as a result of these trips, the dancers found a sense of belonging in a country that is different from their own.

² See <https://www.touropia.com/largest-malls-in-the-world/> for Mall of Asia

The Philippines

The Philippines is an archipelago of 7,107 islands in the western Pacific Ocean. (see Figure 1) Spain colonized this Southeast Asian nation for more than three centuries (1565-1898) and later by the United States ruled it for over forty years (1898-1946). This history explains the many colonial influences in the country's culture, languages, economics and educational system.

The Philippines is divided into three major regions. Luzon is the northernmost region, the central region is called Visayas, and Mindanao is in the south. My hometown of Kalibo, Aklan, is in the Visayas. The nearest city is Iloilo. A mountainous province with over one-third of its land area sloping at 30 percent on the average, Aklan and is one of the few provinces in the country to maintain hectares of virgin forest³. Aklanons (peoples of Aklan) are known for being warm and hospitable people. In retrospect, maybe this is the reason why I am extremely excited and enthusiastic in sharing the Philippines, especially my hometown with everyone that I meet.

Philippine folk dance

My thesis topic honours my Filipino heritage by contemporizing selected Philippine folk dances that have strong bird images and winged motifs. One of these dances is "Tinolabong", a bird dance from the province of Capiz, also in the Visayas and adjacent to the province of Aklan. The second and third dances are "Janggay" and "T'boli", from the provinces of Sulu and South Cotobato in the southern Philippines.

³ See <https://aklan.gov.ph/profile/geographical-information/> 709 acres for more information on Aklan



Figure 1. Map of the Philippines. Source: <http://www.freeusandworldmaps.com>

Much has been written about Philippine folk-dance (see Alcedo, Alejandro, Aquino, Goquinco and Villaruz): its history, movement notations, music, cultural and social meanings and politics. Patrick Alcedo is a dance scholar and Philippine folk-dance professor at York University who researches and writes about Philippine Dance in the diaspora. An award-winning documentary film maker, he has directed several films that relate to Philippine culture and

dances. Reynaldo Alejandro authored the book, *Philippine Dance: Mainstream and Crosscurrents* (1978), which is one of the main resources for Philippine folk-dance scholars. When he was still alive, Alejandro migrated to New York City where he produced multiple publications, not only about folk dance, but also about other aspects of Filipino culture like food and clothing. Francisca Reyes Aquino and Leonor Orosa Goquingco are considered pioneers in the field and in staging Philippine folk dance. They both received the most prestigious artistic merit in Philippine dance—the National Artist in Dance Award (Alejandro). Aquino produced twelve books, including *Philippine Folk Dances* (1973), all of which remain key resources in the study and staging of Philippine folk-dance as of the present. Aquino was also the first to create a folk-dance group for the University of the Philippines Folk and Song group, currently known as the UP Filipiniana Dance Group (Filipiniana). Finally, Steve Villaruz is a notable dance scholar, choreographer, and professor at UP. His written works have been published by several university presses in Manila and by major national newspapers and magazines.

Philippine folk-dance is an amalgamation of different dynamic influences, from neighboring countries, nature, rituals and colonization. Dance movement qualities from the nearby countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and China are prevalent in Philippine folk dance. Filipinos are known to be intimate with nature as depicted in many folk dances of the southern and central Philippines. These dances are inspired by the avian species, the ebb and flow of the water in a lake, the aggressive energy that the cock fight exhibits, and magical fireflies gracing the farmer's land after a rainy day, among many others. In the northern Ifugao region, the geographical makeup of the mountainous land inspired many dances. The dances of the north are also drawn from the rituals of calling the gods for a successful harvest of crops like rice, fruits, and vegetables. Filipinos are enamored with love as seen in their courtship

dances, mostly influenced by the centuries-long Spanish colonial period. The dances that I have mentioned embody distinct influences that spring from their relationship with nature and geography, and the country's specific historical development. Philippine folk-dance is the dance of the Filipino people. As Villaruz writes about Philippine dance: "For a dance is not simply adopted; it absorbs and showcases the traits of the people; even as it serves to express their own experiences and aspirations" (Villaruz 19). Philippine folk dances, even with their influences from other cultures, promote a cultural identity that is unique to the Filipinos.

A Philippine folk-dance concert is usually composed of four suites: Cordillera, Spanish, Muslim, and Rural (Alcedo). The *Cordillera suite* is composed of dances that are from the northern Philippines. The two famous dances from this suite are "Gangsa" and "Banga". "Gangsa" is danced by men garbed in traditional loin cloth costumes. The prop for this dance is a gangsa, a circular musical instrument made out of brass. "Banga"⁴ is danced by women and is usually the highlight of the *Cordillera Suite* because the dancers have to balance six to ten pots on their heads as they traverse the stage and execute the dance's sinuous choreography. "Banga" is a depiction of the daily activities of the women in their village as they fetch water and bathe in a river or in a mountain spring. The floor pattern of this dance is an S shape that mimics the mountain range's curvatures.

The *Spanish suite* are reflective of the Spanish culture: the *Jota*, *Polka*, *Paso Doble*, *Habanera*, *Zapateado* and *Mazurka*. They are danced for courtship and depict the Spanish culture. One of the famous dances from this suite is "Jota Manileña" where the dancers dance with bamboo castanets that are meant to mimic the Spanish castanets. In this dance, the idea of

⁴ Banga is a clay pot that the Ifugao women use to fetch water from the mountains. Banga is also used as a basket for the transportation of harvests like fruits and vegetables

Filipinizing (Ibid) or localizing a certain influence is apparent, in this case the use of bamboos, which are ubiquitous in a tropical country like the Philippines.

The *Muslim suite* is composed of dances from the southern Philippines. From this suite came of the most iconographic dances in Philippine folk dance—“Singkil” (Ibid). “Singkil” is a dance about a princess who is lost in a forest and is rescued by a prince. This dance is a showstopper, because the princess and the prince have to dance among clashing bamboos that dancers clap in an increasing crescendo and in time with the music. As this is a dance of royalty, the costumes for “Singkil” are also a sight to behold.

The last final suite is the highly energetic *Rural suite* also known as the low land Christian dances (Ibid). The dances here depict courtship, harvest and fiesta. The latter is a celebration of abundance during a successful harvest or a time when Filipinos give their reverence to the saints of their particular village or town. “Tinikling” is the best-known dance in this suite. It is composed of intricate and complicated choreography that is performed in and out of two bamboo poles. This dance depicts the movement of the bird *tikling* as it hops from one patch of a rice field to the next.

The Bayanihan Dance Company, Ramon Obusan Dance Group and the Filipiniana are the three renowned folk-dance companies that have consistently travelled the world to showcase Philippine folk-dance (Alejandro 47-51). They have won international awards, catapulting the place of Philippine folk-dance on the world’s stage. Known to be the Philippine’s national folk-dance company, Bayanihan is the first Filipino dance company to have the opportunity to perform on Broadway and was featured in a popular American television show, the Ed Sullivan show. With the active presence of these groups in the international dance scene, Philippine folk-

dance was placed in the global dance culture. It has showcased the Filipinos to the world as people with a dance culture that is rich and complicated.

Tinolabong

Based on the book, *Philippine Folk Dances: Volume 5* written by Francisca Reyes Aquino, “Tinolabong” is a favourite dance of the mountain people who live in the barrios⁵ of Panitan and Loctugan, Capiz. This dance is named after the *tolabong*, a species of heron, with a long neck, long legs and long tapering bill, large wings and soft white feathers that lives in this region. These birds are commonly seen riding serenely on the back of carabaos⁶. The carabaos appear to like these birds because they peck at their ticks, flies, mosquitoes or other insects. When resting or sleeping, these birds usually stand on one foot while the other is raised with the claw resting behind the knee of the standing foot. The “Tinolabong” imitates this bird’s movements.

I grew up performing this dance and I still enjoy watching and performing it. Aside from its aerobic movement quality, it also is a playful dance. During my elementary years, I had the fortune to be asked to join my school’s folk-dance competition group and this was one of the dances we mastered. We also worked very hard to create the costumes that depicted the *tolabong*. We achieved this by gluing white and brown feathers to our tops and the girls were provided with a headdress that was also filled with feathers. The females *patadyong*⁷ was also filled with feathers. As we danced the piece, I remember some of the feathers falling off our

⁵ The Meriam-Webster dictionary defines a *barrio* as district of a city or town in a Spanish-speaking country. This word continues to be used in the post-colonial period to describe a district in the Philippines.

⁶ Carabaos are Philippines’ water buffalo. They are usually found in the rice fields and are a huge help for farmers during rice planting season.

⁷ Patadyong is the most common female costume for Philippine folk dance.

costumes. In examining these memories for my thesis, I realize the metaphor of the shedding of the *tolabong*'s feathers as it traverses its environment. "Tinolabong" is a part of the *Rural suite*.

Janggay

"Janggay" or metal claws is a Philippine folk-dance derived from "Pangalay" and "Kuntao", two dances that are indigenous to the Sulu province in the Southern Philippines (Villaruz 95). Known to be a bird dance, "Janggay" is performed by the Badjao people who are indigenous to the province. The Badjaos are known to be the "fisherfolk" of the Sulu Island (Lucero70). Surrounded by water, particularly the Celebes Sea (Ibid), the movements of this folk- dance reflect the constant ebb and flow of the current of the sea. Its main movement characteristic is the hyper flexed fingers, the flexed wrists and the circular motion of the shoulders. The lower extremities are grounded on the floor to create a solid base for the fluid, upper body movements.

"Janggay" is performed during special occasions like wedding ceremonies. The movement of the feet consists of shuffling, mincing and tortillier patterns as the dancer glides across the space. The fingers, which are accessorized with metal claws made out of brass called *janggay*, flick and turn, mimicking a bird. Alongside the finger's intricate gestures, the wrist flexes and extends to further enhance the intricacy of the fingers' movements. Furthermore, the wrist adducts and abducts in an inward and outward motion to create circular patterns.

During my dancing years with the Filipiniana, I had the opportunity to dance "Pangalay". It is a challenging dance. Aside from demonstrating the movements effortlessly, the dance is performed on top of two bamboo poles that were carried by two bamboo carriers, usually the strongest male dancers in our group, as they can carry the full weight of the dancer on top. The

dance begins with the bamboo poles placed in a diagonal position to the floor and the carriers' shoulders to give way for the dancer to climb on top of it. Once the dancer is halfway to the top, the bamboo carriers lift the other side of the bamboo poles, creating two straight lines on the carriers' shoulders. The dance travels across the stage and at one point, the bamboo poles will go to an X position while the dancer is dancing with his/her feet in a fourth ballet position. This for me was the most challenging part of the whole dance because aside from the precarity of dancing on top of two bamboo poles, the hand and body movements had to be danced in fourth position as compared to a parallel first, the feet position from the beginning of the dance.

Just like “Janggay”, which is only performed in weddings, the Filipiniana only performs this dance in special occasions, like an invitation to dance for the President of the Philippines, corporate events, graduations and or events hosted by the University's chancellor. Part of the *Muslim Suite*, which usually consists of folk dances like “Kapamalong malong”, a dance with a tubular cloth, “Kinikini”, a dance using scarves, or “Singkil”, the aforementioned highlight of the *Muslim suite* that is a dance of a lost Princess going in and out of bamboo poles, which symbolize a forest (Alcedo). “Pangalay” is rarely added in the repertoire because of the extra hours needed to achieve a smooth, safe, and dynamic performance.

T'boli

“T'boli” is a dance of hope, resilience and exhibits the precarity of flight. Verbelino T. Yamut defines “T'boli” as:

The T'boli's from South Cotobato, Philippines have affinity with nature. The unique dance movement is characterized by: heads bowed low; arms extended sideward and forward or

obliquely sideward; and knees and trunks slightly bent. There is frequent use of the upper torso, subtle facial expression, and arms that flow from pose to pose—the fingers held close and still, curling in and out and the elbows are flexed.

Donned with intricate accessories— a belt with bells made out of brass, a headdress that is adorned with layers of glass beads usually attached to a comb, a multi-patterned top and bottom, and a tubular cloth called a *malong*⁸—“T’boli” is a dance that is a reflection of the people of the T’boli tribe. There are a number of “T’boli” dances, such as the acrobatic male war dances, courtship dances that are danced in wedding ceremonies and also dances that emulate animals. My research brought me to two in particular. The first is called “Kadal tabaw”, a dance that imitates the bird *tabaw*, a bird with a unique hopping characteristic. The second is “Kadal blelah” which mimics the bird *blelah*, a mythical bird that is known in fables and tales to have all the colours of all the birds in the region. (Casal 411)

The movement patterns of both “Kadal tabaw” and “Kadal blelah” are characterized by hopping steps that lead to a higher jump with tucked feet behind the body, mincing steps to travel across the space, and staccato contractions of the upper body while descending to the floor. All these nuances and movement patterns imitate a bird in flight, food search until its death. The *malong*, which is the “T’boli’s” only prop, is worn by dancers slowly inserting their hands to both of its ends, creating a tubular scarf on their necks. After the dancers successfully created this scarf, the *malong* is spread out with both hands and is held like wings throughout the dance.

My first exposure to this dance was with Filipiniana during my dancing years with them at the University of the Philippines in Diliman. Inspired by my mentors and fellow dancers there,

⁸ Malong is a tubular cloth indigenous to the people of Southern Philippines. It is used in different ways; headdress, basket, skirt and a dress.

I restaged “T’boli” with the Culture Philippines of Ontario in 2017 and 2020 during the Carassauga Festival – Festival of Cultures. My brother Patrick and I collaborated during this restaging so both our backgrounds in Philippine folk-dance particularly “T’boli”, coalesced.

“T’boli” was the opening number in our 2020 show. The dance started with the *malong* already preset on the floor in a V formation. After four measures of drum and gong music, the dancers in their full “T’boli” regalia entered with mincing steps to get to their *malong*. They danced around it and wore it around their neck (see figure 2). The dance continued with the *malong* as the wings of the dancers who traversed the stage just like birds in a flock during flight. In the final part of the dance, which we named the Death part, the dancers formed a single horizontal line from the first wing to the fourth wing of the stage.



Figure 2. Screen capture of the “T’boli” performance during the Carassauga Festival-Festival of Cultures, 2020. Production of Culture Philippines of Ontario.

With a loud thump in the music to simulate a bird being hit during hunting coming from the gong and drums, the dancers performed the movements of a dying bird with staccato contractions towards the floor. They released their *malongs* to signify that their wings had been

hit. They held this tableau pose for two sets of eights (see figure 3). The music on this part switched to a decrescendo that matched the stillness of the dancers' bodies.



Figure 3. Screen capture of the “T’boli” performance during the Carassauga Festival-Festival of Cultures, 2020. Production of Culture Philippines of Ontario.

After holding this tableau pose, the dancers slowly made their arms move vertically up to signify a rebirth after death. In a deep contraction, the dancers slowly maneuvered their bodies to the sagittal back to be able to go back to a standing position holding their *malongs*. With the music slowly reaching a crescendo that matched the dancers' movement of rebirth, the dance concluded with an exit on stage left with the dancers dancing with their *malongs*.

Other forms in Philippine dance and who is contemporizing

I will enumerate below, the choreographers who have contemporized Philippine dance. They have interlaced their training in Western forms and Philippine culture to modernize traditional forms. The messages that they have conveyed in their choreography even when they were created in 1970-1990 are relevant to the present social, political and economic issues of the country today.

Dame Margo Fonteyn de Arias wrote in her introduction to *Philippine Dance* by Renaldo Alejandro: “The Philippines is particularly rich in dance heritage, both indigenous and adopted, since time immemorial, from the cultures of their South East Asian neighbours; as well as from the comparatively recent period of Spanish rule”. Philippine folk dances have influences from the Malaysia, Chinese and Indonesian cultures.

In her seminal book *Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora: Igniting Citizenship*, Yvonne Daniel imparts historical, social, and political backgrounds of Latin American Dances. She studied the dances in the islands of Haiti, Martinique, Dominican Republic, with focus on Cuba. In one of the sections in Chapter 4 of this book, she writes about Dance Matrix as a set of dance culture that slowly trickles over time resulting in a collection of various dance genres that influences a nation’s cultural dance identity. I found this section really helpful in writing about Philippine dance history and its influences.

Table 1: Philippine Dance Matrix

The Ethnic Tradition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritual Dances 2. The Life-Cycle Dances 3. The Occupational Dances
Low-land Christian Dances	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tinikling 2. Tinolabong 3. Kuratsa 4. Pandanggo sa Ilaw 5. Oasioas 6. Sakuting 7. Kumakaret 8. Sayaw sa Bangko 9. Subli
The Spanish Colonial Tradition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Jota 2. The Balse 3. The Pandanggo 4. The Habanera

5. The Mazurka
6. The Polka
7. The Rigodon and other Quadrille Dances
8. The Paseo and Chotis
9. The Surtidos

The American Colonial and
Contemporary Traditions

1. Bodabil Dancing
2. Ballet (Classical, Neo-ethnic, Contemporary)
3. Modern Dance (Graham, Limón, Horton)
4. Folk and Social Dances
5. Jazz (Broadway, Commercial, Contemporary)
6. Aerobic Dance
7. Tap Dance
8. Hip hop
9. Pole Dance
10. Breaking/Popping/Locking/Krump

Source: Tiongson, Nicanor G., editor. *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art, vol.5*, Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1994, p. vii

The Dance Matrix above employs the many cultural and movement influences of Philippine dance. It also illustrates the contemporary dance forms.

Living and dancing professionally in Manila for 7 years, I had the fortune to dance for several stage and television shows, in musical theatre, and as a member of a Philippine folk-dance company. We would often have joint performances that would be comprised of other dance companies ranging from ballet, modern, hip hop, and jazz. These performances provided me with a window to see how other groups are contemporizing Philippine dances.

Alice Reyes, the Philippines' National Artist for Dance, spearheads Ballet Philippines (BP), the country's official ballet company that she founded in the 1970s. It is one of the most popular dance companies known to contemporize Philippine dances and Reyes created many ballets in this genre. In 1972, she created *Dugso* (Villaruz 145), which was a re-envisioning of the traditional folk-dance form. She also created the *Bungkos Suite* (Villaruz 140), a six-part

dance suite that combines several folk-dance movements with a modern interpretation. *Bungkos Suite* has been performed internationally to great acclaim. One of the works that cemented Reyes' place in the dance community was *Itim Asu* (Villaruz 26-27), which was a dance that depicted a government official's assassination. Aside from these original works, Reyes has also re-staged ballet classics like *Swan Lake*, *Don Quixote*, and many others. For many emerging dance artists, she is a great mentor and an encouraging choreographer and director. In an interview with the Philippines's Prima Ballerina Liza Macuja-Elizalde, Reyes talks about her joy in watching her dancers perform works other than her own, "I was blessed to have the ability to also enjoy watching a dancer perform beautifully. When I first watched Esther Rimpos do *Swan Lake*, I started to cry. I said, my God, there's Esther and she is beautiful! So I am able to take great pride and share in somebody else's success so that opened a lot of happiness for me" (Reyes 00:18:39-00:19:09).

Aside from Alice Reyes, Agnes Locsin a resident choreographer of BP for many years; she has also made notable contributions in contemporizing Philippine folk dances. She is a dancer, teacher, scholar, choreographer, and an artistic director. She is known for her choreographic pieces: *Encantada* and *Sisa*. Locsin is one of the pioneers of "Filipinizing" Philippine folk dance. In one of her interviews, she states: "I started "Filipinization" quite early because my Mom always saw to it that our recitals had a Filipino section. And then, when I studied in the states, in our choreography classes, I found that when I use Filipino movements, *wa sila spluk* (they can't say anything about it)" (Ateneo De Manila University 00:03:17-00:03:45). What I take from this quote is that merging her Philippine folk-dance knowledge and her graduate studies in choreography resulted in new-found movement aesthetics that are

authentic to her. When she returned to the Philippines, these movements were dubbed the “Agnes Locsin moves” by Filipino ballet, contemporary, and modern dancers.

In addition to the works of Reyes and Locsin, a recent 2020 reimagining of “Singkil” and “Pang-alay hapatong” by the UPPeepz, a Filipino hip-hop group garnered praises for their performance during the *World of Dance* television program. Their interpretation was composed of traditional movement patterns and fan work blended with lyrical hip-hop and krump. Their performance was a huge hit and the judges (Ne-Yo, Jennifer Lopez, and Derek Hough) commented that their performance was “off the chart and showcased not only Philippine culture but also the dancers’ personalities.”

Aside from the Bayanihan Dance Company, the Ramon Obusan Dance Group and the Filipiniana, this performance of the UPPeepz once again placed Philippine folk-dance on the global stage.

Douglas Nierras

If there is a dance teacher, choreographer, and artistic director who I consider a mentor during my formative years as a performer, it is Douglas Nierras. Tito⁹ Douglas took time and patience to teach me the rigours and multi-faceted discipline of dance. He took me under his wings and made me a member of his dance company, Douglas Nierras Powerdance Company (DNPD), without hesitation. I was under his guidance for five years, a time when I was provided with endless opportunities to study modern and jazz forms. I was able to participate in numerous performances ranging from jazz and modern concert dance, commercial dance, and musical theatre. I was able to travel outside the Philippines and perform with international artists. I

⁹ Tito is the Filipino term for uncle. It is also be used to address an elder as a sign of respect.

gained an utmost respect for the many facets of dance choreography and productions during this period.

Born in Tacloban City in the province of Leyte Philippines, Tito Douglas trained in ballet and modern dance at a local dance studio. After high school, he got accepted to the University of the Philippines where he majored in Medical Technology. He passed the licensure board exam with flying colours—placing twentieth in the whole country. During his studies, his love for dance lingered. He joined the Filipiniana and toured with them in Europe. At the same time, he trained in modern and ballet at the Cultural Center of the Philippines under the tutelage of Alice Reyes.

Tito Douglas furthered his studies in the United States where he studied jazz (classical and Broadway). He lived in the US for three years before returning to the Philippines to share what he learned. His coming home resulted in the formation of *Hotlegs*, the first commercial jazz dance company in Philippine television. He founded this group with celebrated television director Johnny Manahan and dancer Christine Blando. *Hotlegs* was a huge success with a consistent booking in both television and industrial shows. In high school, I remember watching *Hotlegs* on the *RSVP* television show in awe. This was my introduction to the world of jazz, a dance form that I had not been exposed to in my hometown.

After years of creating and dancing with *Hotlegs*, Tito Douglas left to form his own company, DNPD. The founding members are Para Isidro, Jaime Del Prado, James Laforteza, the late Liesl Laforteza, Danny Marshall and Mimi Villareal. DNPD performed on television and in musical theatre industrial shows. Tito Douglas also opened a school where the dancers had the opportunity to teach dance and fitness classes.

In August of 1996, DNPD performed at the University of the Philippines as a guest dance group for the show *Brava Corazon*. Patrick Alcedo produced the show in honour of Corazon Iñigo, who trained many dance choreographers and artists like *Tito Douglas*, my brother and my Filipiniana dance teachers. It was a show that gathered seven groups. I was lucky to be included in this show as part of the Filipiniana, the same dance group that Iñigo directed for many years. After our group danced three folk dances, I stayed in the wings to watch other groups perform. DNPD performed a lyrical modern jazz number. The song was the Michael Bolton's cover of the Beatles' "Yesterday", danced by Jaime Del Prado, Liesl Laforteza, and James Laforteza. My world turned upside down with wonderment; I had never seen this kind of dance form. The dancers were so expressive and danced taking space in all directions I had never imagined or previously seen. I fell in love right away. I knew at that time that I would like to train and dance just like the DNPD dancers.

After the show, I asked my brother Patrick how to approach Tito Douglas. He encouraged me to introduce myself to him and inquire about training. Tito Douglas was so welcoming and suggested that I go to the company class the next day in their dance studio. I was so happy to know that he was willing to train me and for me to dance with his company. I was excited for the next day.

I barely slept that night. The company class was held at 1:30 pm-4:30 pm and I arrived thirty minutes early. When I entered the dance studio, it felt like home. I entered the dance studio floor where six company members were already stretching and mentally preparing for class. The dancers welcomed me with hugs and big smiles. I felt comfortable and ready to train. Tito Douglas finally arrived at 1:30 and class started. It was an advanced jazz class and only for company members. I was a beginner while the rest of company members were ballet trained

since they were very young or had been dancing with Tito Douglas for many years; one was even a gold medalist in rhythmic gymnastics. I took this class with James, Jaime and Liesl, the same dancers who I had watched perform the day before. I could not pick up as fast as them and my flexibility needed a lot of work. However, with Tito Douglas and the company members' encouragement as well as my drive to improve, my lack of training in jazz and ballet at that time did not deter me from attending classes. One class led to another until I had already trained with them for six months and then I was cast in one of the company's major dance concerts.

One of the unforgettable pieces that will be forever etched in my heart and mind is an eighteen-minute dance suite called *The Basil Suite*. (see figure 4) Performed as an octet, this suite is composed of five songs sung by Philippine balladeer Basil Valdez. Tito Douglas created a lyrical modern jazz choreography for all the songs. *The Basil Suite* was composed of solo, duets, trios, and group sections.

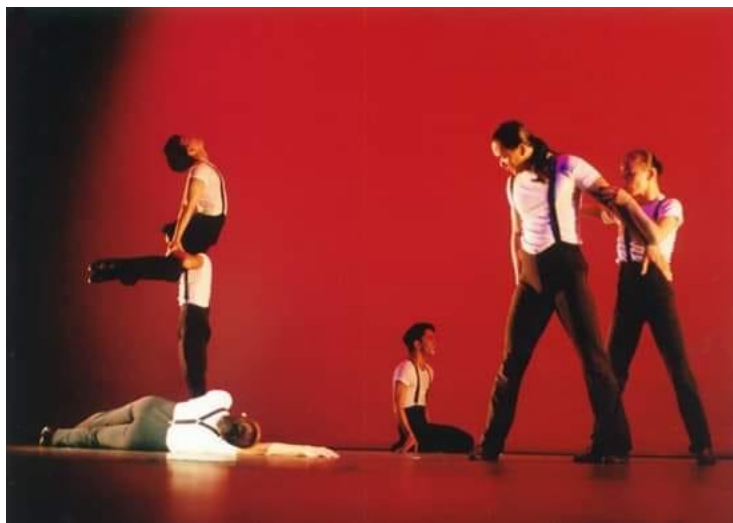


Figure 4. Screen capture of *Basil Suite* 1997. From stage left to right: James Laforteza, Julie Alagde, the author, Van Cornelius Manalo, Avel Bautista, and Liesl Laforteza.

In one of the sections, I was to turn with my arms extended horizontally in second position with my head tilted up to the dance studio's ceiling. I was to perform these turns from

upstage to downstage without changing spots¹⁰. Tito Douglas and the company members later coined this turn the “Wonderwoman” turn.

It was 11 pm in the evening when we rehearsed this last section of the dance suite. We were choreographed to go upstage in a horizontal line with our arms vertically growing from our ankles to the top of our heads. After we dropped our arms, Tito Douglas directed me to open my arms in second position with fingers and arms fully extended and turn towards the downstage. At first, I demonstrated a series of chaîné turns with the prescribed arm placement. When I reached the edge of the dance floor, Tito Douglas asked me to go back to upstage again and repeat what I just demonstrated but this time with head tilted up to the ceiling. I did not know how to demonstrate this kind of turn properly as we were trained to spot when turning. My first attempt was a failure as I did not execute the turns in a straight line. Tito Douglas then directed me to engage my core more and he said, “just turn.” This inspired me to have more courage to trust my body more and not the spot. The third attempt was a success, and he kept this section of the piece.

The phrase “just turn” has stayed with me; even now and I remember Tito Douglas’ direction and when I feel stuck during auditions, choreographing or dance classes that I take and teach, I remember to not second guess myself. It simply means that if you are in doubt about something, just do it and do something about it. Professor Darcey Callison in one of our Choreography classes, he said: “One of the ways to generate movement materials is for the choreographer to start moving and dancing in a studio.” Professor Callison and Tito Douglas

¹⁰ Spotting is a turning tool used by dancers to execute the demonstration of a series of turn with ease. A spot is a particular marker on the other side of the room that the dancer consistently looks to make sure that the turns are completed in 360 degrees and performed in a straight line.

echo each other in their understanding of how to approach a certain task when uncertainty and doubt cloak a person.

We rehearsed the *Basil Suite* for one week. I remember us rehearsing until 4 a.m. or sometimes 5 a.m. at some point because we had to finish, clean, and really embody the different dance sections. We sweated, struggled, and cried to make sure that our dancing was reflective of Tito Douglas' high-caliber standards and choreographic vision. Even with these struggles, I went home after every rehearsal with a big smile on my face and a full heart. Although it was hard, I truly loved every second of our rehearsals.

The *Basil Suite* was such a memorable group of dances for me because twenty-five years later, I can still remember all the sections of the dance pieces that comprised this suite. Furthermore, this dance suite is important for my formative years as an emerging dance artist because this experience was when I learned to have total respect for the stage and the dancing that goes on it. Tito Douglas once said: "The theatre is a holy place. Once your feet touch the dance floor, it is holy ground." These words resonated with me and after all these years, I still carry this message with me whenever I perform.

As I delved into the world of teaching and choreographing for dance shows, I have also relayed this same message to my students before every performance. A reminder like this can be a useful tool in respecting the hard work one has invested, the artistic exchanges that occurred during rehearsals, the hours spent in the dance studio, and the preparation to perform and show our love for dance. Sans a dance floor made out of wood, plastic, cement, marley, or air, a dancer cannot perform.

My research, my teachers' feedback, teachings, and advice as well as my own personal professional experiences contributed to the making of my thesis choreography. Abstracting the

winged creatures in the selected Philippine folk-dances to represent contemporary questions about life and dance provides a metaphor for understanding my environment and a life spent searching. Tito Douglas' encouraging approach to his teaching and the Filipino choreographers who are contemporizing Philippine folk-dances detailed in this chapter, mark an awareness for me of an approach to making dances that moves beyond learning dance steps to accompany a traditional story, to one that interprets these stories and experiences for a modern audience.

CHAPTER 2 | Process

On May 14, 2020, I had a Zoom meeting with Professor Cash. At this time, all in-person classes were suspended due to COVID-19. I initially planned to choreograph a fifteen-minute piece to be performed live with an audience in the Sandra Faire Ivan Fecan Theatre (FFT). However, with the Ontario government's restrictions and health protocol to ensure public safety, Professor Cash encouraged me to think of other creative ways in presenting my thesis. We both agreed that it would be a dance film. We also agreed on the action items that I would engage to start my research, including readings related to Philippine bird dances and culture, possible collaborators for the film portion of the project, and an examination of Filipino choreographers who are contemporizing Philippine folk dances. This timetable assisted me in my writing of the abstract and introduction. We had another meeting on May 28, 2020 where we solidified the chapters that would comprise the written component of my thesis. She encouraged me to continue with my readings so I could start writing. I gathered books, journals, articles, encyclopedias, newspaper clips, and magazines about Philippine folk-dance, Jazz dance history, dance composition and dance film. I also contacted two musicians (Peter Alcedo Jr. and DJ Toy Armada) who I hoped would collaborate with me; both are based in the Philippines. They were unhesitatingly supportive. By July 2020, I had all the music files for the production saved on my hard drive.

In this chapter, I will provide more details on Act 1 because of the ethnographic and historical research that was involved in its creation. Acts 2 through 4 are brand new pieces that I choreographed for this research; thus my investigations and analyses are not as exhaustive as they are for Act 1. In addition, this chapter includes a day-by-day recollection of my rehearsal days with the YDE as well as with Justine Del Rosario from the Culture Philippines of Ontario.

Act 1 was first created as part of Professor Darcy Callison's choreography class. I performed it as a solo in Studio A at York University's ACE Building on December 4, 2019 as part of the MFA 1's final choreographic presentation, *Masala*. This dance piece is a culmination of three versions stemming from the Romanticism, Expressionism and Minimalism Eras.

In creating this dance, we were asked to select an image that reflected the choreography. I selected a picture sent to me by a dear friend Jennifer from her trip in Scotland. It was an image of two birds, one in flight and the other on the water basking in the glorious sunlight. This particular image inspired me to create movements that imitated a bird learning to fly and eventually to soar in the skies. I then picked a song that will reflect the assignment's theme. Subsequent to the image and music selection, I worked in the studio to start creating movement phrases that had themes of flight and wings. I was simultaneously in search for music to accompany my choreography. After I selected the music, I got inspired to layer it with egg cracking sounds to depict an egg hatching, a sign of birth.

After our first showing, we were asked to recreate the same solo, this time inspired by Expressionism, a period where Film Noir came to prominence. Professor Callison advised me to watch the movie *Sunset Boulevard* as an inspiration. After watching the film, various words came to mind: unsurety, lurking, dark, being watched, eerie, and late night. The version of this dance solo I presented for this assignment consisted of the same movement phrases as the previous, but with the addition of a study lamp to signify a specific location— a bedroom. I then added doorbell sounds in the beginning to enhance the idea of the location. I also played with a different music, this time selecting a song that had no specific rhythm so I could feel my body as I performed the choreography.

Building from the second solo, the third and final choreographic assignment was to re-create the same choreography, this time with the influence of Minimalism. I researched on dance makers and musicians that were minimalist in their practice and discovered that movements can be simple and effective—they don't always have to be explosive and sharp. I then applied this theory when I went back to the studio to rework this third version. I played with the idea of less movement, more repetitions, and variations. As for the props, I changed the study lamp to a taller stand-alone lamp that was more proportional to the dance floor. I also used a red Ifugao cloth¹¹ as a prop. (see figure 5)



Figure 5. The author lying in front of a taller stand-alone lamp covered with a red Ifugao cloth

In this choreography, I zeroed in on four intentions: first, stay with the minimalism theme; second, use a prop for what it is and what it can represent; third, dance with more weight; and fourth, display clear execution of movements and transitions.

¹¹ Members of the Ifugao tribe in the northern Philippines wear this cloth as an upper garb to protect them from the elements when they are hunting.

I was fortunate to have a chance to discuss my dance versions with Professor Callison and fellow MFA colleagues in class. I took notes of their feedback and in the succeeding days at the studio, I went back to my core and breathing rather than relying on my arms and hands to propel a motion. I also danced all the movements with more awareness of my lower extremities and was conscious of the addition of weight in my movements. I took notes of all these new ways to move and applied them during one of our run throughs before the big presentation. Professor Callison and my colleagues were delighted to see that I applied their suggestions to this new version of my solo.

My use of the red Ifugao cloth was intended to showcase Philippine tradition. In one of our classes, Professor Callison also inspired us to use objects on stage for what they are and what else can they become, which echoes Mike Pearson in his article “How Does Theatre Think Through Things?” (Pearson 114-129). I used the wide Ifugao cloth from the northern Philippines as a mat, blanket, skirt, and headdress to signify that objects can be used in various ways in performances like dances and can transform meaning.

The following words are ideas that came to mind prior to and while crafting the dance: wings, birth, freedom, contraction, feel the ground, elements of Philippine Folk Dance, minimalism, repetition, tempo, theme and variation, dynamics, shape, beginning, middle, end, and climax.

Lighting was minimal for this piece to create an eerie environment and mood. With the help of the graduating MFA class (Emilio Colalilo, Maria Avila, and Rainie Kearns), we agreed that aside from the lamp, I needed to use another source of light to model my body while in the space. The result of this collaboration was to illuminate the downstage at forty percent using a neutral yellow tone to match the light emitted by the lamp. Costume was also minimal for this

piece. Professor Callison picked the white top I used during one of the presentations in class. (see figures 6 and 7)

This solo is the foundation for creating *In Flight*. The aforementioned Philippine folk-dances discussed in Chapter 1 heavily inspired the movement creation for my dance film's four acts. I interlaced Philippine folk-dance and contemporary movements with a focus on the winged themes as I developed the piece. When the choreographic process for Act 1 began, the idea of birth came to my mind. This solo starts with small contractions that mimic a baby bird emerging from an egg. The process of being in this cocooned state progresses to a bird learning how to fly and navigate its surroundings.



Figure 6. Author gathering the red Ifugao cloth to be worn as a skirt. Author facing the stand-alone lamp wearing a white top



Figure 7. The author dancing on top of the red Ifugao clothe with all the lights on

York Dance Ensemble dance rehearsals

The choreographic vision and the movement creation aspects in all four acts infuse my own transnational identity, Filipino tradition, jazz, and modern movements. I began by crafting Act 1, which was inspired by the solo that I presented for Professor Callison’s choreography class. Reimagined, the solo is influenced by the Philippine folk-dance “Tinolabong”. The traditional movements of “T’boli” inspired Act 2 and I incorporated jazz movements to reflect the fast-tempo music that DJ Toy Armada created for the piece. The inspiration for Act 3 was the Philippine folk-dance “Janggay.” The choreography consists of movement nuances from this particular folk-dance as well as Graham¹² contractions and releases. The final act is a combination of all of these three folk-dances with a mixture of jazz movements. I created a simple choreography since the dancers perform in unison.

In October 2019 when the choreographic process begun, Professor Susan Lee, artistic director of the York Dance Ensemble (YDE), asked me if I wanted to create or co-create the

¹² Graham technique was created by Martha Graham who was known to introduce modern dance in North America. Contraction and release are two examples of Graham technique principles.

movements with the dancers. Foreshadowing the challenges that Zoom rehearsals would pose, I elected to purely create with the dancers. A week prior to every scheduled rehearsal, I choreographed the section that I would teach them on that specific day. Since I was choreographing for an ensemble of fourteen dancers, I had to be prepared to efficiently teach the dancers in that rehearsal's movement material. It was a wonderful experience creating these dances for the YDE and Justine; they were constantly mentally and physically present every rehearsal even if they were not in a dance studio learning the choreography but in the confines of their home.

Day 1: Act 1 Oliver

Morgan Staziewics of the YDE danced this solo for the opening act for my dance film. I originally intended to cast a male dancer for this role; however, when Professor Susan Lee asked me if I were open to a female role, I immediately agreed and reenvisioned the choreography to be danced by a female body. Morgan was a joy to work with and I did not find any challenges to re-choreographing the solo that I performed for *Masala*.

During our first Zoom dance rehearsals, I showed her a video of the Philippine folk-dance "Tinolabong" where the movement vocabulary of her solo was derived. I showed the various hand gestures and body curvatures that mimic the *tolabong* bird. Morgan quickly got these themes and started embodying them as she performed the choreography. Since this solo is a lyrical jazz (with the lyrics being the piano instrument), we worked on fusing the movement and the music right away so she could hear the ebb and flow of the musical score to match her movement.

Day 2: Skirt Dance

This second day of rehearsals was devoted to the dance skirt dance, which is an integral part of this solo. We rehearsed multiple times to make sure that the skirt stayed when she was dancing. In the first few run throughs with the skirt on, the skirt kept on slipping especially on the *développé à la seconde* in the middle part of the dance. To address this issue, I instructed Morgan to try different sizes and textures of cloth she had at home. After a few tests, we found that the cloth made with Sherpa fabric and neoprene worked the best. We did a few run throughs of this solo and added nuances and dynamics to the movements. In the last run through, with Morgan's permission, I recorded her solo to be added in the rehearsal video footage saved in a secured Google Drive folder that limited access to the dancers, the teaching assistant, Professor Susan Lee and myself. This method of storage facilitated the dancer's ability to rehearse on their own.

Day 3: Act two Lea

Bridgette D'Orsogna was cast as the mother bird, Lea. On this day, Bridgette and I worked on the several movement themes and gestures. As I did with Morgan, I showed Bridgette "T'boli", a Philippine folk-dance video that inspired the Act 2 solo. After watching the video, we started crafting the choreography, which is a blend of contemporary jazz and Philippine folk-dance movements.

I was fortunate to have Bridgette play this role because of her strong ballet and modern dance techniques. Although her solo was composed of contemporary jazz movements, a dance style new to her, this did not impede her excellent demonstration of the choreography. Bridgette quickly absorbed the movements and applied "T'boli" influences in her dancing.

We did a couple of run throughs and I asked Bridgette if I could video tape the rehearsal for future reference. She agreed and after rehearsals, Stacy Murchison who was the teaching assistant of the YDE, added this footage to the Google Drive folder.

Day 4: Act two Lea (continued)

Before this rehearsal, I emailed Bridgette the notes that I jotted down after our previous meeting. The notes were composed of inserting more dynamics, solidifying the gaze, and adding more bird hand gestures in the improvised section. We also reviewed her solo count by count before I taught her the group phrase numbers, which are also performed by the rest of the ensemble.

Bridgette immediately applied the notes I have given her dancing. She also learned the group phrase with ease. The rest of our rehearsals was productive and ended with her being more comfortable in dancing her solo.

Day 5: Group two Siblings

I logged in to my Zoom account at 4:25 pm excited to see the first group of the dance ensemble who were cast as Oliver's siblings. The dancers were: Jasmine Almaguer Sheldrick, Teagan Ariss, Carly MacDougall, Andrea Madore, Alyssa Nunziata, and Katherine Romard. By 4:30 pm together with Stacey Murchison, who was the YDE's teaching assistant, we were all logged in and ready to dance.

We started rehearsals with a twenty-minute jazz warm up class to get our bodies going and for the dancers to get familiarized with my style. I was in awe watching the dancers on the screen as I could see that they were great movers; they also quickly picked up choreography. I knew then that they would easily learn the different dance sections.

Before we started learning the choreography, I shared my screen to show them a video of a “Janggay”, a Philippine folk dance, so could see my inspiration of the choreography. After the viewing, we practiced some of the hand gestures and body placement unique to “Janggay”. The dancers appreciated this way of interconnecting a traditional dance form to jazz dance.

This day we were able to finish Acts 2 and 3 With the dancers’ approval and Stacey’s assistance, we recorded the rehearsals as a way of archiving this day’s choreography. Stacey had created during the start of our rehearsals a Google Drive folder where all of the rehearsal footage was uploaded so the dancers and myself could refer to them when needed.

Day 6: Group two siblings

It was my first opportunity to rehearse with the second group of Oliver’s siblings. The dancers participating were: Leslie Woo, Kelly Choi, Bethany McMorine, Coleen Satchwell, Emily Williams, Bayley Wyatt. We were all present and logged in at 4:30 pm. I made use of the same dance rehearsal methods from the previous group and there were no new choreographies that I taught because their movements were a complete mirror of Group One.

Before the day ended, I again asked the permission of the dancers if I could record them during the last run through. Before the day ended, the dancers agreed to my recording of the last run through. Stacey recorded it and then saved the video to the shared Google Drive folder.

Day 7 and 8: Group One and Two Siblings

The participants on these two days were all of Oliver's siblings and Stacey. We reviewed Acts 2 and 3 before starting to craft Act 4. After we did the usual twenty-minute jazz dance warm-up, I introduced to them to the song for Act 4. Before I played the song "Lipad sa Kalawakan", which is a blend of Filipino and English lyrics, I broke down the lyrics in Filipino and provided the dancers with the English translation. The song is about the freedom one experiences when flying or travelling. The song was for me a great finale song because it is imbued with a message of hope, courage, and resilience.

These two days were very productive as the dancers learned all of the choreography from all four acts, and the music we would be using throughout was emailed to all of the dancers. Before we ended these rehearsals, I encouraged the dancers to review their dances as part of the rehearsal footage that Stacey had recorded.

Day 9: Lea with Group One Siblings

This was the first time that Bridgette was joining the first group of the ensemble. Everyone logged in at 4:30 p.m. and we started with the usual twenty-minute jazz dance warm-up. The purpose for this rehearsal was to review the dances. Before revisiting them, I provided the dancers with notes from their previous rehearsals, which they quickly applied. We did a couple of run throughs of Acts 2 through 4.

Day 10: Oliver with Group Two Siblings

Just like Bridgette, this rehearsal was the first time for Morgan to dance with the second group of the ensemble. After our customary warm-up, I shared my notes on the previous performances with the dancers and we did a couple of run throughs of Acts 2 through 4. I was extremely happy with this rehearsal because aside from the dancers learning all the choreography, Morgan was able to dance with the ensemble.

Day 11 and 12: Everyone

These two rehearsals were the culmination of ten days of crafting all four dance acts of my thesis. After the warm-up, we did multiple run throughs of each act and recorded the last one. The dancers were more confident in their demonstration of the movements and I could see that they were ready to be filmed.

On Day 12, to the dancers' delight, I showed them the costumes that Chelsea Trudell, the costume designer, has created for them. Chelsea made individual head costume pieces that were donned with beads and feathers assimilating the idea of a bird. She also made each dancer a mask that had feathers glued to it. These costuming ideas came from my primary supervisor, Professor Cash, who suggested the addition of feathers in these two costume pieces.

Justine

Justine Del Rosario, a dancer from CPO, agreed to dance a part in Act 3. Justine and I worked together in several shows over the past two years, including *Luzviminda: The Philippine Dances for Canada 150* at York University's Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre, *Indak* at the Fleck Theatre, and numerous performances at the Carassauga Festival of Cultures. I have always

admired her professionalism and work ethic so when she agreed to dance for my thesis performance, I felt honoured to create a dance for her.

Our biweekly rehearsals started in October 2020 and continued until January 2021. These four months were devoted to the creation of the movements that were inspired by “Janggay”. As Justine had been dancing this particular folk-dance for many years, she did not find it challenging to blend my contemporary choreography with “Janggay’s” folk-dance nuances. With Justine’s permission, I recorded every rehearsal so that we could both refer back to choreography if needed.

In January 2021, Alex Felipe and I travelled to Kalayaan Community in Mississauga, Ontario to film Justine’s section for Act 3. We wore our masks and observed social distancing during the filming as per the protocol in the region at the time. We did a couple of run throughs and rehearsal for camera angles. I set the design of the stage and prepared to film. Justine was a joy to work with. She reviewed her dances on her own and performed her solo beautifully—signs of a true professional.

Costume

In the Fall of 2020, concurrent to rehearsals, I asked a co-worker, Chelsea Trudel, if she was interested in creating the costumes for my thesis performance. To my delight, she agreed. Chelsea has created costumes for ballet companies and musical theatre productions.

In one of our meetings, Professor Cash suggested a headdress donned with feathers and an accompanying mask for my dancers. I took notes and shared these ideas with Chelsea during our first Zoom meeting. I also emailed her my thesis abstract so that she would know its overarching theme.

After several virtual meetings, Chelsea showed me the headpieces (see fig. 7) and masks that she made for the YDE dancers. I was completely in awe with what she created. They were more than what she described to me and she even added beadwork to them.



Figure 8. Headpieces created by Chelsea Trudel

During the Christmas break, Chelsea and I continued to meet to discuss costume ideas for Lea (Bridgette D’Orsogna) and Oliver (Morgan Staziewics). Aside from a headpiece and a mask, Chelsea also wanted to create dresses for them and had to dust off her mannequin during the process of sculpting the dresses. In one of our meetings, she said: “I had to bring her [the mannequin] out of the closet after a long time.” Chelsea created two beautiful dresses for Bridgette and Morgan. (see figures 8 and 9) The number of details that she added on the belts and skirts were extraordinary and beyond my expectations.



Figure 9. Bridgette D'Orsogna's costume for the part of Lea



Figure 10. Morgan Staziewics' costume for the part of Oliver

Collaborating with Chelsea was very rewarding. She invested an enormous amount of her time, energy, artistry, and care in the costumes' creation. If given another opportunity to create dances, I would definitely ask her to collaborate with me again.

Music

In July of 2020, I contacted my brother Peter to see if he could create two music compositions for Acts 1 and 2 of *In Flight*. I also asked him if I could use one of the tracks from the music score that he had created for a documentary film—it was a perfect fit for Act 3 because of its eeriness. It also had a good mixture of contemporary beats to a Philippine lullaby titled, “Dandansoy”. I emailed him my abstract and film treatment so that he could mirror his composition to the themes prevalent to each act. He immediately agreed and started to compose.

Peter sent the drafts of these two songs in July 2020. His compositions had a blend of Philippine instruments with contemporary beats that were reflective of my choreographic vision. I started creating dance phrases so that I would be ready for rehearsals with the dancers, which commenced in October.

A good friend, DJ Toy Armada, composed the music for Act 2. He is celebrated DJ in the Philippines known for his unique style of remixes from famous popular songs. Toy and I became acquainted at the University of the Philippines when we were both members of the Filipiniana. Without hesitation, just like my brother Peter, he agreed to compose for me original music based on a Philippine folk dance, “Singkil”. Traditionally, the music for “Singkil” has a 5/4¹³ music

¹³ 5/4 is called a quintuple metre in music in which you add another count to a 4/4 music metre.

measure and is played with an *agung*¹⁴ and a *kulintang*¹⁵. Toy spent a few months creating his composition and after many Zoom meetings, he sent the final draft in September 2020. It was upbeat music that blended electronic with “Singkil” beats.

After saving all of the music compositions that my brother and Toy composed, I started to rehearse the choreography with the YDE dancers and Justine.

Animation

Sarimanok, a powerful, mythical bird from the Philippines, was the inspiration for the animation that preceded Act 1. (see figure 11) Culturally, the *Sarimanok* represents hope and strength. It has dynamic colours and is known to bring good luck to those who cross its path. I envisioned it as it appears in the animation, knowing it would be an auspicious opening for the dance film.



Figure 11. Screen capture of a Sarimanok bird image. [Artwork by PaulM](#)

¹⁴ Agung is a brass musical instrument from the southern Philippines. It is usually played in a suspended vertical position to create an echoing sound when hit by drum beaters.

¹⁵ A kulintang is a set of small agungs placed on top of the strings that are attached to wooden box. Sounds are produced using drum beaters.

Source: <https://twitter.com/PaulMurphyBooks/status/1281897364576301056>

Alec Bell, a graduate of York University's BFA in Film Production, created this animation. During our first meeting, I showed him examples of videos that had themes of egg cracking and hatching. I also shared with him the film treatment so he had an idea of where his animation would be located in the film, and the themes that would surround his composition. Alec was so excited to start working on this section; this animation was a first for him.

After the multiple drafts he sent and hours of rendering, he completed the animation for Act 1. I immediately sent it to the video editor, my brother Peter, to begin incorporating it into the existing clips of Act 1. In March 2021, Act 1 was ready to be merged with the rest of the acts for *In Flight*.

CHAPTER 3 | COVID-19

This chapter illustrates my direct experience in creating and producing *In Flight*, my dance film for my thesis, during the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores different techniques that I employed in transposing in-person meetings to a virtual platform during the rehearsal, production, and filming process. In addition, it enumerates the several challenges I faced during the dance creation process and how I was able to find creative solutions to these challenges. Finally, this chapter provides a specific scenario of a time when I was able to rehearse with my dancers in person and how this to me solidified the impact of in-person rehearsals versus Zoom rehearsals.

On January 12, 2021, during the beginning week of the winter term, I drove to the Accolade East (ACE) building to rehearse in person with the YDE. This was the first time I will be conducting face-to-face rehearsals with them. This was also the first time that I will be working in a dance studio since the beginning of the pandemic. I was so excited to finally see the group in the same space and review the dances we have learned in the previous term.

It was my second visit to the ACE since March 2020. The security measures to enter the building were now heightened with entrance granted only for those with special permission and an active York University (YU) card. I felt safe going into the building knowing that the people inside it were all York students, professors, and staff. After I tapped my YU card, I stepped into the building. It felt like entering onto a stage that was just mopped ready for a performance, a holy place. I felt hope once again. I felt a sense of freedom. I was about to dance.

After changing into my rehearsal clothes, I made my way to Studio D where the in-person rehearsals would take place. Morgan greeted me, her eyes revealing a full smile hidden behind her mask. She plays one of the lead roles in my dance pieces. Professor Susan Lee,

YDE's artistic director, also greeted me with a warm elbow bump. She was there to make sure that my rehearsals ran smoothly. Professor Lee assisted me with the technical preparation to ensure that the dancers staying at home will have the same rehearsal experience as the dances rehearsing live. It was a unique experience—a synchronous rehearsal for dancers in their homes and Studio D.

The rehearsals was jampacked with reviewing and adding more movements based on the notes that my primary advisor, Professor Cash, provided me. I applied her advice and witnessed the resulting increased depth in the dances, especially with Morgan's solo.

It was such a relief to finally see bodies moving in space in a dance studio. I could hear the dancer's breathing, which was particularly a challenge with our masks on. I could feel the energy that a Zoom rehearsal could not provide. I could see sweat dripping from our foreheads. I could feel the tangibility of the objects in a rehearsal space. We were moving in full body motion; we were expressing and adding nuances to our movements; we inhabited larger spatial points and we were able to travel even within the covid regulated 6m pods. All this, we were not able to have in our tiny spaces in our homes in the fall. As a choreographer, seeing the dancers in person was a gift because I could see, feel, and dance with them in a dance studio, a place where dances are crafted. This day we danced, a moment in time that had not been allowed for the past nine months. This liberty, especially in an "expressive culture" (Przybylski 12) such as dance, were appreciated greatly during this day.

Challenges and creative solutions during creation

The happiness and fulfillment I experienced when I had the in-person rehearsals were incomparable in contrast to virtual rehearsals. Finally, I was able to see the dancers and to return

to a space where I used to dance in performances, created dance for choreography classes, assisted professors in classes and met great people and colleagues. It was like going home. That day, as I drove past the ACE on my way home, I had a fuller smile and a heart full of gratitude.

These joys however did not last a long time. I was scheduled to return to the studio in two days to rehearse with the dancers again; however, the entire province of Ontario went on a lockdown, for the second time during the Covid-19 pandemic. The number of cases had increased, and Premier Doug Ford issued a stay-at-home order the same day I was to return to rehearsal. Aside from this government announcement, York's Office of Research and Innovation announced that graduate students are not yet allowed to engage in in-person rehearsals and that all rehearsals will be done remotely.

I had to find other creative avenues to pursue my research. I went back to my notes for the filming of my dance film. Initially, I was to film live at the Mclean studio. I had to reinvent the filming idea back to filming virtually. Not only that but I had to direct the filming through Zoom. My vision changed; it had to change. In *Hybrid Ethnography*, Przybylski provides an idea of remaining nimble in the changing field (Przybylski 160). I had to be a nimble researcher to be able to complete the filming of my thesis in a timely manner. I had to find other creative solutions to deliver my vision uncompromised. I had to give the dancers the best dancing experience possible amidst these barriers and still explore the thesis topic effectively.

With all these concerns in mind, I immediately thought of filming the dancers remotely. With the support of Professor Cash, Professor Lee, and Professor Jimenez, we decided to film the dancers in Studio A. With Professor Cash overseeing everything, Professor Lee provided me with extra days of rehearsal for the new blocking of the dancers. I initially choreographed the sections with seven dancers at a time. However, this number had to change because Studio A is a

smaller space and I had to compromise so the camera would be able to capture the dancers properly.

On February 5, 2021 we filmed all the sections. Several aspects—lighting cues, dress rehearsals and setting of the camera angle settings—were explored and solidified two days prior during the technical rehearsal. Professors Jimenez and Lee provided me with this extra day to have a run through of all these elements. Additionally, Professor Jimenez offered two work study students (Naomi Henry and Nicole McLean) to assist me in recording the lighting cues through a lighting software Qlab and performance facilities personnel (Samuel Chang and Zach Kale) to ensure that the cameras were working properly. I was so happy with the result of our collaboration because of this supportive ecosystem, even if I was directing them via Zoom.

I completed the filming of the sections on February 5, 2021. All the raw files have been successfully converted and downloaded for editing. The editor, animator and I are working closely to edit and add effects to the film. I could hardly wait to see the finished product, which became a reality. Thanks to the endless support of the dancers, my supervisors, the dance faculty, camera and lighting crew, editor, costume designer, animator and production assistant who stayed with me in this journey regardless of the pandemic forcibly clipping our wings.

Reflections on filming during Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced us to live in the confines of our homes (Burch p.6). All the educational institutions, office buildings, restaurants, museums, and airports that are locations of learning, working, building a community, and an avenue to see our loved ones who live far away, were put to a halt. Dance was not spared. The creation of dance and the ways in which it traditionally gets presented live to the audience have changed. However, dance makers

did not stop creating and still managed to find creative solutions even during these extraordinary times. An influx of dance performances being presented in the form of dance films and the screening of past performances or works in progress via online platforms like YouTube and Vimeo increased.

At that time, graduate students were not allowed to conduct research with undergraduates. Fortunately, with the support of my supervisors, Professor Susan Cash and Jennifer Jimenez, alongside the performance facilities crew headed by Samuel Chang, we were able to live stream the filming process using OBS¹⁶ software so I could direct while logged in to Zoom.

When I transposed my choreographic vision from a proscenium stage to a dance film, I had to find creative innovations to present a choreographic work that is cohesive and is different from the present craze *Tiktok*¹⁷, or popular music television videos. I wanted to create not only a dance film but to offer the audience the feeling of watching a performance on a proscenium stage as well as give viewers a sense of space despite the limited viewing ability that a screen provides. I wanted to bring the audience back to the theatre even if they were watching the film in their own personal spaces.

The dancers were filmed in six separate time schedules (see Appendix p. 69) to adhere to the set limit of the number of people in a space which was ten, in my video, four dancers plus four crew. Normally, fourteen dancers would be on stage at the same time if this were performed live on stage. Samuel Chang, who was in charge of the camera work, and I elected to film the

¹⁶ OBS (Open Broadcast Software) is a live streaming source to capture events

¹⁷ Tiktok is a video created by dancers to showcase a short clip of a movement phrase that fits the dimension of a mobile device like a cellular phone or tablet.

dances from three camera angles: static wide, side, and a moving angle where the camera person could follow the dancer's movements from a closer position. I found that these choices Samuel and I made resulted in the capturing of the dances from multiple viewpoints. They also provided a variety of shots that mirrors a recording of a live or a pre-recorded dance performance on a stage, television, or film set.

I especially liked the moving angle that was the third option of the camera angle choices. The shots captured the faces of the dancers, details of the costumes, and minimal afflictions in the movements that an audience may not see if the dancing were performed on a proscenium stage because of the distance of the audience to the performers. Erin Brannigan states:

“This [close-up shot] is achieved through an attention to the performing body and its micro-movements—the smaller detailed movements of the body and its parts.” (Brannigan 43)

The shots that were used, especially in the solos of Bridgette D'Orsogna in Act 2 and Morgan Staziewics in Act 1, brought the audience to a closer view of the dancers' performance of the movement.

The York Dance Ensemble dancers were extraordinary in embodying the movements even with the restrictions of the dancing space and the distance they had to maintain while performing. In addition, there was no sign of a lack in the performance quality or compromise in the demonstration of the dances albeit wearing masks. This was true of my guest dancer Justine as well when we filmed her at the Kalayaan Dance Centre in Mississauga with Alex Felipe. The dancers were real troupers in adjusting to this new approach of performing.

This new way of directing virtually was challenging because normally a director would be present on set to make changes or suggestions on the spot and could call a cut in the middle of a scene if needed. This was impossible to do when directing in a virtual platform since my

dancers performed a three-to-four-minute piece for each act. With this in mind, I made sure I came prepared during the filming day. I wrote a list of shots of each section so I would have clearer directives to the crew and the dancers. The day prior, Samuel informed me of the cameras that were used for filming, so I catered the list of shots based on the information he provided.

A week after the filming, all the raw files were sent to the editor Peter Alcedo. Peter and I met many hours in Zoom to create a dance film that is reflective of a live performance. He was able to add new clips for the title section, setting the ambience for the whole film. He was also able to seamlessly blend each act by adding short clips gathered from the different camera angle shots of the dances.

I found that in this creative process, dance is an artform that can be presented using multiple platforms. A dance film can showcase a dance piece from many viewpoints that could not be achieved if watching a dance performance on a proscenium stage. In one sense, creating a dance for the screen instead of the stage is freeing, but it also requires the choreographer and director to think creatively in different ways, taking into consideration the many variables, not to mention the audience viewing experience.

Conclusion

I created *In Flight* in collaboration with many artists and with the support of professors and with a drive to continue creating dance even when faced with the many adversities that the COVID-19 pandemic forced on my path. The choreographic journey to generate dance movements for my dance film provided new ways to mobilize the dancing body despite constricted conditions of space and the inaccessibility of dance studios. My directing *In Flight* via Zoom, even though it was challenging, elicited a realization that dance artists can thrive and produce choreographies even in lockdown conditions.

In this thesis, I demonstrate several methods that coalesce in the many facets that comprise dance and film making and explore how these methods assist a choreographer and director when producing a dance film, especially during a time of a pandemic. I also demonstrate the importance of collaboration—creating such an involved project in less-than-ideal circumstances necessitates teamwork and mutual respect.

Moreover, this thesis also yields a wonderful journey of sharing Philippine culture through its folk dances with winged motifs. Contemporizing “Tinolabong”, “Janggay”, and “Tboli” has offered me the chance to expand these folk dances’ traditional movement annotations to include metaphors of birth, growth, life, immigration, struggle, failures, resilience, and hope. My contemporizing these selected folk-dances where I employed recent life experiences, knowledge gained from scholarly resources, and my understanding of our current contemporary realities, echoes, for me, the definition of what is contemporary. What I created in *In Flight* reflects what these folk-dances mean to me at this time in my life. *In Flight* suggests a journey from birth, to an increasing confidence in identity and belonging, giving rise to fly unencumbered, adapting to the environment around me.

These are examples among several rewarding learning outcomes that I benefited from as a result of creating *In Flight*. My examination of dance rehearsals as a fieldwork site is yet another. The integration of dance ethnography into my work has sparked for me a new way of understanding the rehearsal process. In the future, and for my research to be truly ethnographic, I plan to travel to the northern and southern Philippines to conduct fieldwork when it is safe to do so. In addition to deepening my research using ethnographic tools and producing research materials that will further expand my understanding of other Philippine folk dances, this experience will offer a sense of closure that has been kept from me due to travel restrictions during my graduate studies. It will also help me to refine and even re-imagine *In Flight* for the day when it can be staged live and performed on a proscenium stage.

Despite the circumstances of COVID-19, I have had access to many avenues to create a dance film during this time of a pandemic. I have learned so much about the possibilities and impacts that spring from the interplay between technology and dance. I feel like I am a pioneer of an art form that is in a state of transformation.

When I decided on my thesis title, Toronto was not yet in lockdown. My intention was to perform the dance pieces at the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre at York University. *In Flight* now goes beyond the Canadian stage because of the nature of who danced it and how it will be presented now in digital form. I created the dances with a diverse group of dancers who brought their own experiences to the rehearsals and the performance. The dance transcends a single story and a single meaning to become our story; a world story; a story that we can all relate to in these current times.

My graduate studies and the journey to create *In Flight* have afforded me the opportunity to transition from being a professional dancer and an emerging choreographer to a dance maker

who is academically, conceptually, and technologically adept, and ready to participate in choreographic conversations among dance artists within Canada and beyond.

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Appendix



Screen capture of the animation created by Alec Bell for Act 1



Screen capture of Morgan Staziewics during Act 1



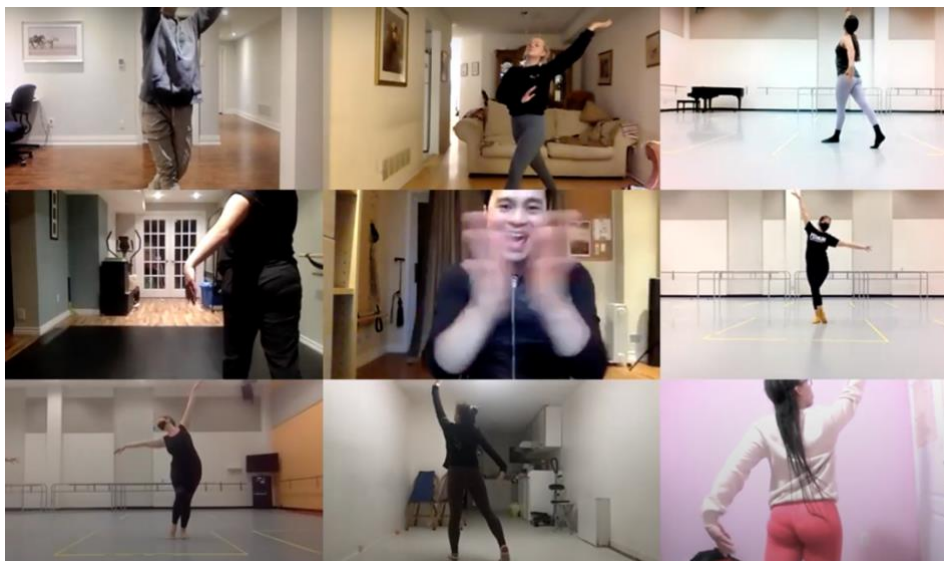
Screen capture of Bridgette D'Orsogna during Act 2



Screen capture of the York Dance Ensemble during Act 2



Screen capture of Zoom dance rehearsal with Justine Del Rosario



Screen capture of Zoom dance rehearsal with the York Dance Ensemble.
Four dancers were in their home and three dancers were in Studio C at the Accolade East Building

IN FLIGHT FILMING SCHEDULE											
DATE (2021)		4:45-5:15	5:15-5:45	6:00	6:15 PM	6:45 AM	7:15	7:45	8:15	8:30	
02-Feb	Arrival of artists and crew Set up	Morgan	Bridgette	Break	Morgan, Bailey, Katherine, Leslie	Bridgette, Andrea, Bethany, Carly	Morgan, Colleen, Kelly, Alyssa	Bridgette, Jasmine, Emily, Taegan	Reset and pack-up	End of tech rehearsals	
05-Feb	Arrival of artists and crew Set up	Morgan	Bridgette	Break	Morgan, Bailey, Katherine, Leslie	Bridgette, Andrea, Bethany, Carly	Morgan, Colleen, Kelly, Alyssa	Bridgette, Jasmine, Emily, Taegan	Strike	End of filming day	

Screen capture of the technical and film schedule on February 2 and 5, 2020



Screen capture of the thank you cards written to the York Dance Ensemble Dancers during the filming of thesis



Screen capture of the York Dance Ensemble alongside Stacey Murchison during the first run through of acts 1-4.

Film treatment

This film treatment articulates on paper my vision for this dance film. It explores how the transformation of my original choreography, meant for the proscenium stage, can be enlivened on film.

In writing this treatment, I challenged myself to reposition my choreography to fit the lens of the camera, while maintaining the integrity of the movements as if they are performed in a bigger space, such as a theatrical stage.

Synopsis:

Oliver is a character based on the *Sarimanok*, a powerful mythical bird from the Philippines. Lea is a caring mother to Oliver and her siblings. Oliver's birth is celebrated with a dance from her tribe. As Oliver grows up, she is faced with challenges: learning how to fly,

adjusting to her new environment, becoming sick from a virus, and navigating the wind as she tries to fly. With the help of her mother and her siblings, Oliver overcomes these challenges and learns to fly on her own.

Characters:

Lea (Mother bird)

Oliver (Lead female bird)

Siblings of Oliver

Act 1

(Birth of Oliver)

Forest during dawn . . .

The sun is about to rise, showing hope of a new day

A sign of birth is about to occur

Hazy . . . cold . . . blue . . .

A bird's nest is found

An egg is about to hatch

Frames:

First frame: Title. Fade out.

Second frame: Opening poem. Fade in:

Voice: *Secluded from the world*

no windows, no love, a simple but a major mistake of a dove

flew off carelessly on the road

dove..oh...dove..

when will you realize that the éclair was sweet

only when taken with a careful and mindful beak. – Paulo Alcedo

Text fades out.

Voice: *We can survive . . . we can thrive . . . we can change . . . we can adapt . . . with each new birth.*

Third Frame. Text. Survive (close-up face of Lea)

Text. Thrive (close-up of siblings 1 to 4)

Text. Change (close-up of sibling 5 to 9)

Text: to each new birth (close-up of sibling 10 to 12)

Fourth Frame (42 seconds): Animation of an egg hatching. Egg hatches, revealing a bird inspired by the *Sarimanok*. Cut.

Fifth frame: Zoom in to Oliver who is preset on the floor and will dance a solo inspired by birth, loss, and regaining of balance.

Music and video projection: Egg cracking sound layered with chants from the Ifugao region of the northern Philippines. Fades in together with the egg film created through Vuo. As the music plays, the egg slowly hatches, revealing a bird about to fly, a *Sarimanok*.

The movement vocabulary is inspired by “Tinolabong”, a Philippine folk dance from Capiz, a province in the central Philippines.

Music: Original composition by Peter P. Alcedo Jr.

Animation: Alec Bell

Act 2

(Lea and Oliver’s siblings)

Sun is shining in its full glory . . .

Joyous . . .

Caring . . .

Frames:

First frame: Wide shot to reveal Lea and Oliver's siblings playing in the forest.

Second frame: Close up on Lea who is present on stage right. Close up of hand gestures.

Third frame: Open to wide shot for their group ensemble dance.

Fourth frame: Wide shot until the end of dance.

The movement vocabulary is inspired by *T'boli*, a Philippine folk dance from the indigenous people of South Cotabato, Mindanao, the southern island of the Philippines

Music: Original composition by DJ Toy Armada

Act 3

COVID-19

(The Fall)

Forrest during dusk . . .

Gray . . .

Eerie . . .

Restricted . . .

Isolated . . .

Frames:

First frame: Oliver on the detritus of the forest floor playing with her siblings and Lea. Justine enters the frame to give Oliver the seed. Close up of Oliver eating the seed and suddenly falling ill.

Second frame: Oliver will dance a solo that is restricted, isolated, and bound because of sickness.

Third frame: Lea and the siblings help Oliver to regain her strength. Oliver will be healed and will be seen flying once again.

The movement vocabulary is inspired by “Janggay”, from the Badjao people of Sulu, the southernmost region of the Philippines.

Music: Original composition by Peter P. Alcedo Jr.

Act 4

Finale

(Hope)

Forest in the morning . . .

Celebration . . .

Colourful . . .

Full of life . . .

Frames:

First frame: Close up of Oliver

Second frame: Close up of Lea

Third frame: Close up of Oliver’s siblings

Fourth frame: Wide shot for a celebratory dance.

Fifth frame (10 seconds): Animation in Act 1 retrogrades back to an egg.

The movement vocabulary is inspired by a fusion of “Janggay”, “T’boli”, and “Tinolabong” movements.

Music: Original composition by Peter P. Alcedo Jr.

End

50TH ANNIVERSARY FESTIVAL OF DANCING AT YORK PROGRAM:

Forward Thinking, Forward Moving, Then & Now

DANCING WITH 2020: Tuesday March 30, 2021 @ 7:30 pm - [LINK](#)

YORK DANCES SERIES 1: Wednesday March 31 @ 7:30 pm - [LINK](#)

YORK DANCES SERIES 2: Thursday April 1 @ 7:30 pm - [LINK](#)

NEW TRADITIONS - DANCE ON SCREEN, THEN & NOW:

Tuesday April 6, 2021 @ 7:30 pm - [LINK](#)

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES - FEATURING THE YORK DANCE ENSEMBLE:

Friday April 9th, 2021 @ 7:30 pm - [LINK](#)

DANCE.AMPD.YORKU.CA

Welcome to the 50th Anniversary Festival of Dancing at York

Tonight's Program

Shifting Perspectives features the York Dance Ensemble in two dance film works by MFA candidates Paulo Alcedo and Michael Vintila, and a new collaborative live performance work by Susan Lee and Don Sinclair.

The creation of these works had an added layer of uncertainty due to the constantly evolving COVID protocols which required us to adapt the creative process on multiple levels. That said, the works presented tonight are not especially ‘COVID creations’ as much as they are thoughtful responses to changing social dynamics.

It feels like it has been a long year. We are now so close to the end of term, we can almost taste it. I am incredibly proud of the dance artists of the York Dance Ensemble - they have shown themselves to be intelligent, creative, resilient and compassionate. They have taught me much during this year. Please enjoy tonight's show. - SL

Message from Chair Susan Cash:

Warm wishes and welcome to the 50th anniversary festival of Dancing at York University. What a year to celebrate this milestone. In the May of 1970 Grant Strate the founder of this department opened the door to 32 students in dance at this university. The department has been transforming itself since then, responding to the current climate and needs of our students.

In this 50th year the challenges of Covid have highlighted issues around climate change, environmental concerns, Treaty rights, The Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter and Race inequities. Yet through all these converging aspects we have continued to listen, discuss and

dance at York with courage, determination and a genuine passion for making our lives and the people around us better, with dance.

I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all the faculty members who have worked so tirelessly to create this culminating feature to mark our half century so eloquently.

We always say to students when they come to Dance at York that we are not just helping you to find your potential as articulate makers and movers but also as independent, thoughtful thinkers. It is with pride that I congratulate the students in the Department of Dance for your consistent creative energy and perseverance in getting the best out of your education.

Dance students, faculty and staff have all learned together this year and shared in the newness, discovery and re-creation of how we dance during tough times, and I like to think that we've grown closer together through that process. This year has truly taught us to adapt and along the way we have helped each other make the most of these extraordinary times.

50th ANNIVERSARY FESTIVAL OF DANCING
Shifting Perspectives -- Featuring the York Dance Ensemble

UNHEIMLICHKEIT

20m

Choreographer(s): Michael Vintila, Kyra Todd, Reece Caldwell

Performers: Reece Caldwell, Kyra Todd

Music: Come Ruin and Rapture

Written by: Desiderii Marginis

Album: Procession

Performed/recorded by: © 2012 Cyclic Law -Released on: 2012-05-28-

Embedded within and reinforcing Unheimlichkeit (German for uncanny) are strong sculptural, philosophical and political connotations that when observed by an audience, exposes a dimension of the uncanny, suggesting the crude nature a body can inevitably become and wishes to pursue. As a multivalent work, a moving body begins by consulting work that previously existed as separate to the contemporary lexicon. The theoretical grounding identified in various theorists ranging from George William Friedrich Hegel to Maurice Merleau-Ponty reconfigures a dancer's understanding of interpretation that will inform and frame their gradual transformation while improvising.

IN FLIGHT

17m50s

Choreographer: Paulo Alcedo

Performers: Jasmine Almaguer Sheldrick, Teagan Ariss, Kelly Choi, Bridget D'Orsogna, Justine Del Rosario, Carly MacDougall, Andrea Madore, Bethany McMorine, Alyssa Nunziato, Katherine Romard, Coleen Satchwell, Morgan Stasiewicz, Emily Williams, Leslie Woo, Bayley Wyatt

Music: *Hatch with Hatching Sounds, Dandansoy, Lipad sa Kalawakan*

Written & performed by Peter Alcedo, Jr.

Lipad

Written & performed by Dj Toy Armada
 Lighting Design: Naomi Henry, Nicole Mclean and Samuel Chang
 Videographers: Alex Felipe, Samuel Chang, Zach Kale
 Costume Designer: Chelsea Trudel

This film is in partial fulfilment of the Masters of Fine Arts, Graduate Program in Dance, York University, Toronto Ontario 2021

Primary Supervisor: Associate Professor, Susan Cash
 Secondary Supervisor: Assistant Professor, Jennifer Jimenez

In Flight is a choreographic and filmic exploration contemporizing selected Philippine folk dances that have winged motifs. Metaphors of birth, growth, life, immigration, struggle, failures, resilience, and hope are manifested and expressed. It critically responds to themes of isolation, limited movements, the precarity of flight, restricted travel, acts of transferring from one place to another, and the ways in which dance artists adapt to quarantined movements of life. It seeks to find an increased knowledge in the natural movement of the avian species paralleled or in discussion with how humans translate naturally occurring movements of birds to human expressions and dances.

PAUSE

Music by Erik Geddes

POLARITIES

Choreography: York Dance Ensemble with Susan Lee
 Media Artist: Don Sinclair
 Performers: Jasmine Almaguer Sheldrick, Teagan Ariss, Reece Caldwell, Kelly Choi, Bridget D'Orsogna, Carly MacDougall, Andrea Madore, Bethany McMorine, Alyssa Nunziato, Katherine Romard, Coleen Satchwell, Morgan Stasiewicz, Kyra Todd, Emily Williams, Leslie Woo, Bayley Wyatt
 Music: Mark Duggan
 Lighting Design: Jennifer Jimenez
 Mask Design & Construction: Rolezajejan Marzan <https://lexaartworld.com>

Polarities is a live performance streamed from the McLean Performance Theatre at York University.

Choreography Notes:

The movement vocabulary of *Polarities* was created by the members of the York Dance Ensemble using a variety of improvisational prompts inspired by themes driven by the very interesting times we currently live in. We explored the desire to connect vs the inability to connect, light vs dark, being in control and out of control, constraint and freedom, stages of grief and loss. We also borrowed (with permission) choreography from a solo in Anna Blewchamp's 1990 work *Last Rites, New Dawn* which was created in memory of those who lost their lives in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Added to this was the complexity of rehearsing remotely

and in-person at the same time, a couple of lockdowns, physically distancing, masks and a 10 person per room limit. Many thanks to Mark Duggan, Don Sinclair, Jennifer Jimenez, Sarah O'Brien, Sam and Zach, Anna Blewchamp, and the incredibly patient and generous members of the York Dance Ensemble.

Technical Notes:

What might a live dance performance look like when at most 10 people are allowed in the theatre and the ensemble has 16 members? With the go ahead this past January to work face-to-face within these constraints we began to explore what we could create. As a result of our explorations we decided to use a chroma key compositing effect (green screen) to combine live streamed video with pre-recorded and processed video. If you were actually in the theatre, you would see a great deal of green! Essentially the compositing effect allows us to take anything that is green and replace it with a video. This is fairly challenging to do in this live theatrical context as it depends on even green lighting of different surfaces (plus bodies and fog!). There were some challenges for the dancers as well. While it appears to the audience that everyone is together, the live performers cannot see the performers in the videos. Since the audience view is the camera, "front" is wherever the camera is - very different from working on a stage with the audience in the room!

BIOGRAPHIES

ARTISTIC DESIGNERS:

Susan Lee is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Dance who has a longstanding interest in interdisciplinary collaboration and improvisation in performance. A Dora-nominated dancer, Susan's professional career spans nearly 30 years, originating roles in numerous works by established Canadian choreographers, and which have been performed across Canada, the US, Mexico, Portugal, Sweden, Singapore and Indonesia. Many of Susan's works combine dance, live music, video and interactive new media. Susan holds a BFA (specialized honours in dance) and an MFA in choreography from York University. This is her 6th year as YDE Artistic Director.

Don Sinclair is Associate Professor in the Department of Computational Arts at York University in Toronto, Canada. His creative research areas include interactive performance, mediated performance, projections for dance, sound art, web and data art, cycling art, sustainability, and choral singing most often using code and programming. Don is particularly interested in processes of artistic creation that integrate digital creative coding-based practices with performance in dance and theatre. To help understand these relationships, Don has participated in a number of dance workshops to complement his background in computational arts. As well, he is an enthusiastic cyclist who will most likely exceed riding 500,000 km in his lifetime.

Jennifer Jimenez is a community engaged artist with an extensive career as a national and international scenographer for live performance. She holds an MA in Advanced Theatre Practice from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London, UK, a BFA in Theatre Production and Design, and BEd from York University. She has received an OAC Chalmers Award, has been twice nominated for the OAC Pauline McGibbon Award in Design, and is a member of the Associated Designers of Canada (ADC). Her research explores the intersection between participatory and inclusive performance, community development, and interdisciplinary practice. As Co-Founder/Executive Director of ADCID (Aiding Dramatic Change in Development) since

2008, she has worked towards sustainable community development, engaging groups locally and internationally, in participatory arts and dialogue. She is a member of the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) and the Hemispheric Institute's, Disability and Performance working groups, and the IFTR Scenography working group.

MFA CHOREOGRAPHERS

Paulo Alcedo is in his second year of the MFA program in Dance Choreography Collaboration and Creation. Born and raised in the Philippines where he received extensive training in Philippine Folk Dance in the University of the Philippines' Filipiniana Dance Group. He furthered his training in Contemporary Jazz and Modern Dance under Douglas Nierras' Powerdance Company and toured with them in Asia and North America. Before moving to Toronto, he moved to Los Angeles California where he won a one-year dance scholarship at the Edge Performing Arts Centre in Hollywood, California. There he studied under noted choreographers, such as Ryan Heffington (Sia) and Brian Friedman (Britney Spears), among many others. In Toronto, he has danced the works of Susan Cash and is currently the artistic director of the Culture Philippines of Ontario. Paulo is looking forward to sharing his MFA thesis which was created and produced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Michael Vintila is an emerging instructor, performer and choreographer. From a young age, he adapted his current artistic capabilities by drawing knowledge previously attained through various acclaimed fine art programs around Toronto such as Claude Watson School for the Arts. His love for movement creation and well-being practices continues to flourish by challenging himself with new and unique ways to manifest creative movement ideas. By investigating innovative methods through an integration of fundamentals such as fitness, politics and philosophy supported through the collective lens of dance, Michael wishes to enhance the overall experience of both non-dancers and dance professionals.

YORK DANCE ENSEMBLE

Jasmine Almaguer Sheldrick is a Mexican-Canadian dance artist based in Hamilton/Toronto. She is in her fourth year at York University specializing in performance and choreography. Jasmine has over fifteen years of dance experience in an array of genres. She plans to perform professionally and integrate film in her work.

Teagan Ariss, originally from Waterloo, Ontario, is an emerging dance artist based in Toronto. Currently in the fourth year of her BFA in Honours Dance, Teagan has a particular interest in creating contemporary choreography. At York, she has trained under artists including Susan Lee, Tracey Norman, Syreeta Hector, and Julia Sasso.

Reece Caldwell is a Toronto based emerging dance artist, specializing in contemporary and modern dance forms. Reece began dancing in Peterborough, ON, and has continued his dance training in York University's BFA program, where he has trained under professional dance artists including Syreeta Hector, Tracey Norman, and Susan Lee.

Kelly Choi is an emerging dance artist and teacher from Scarborough, Ontario. Kelly specializes in contemporary/modern and ballet. She has over fifteen years of dance experience in ballet. Kelly plans to pursue teaching and performing as she completes her BFA in dance and BEd in concurrent education.

Bridget D’Orsogna is an emerging contemporary dance artist based in Toronto, Ontario. Currently in her fourth-year in the York Dance program, Bridget specializes in choreography and performance. At York University, she has studied Cecchetti ballet, modern, and contemporary dance techniques with a focus on improvisation. Bridget is in her second season with the York Dance ensemble.

Carly MacDougall is an emerging Toronto-based dance artist, specializing in contemporary and modern dance. Carly started dancing in Brampton, where she also practiced tumbling. She is currently completing her BFA at York University, where she has studied under professional dance artists including Susan Lee, Tracey Norman, and Syreeta Hector.

Andrea Madore is a Toronto-based emerging dance artist in her fourth year. She is completing the Hons. BFA program in Dance at York University. Andrea has training in various dance forms including contemporary, modern and traditional Chinese dance. Andrea has studied under professional dance artists including Susan Lee, Syreeta Hector and Julia Sasso.

Bethany McMorine is an Ottawa and Toronto-based dancer and choreographer specializing in contemporary dance with training in jazz, ballet and hip hop. She is currently training at York University’s dance program, working with professional artists such as Tracey Norman, Susan Lee and Amy Hull.

Alyssa Nunziato is an emerging choreographer, teacher and performer originally from Barrie, Ontario. She has trained for over ten years in various styles including ballet, modern, and contemporary. She has continued her training through York’s four-year BFA Honours in Dance where she became passionate about improvisation and collaboration in movement creation.

From Peterborough, Ontario, **Katherine Romard** is an emerging dance educator and enthusiast. Katherine has a passion for cultivating creative voices through contemporary dance in her work as a teacher. This has been demonstrated in her work with Thomas A. Secondary School, Camp Arowhon, and York University

Coleen Satchwell is an aspiring performer based in Toronto, training in dance, acting and singing. She has training in many genres of dance with choreographers and teachers across Canada and the USA. As a young black artist, Coleen plans to continue to train and potentially work with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in the future.

Morgan Stasiewicz is a Canadian dancer, performer, choreographer and dance artist with twenty years of experience. After completing one year in York University’s Honours Dance program, she performed for Carnival Cruise line for over three years. She returned to York University in 2018 and plans to graduate in 2021. This is her second year with the York Dance Ensemble.

Kyra Todd is an emerging dance artist and choreographer, specializing in contemporary and modern dance forms. Kyra began dancing in Vancouver, B.C., and moved to Toronto, Ontario to continue her training in the dance program at York University. There, she has studied under professional dance artists including Nicole Rose Bond, and Susan Lee.

Emily Williams is an emerging dance artist from Burlington, Ontario. She began dancing at the age of three, and quickly fell in love with dance, joining a competitive team at age eight. Currently pursuing her BFA specialized honours in dance, her focuses lie in contemporary, ballet, and creation.

Leslie Woo, originally from Calgary, Alberta, has trained in various dance forms including Vaganova and Cecchetti ballet, contemporary, contact improvisation and jazz. Alongside her training, she currently holds the position as Assistant Artistic Director of *Bloom* for the 2020-2021 season.

Bayley Wyatt is a dance artist based in Toronto, Ontario. She has been teaching and choreographing pieces since the age of fifteen, Bayley specializes in contemporary, jazz, and acro dance styles. Now in her third year of the BFA dance program, focusing in the performance stream, Bayley has studied under dance artists Susan Lee, Nicole Rose-Bond, and Tracey Norman.

TEACHING ASSISTANTS:

Deanne Kearney is a current Ph.D. student in Dance Studies at York University in Toronto, Ontario. Her research follows popular dance and music and their interactions with the online world. Her Master's research focused on the Canadian krump community, and she continues to focus on hip-hop and street dance styles. Kearney has been afforded many great writing opportunities from *Dance Magazine*, *The Dance Current Magazine*, *Dance International Magazine* and *Mooney on Theatre*. Kearney has interned with the internationally acclaimed *Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival*, where she worked within the dance archives. She has completed *The National Ballet of Canada's* Emerging Dance Critics programme, the *New York Times'* 'How to Think and Write Like a Critic' course and an editorial internship with *The Dance Current Magazine*. She is happy to be involved with the *York Dance Ensemble* as a teaching assistant for the second year.

Stacey Murchison is a PhD student in Dance Studies at York. She holds an MFA in Theatre Practice from the University of Alberta and a BA in Dance and Kinesiology from the University of Calgary. Her current research looks at the art of roller skating and the various ways it is expressed and practiced throughout North America. She was a company member of EDAM dance in Vancouver, BC between 2006 – 2014, where she interpreted the works of artistic director Peter Bingham. As a dance educator, Stacey has instructed and mentored students of all ages and abilities in the styles of jazz, tap, hip-hop, contemporary dance, and contact improvisation. She is also a DJ, certified yoga instructor, and has been independently producing experimental dance videos since 2006. This is her second year working with YDE as a teaching assistant.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We recognize that many Indigenous nations have longstanding relationships with the territories upon which York University campuses are located that precede the establishment of York University. York University acknowledges its presence on the traditional territory of many Indigenous Nations. The area known as Tkaronto has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Huron-Wendat, and the Métis. It is now home to many Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. This territory is subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.

50th Anniversary Festival of Dancing at York: Forward Thinking, Forward Moving, Then & Now acknowledges that ceremonies, dance and performance are fundamental to the expression and sharing of all people. We dance today on land that remembers the colonial heritage of Canada having forbid this fundamental expression from 1876 to 1951 to the Peoples of the First Nations of Canada.

DIGITAL LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

"Since our activities are shared digitally to the internet, let's also take a moment to consider the legacy of colonization embedded within the technologies, structures, and ways of thinking we use every day. We are using equipment and high speed internet not available in many indigenous communities. Even the technologies that are central to much of the art we [make] leaves significant carbon footprints, contributing to changing climates that disproportionately affect indigenous peoples worldwide. I invite you to join me in acknowledging all this as well as our shared responsibility: to make good of this time, and for each of us to consider our roles in reconciliation, decolonization, and allyship." ~ Adrienne Wong, artist in residence with the SpiderWebShow (Ontario, Canada)

The York Dance Ensemble:

The *York Dance Ensemble*, the lively young repertory company of the Department of Dance, showcases a remarkable line-up of contemporary works by rising dance artists.. The company regularly premieres works by guest choreographers, faculty and students, and selectively remounts significant legacy works, offering upper-year BFA students pre-professional performance and production experience. Membership in the YDE is by audition.

Check out what the York Dance Ensemble is up to by following their Instagram - [@yorkdanceensemble](#) or their website [YorkDanceEnsemble.ca](#).

The MFA Dance Program:

The MFA in Dance Program: ‘*Choreography | Collaboration | Creation*’ reflects the ways many contemporary artists are working today. This student-centered, experiential program encourages students to work collaboratively with other graduate students from a wide-range of disciplines, and to successfully find their own creative voice. In addition to a foundation focus on

choreography, the use of digital technology in support of dance will be encouraged through course-work and access to leading-edge technology.

For more information visit: dance.gradstudies.yorku.ca/mfa/

Digital Media Program:

Digital Media focuses on the study of 3D simulations and animation, artistic theories and cultural impact. It inspires people with imaginative digital art installations or design of the next generation gaming technology. Using code and programming as tools for creative expression, digital media specialists develop original digital media objects and experiences such as mobile apps, immersive and 3D environments, data visualization, interactive.

50th ANNIVERSARY FESTIVAL OF DANCING AT YORK:

Forward Thinking, Forward Moving, Then & Now

Artistic Director of the York Dance Ensemble: Susan Lee

Course Director, Collaborative Performance: Don Sinclair

Course Director, Dance Video and Intermedial Performance: Freya Borg Olafson

Course Director, Dance Production Practicum: Jennifer Jimenez

Production Manager: Jennifer Jimenez

Stage Manager *Polarities*: Sarah O'Brien

Course Director, 3rd year Choreography: Terrill Maguire

Publicity Coordinator: Susan Cash

Teaching Assistants, YDE: Deanne Kearney, Stacey Murchison

PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE, DEPARTMENT OF DANCE

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Faculty Members: Freya Bjorg Olafson, Jennifer Jimenez

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Administrative Assistant: Flannery Muise

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Work Studies: Naomi Henry, Nicole McLean

DANC 3271 Production Practicum Students: Juliette Manalac, Abbigail McEyeson

Social Media Team: Nicia John, Andrea Madore, Jasmine Almaguer Sheldrick

ADMINISTRATION, DEPARTMENT OF DANCE

Chair: Susan Cash

Administrative Assistant: Flannery Muise

Student Programs Assistant: Michelle Johnson

Operations Manager: Tom Osborne

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