Dance as an instrument for social change leadership

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Introduction

Dance is a universal language spoken through the movement of the body. It is considered by some to be “the most appropriate medium of expression for primal, emotional, and libidinal dimensions of human experience. Dance is seen as an outlet for intuitive or unconscious feelings inaccessible to verbal (intellectual) expression” (Foster, 1995, p. xiv-xv). Dance is capable of making a connection with the audience, drawing them into the experience to express thoughts, emotions, and feelings that cannot be fully described with words.

Due to the power of dance to communicate across language, cultural, and societal barriers, it has a unique ability to convey messages of social significance. It can move audiences to tears or bring them to their feet. It has the ability to convey a message on an emotional and intuitive rather than a strictly intellectual level. When used as a reflection of and reaction to the world around us, it can open the horizons and broaden the perspectives of the audience. When it addresses controversial issues and poses questions it can shift attitudes or even alter actions and beliefs. Dance can also be used as an educator, bringing audiences into new situations and establishing empathy, or providing information to break down stereotypes. The possibilities are endless.

This project involved using dance as a form of leadership in creating social change. An original dance piece was created, entitled Silent Cries, which incorporated movement, music, text, and costumes to confront and address the issues surrounding domestic violence against women. The creative process of choreographing movement, teaching the movement to other dancers, and fine tuning in preparation for performance was a transformational experience for both the choreographer and the dancers.
Literature Review

Dance is subjective, as is any art form, thus making the messages received by an audience largely dependent on their capability to understand the dance. Peter J. Arnold (1995), in his article “Objectivity, Expression, and Communication in Dance as a Performing Art”, articulates the role of the audience:

If communication in any full sense is to take place, a good deal depends not only on the performer but also on the imagination and educational background of the onlookers and what particular understanding and concepts they possess in relation to the dance (p. 67).

Understanding a message may depend on one’s familiarity with dance and also on a choreographer’s intention of creating something with a clear meaning. Not all choreography carries a message, however, and sometimes it carries a message that was not originally intended. Thus, to create a dance piece that carries a strong message and also leaves room for interpretation is an art form not easily achieved.

In researching the social messages that have been conveyed through dance, it is difficult to obtain a clear understanding of the original intentions of the choreographer. Foster (1986) observes that “because of the fleeting nature of the medium as well as their own aesthetic concerns, twentieth-century choreographers have, in general, preferred not to talk about their dances. [They] want the dance to speak for itself in a language all its own” (xvi). Thus, understanding of the choreographers intentions are derived from secondary sources such as dance reviews, interpretive books, and audience interpretation. Any audience member’s account of a dance is highly subjective.

For any given dance, the viewer must weave together the dance references to the world and to other dances with its internal organization to establish the harmonies, tensions, and counterpoints that give the dance both its meaning and its energy (Foster, 1986, p.97).
Each viewer of a particular dance may come up with a completely different impression or interpretation, which may or may not align with the choreographer’s intentions. Despite the subjectivity of the medium, however, many dancers and choreographers have made a social impact through their work. This historical background does not include all of the artists who have instigated change through dance in the United States, but highlights some major contributors and valiant efforts of the 20th century.

Isadora Duncan is considered to be the origin of modern dance (Franko, 1995, p. 7). She started making an impression on the dance world in 1903 and continued to be a powerful presence until her death in 1927. At the time, dance was strictly classical ballet and confined to rigid techniques and rules. Duncan was fascinated with the classical Greek ideologies concerning the soul and body. To imitate the Greeks moved beyond European ballet to a “revitalized, expression-filled form in which the body could serve as medium for the divine expression of the human spirit” (p.145). She wanted to find a natural dance form that would allow the dancer to express their own existence. In her autobiography she explains her dance as “an effort to express the truth of my being in gesture and movement” (p.6). Although she did not portray messages meant for change in the subject of her dance, the actual act of her performance was a social message and a position of leadership.

She was a self-producing solo performer, which at the time was unheard of for a woman to do. Furthermore, she was a raging success; audiences loved her. She protested the Victorian experience of women in society and the separation of public and private
spheres of life with women confined to the private. Her career challenged such gender division.

By choosing dance as a ‘woman’s place’, she inevitably raised the issue of woman as subject, of feminine subjectivity. Duncan’s subjectivity was unstably positioned on a threshold between privacy and publicity because her dance was an act of public display unveiling hidden nature as prior to or intrinsically outside society, from elsewhere by definition. Although opposed to the separation of these spheres, Duncan also relied on their segregation to dramatize her opposition. In this sense, she took performance where she found it as a public act for a private self (Franko, 1995, p.2).

She pushed the boundaries of what was accepted and expected, both in the act of performing and in changing the norms of dance and introducing freedom of movement of the woman’s body. “Duncan performed women’s rights; Duncan’s dance was a transparent medium through which her personality sent a message of social reform” (p.7).

For although ballet featured female dancers that moved on stage, it was restrictive and measured and some may say passionless. Duncan, on the other hand, was known and admired for her fiery performances.

Martha Graham is another influential figure in the development of modern dance. She danced and choreographed from the early 1920s up until 1990. Graham entered the dance world during a time when dance was used as a medium to denounce capitalism and to fight for working class rights. She was often criticized for being apolitical in her choreography. She stated:

Dancing reflects social conditions but that doesn’t mean it is a vehicle for any kind of propaganda. The instrument is your body and your body lives in this time...Life is now changing fast. A new set of symbols is being created. People have a new attitude toward life, and this new attitude, this new awareness is reflected in the modern dance (Warren, 1977, p.59).
Relatively early in her career, she denounced the use of propaganda in dance and stressed her intolerance of it's discussion in her studio. In 1936, however, she began to make political statements in her work.

In a statement against Fascism, she choreographed *Chronicle* (1936), *Immediate Tragedy* (1937), and *Deep Song* (1937). These works were about “the looming horror of a universal catastrophe and its moral breakup”(Graff, 1994, p. 8). Although at one time Graham identified her dance as abstract art, she later used her art form to convey political messages about current world issues. Soon after these pieces, Graham began to choreograph propaganda rich with American nationalism. These works used folk music, folk tales, and documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation. In *American Document* she “traversed the limits of time, space, and race, bringing working America, Native Indian America, black America, colonial America, and contemporary America together on a single stage” (Graff, 1994, p.9). These works were “an affirmation of the American traditions of democracy and social justice” (Graff, 1994, p. 9). Her purpose in creating this work was to strengthen the growing patriotism of the time.

In the early 1930s, following the Great Depression, a new self-identified working class emerged. Concerns such as class consciousness and political radicalism began to find a voice through dance (Franko, 1995, p.25-26). The dance world moved away from dance as an abstract art and towards dance as a revolutionary movement. Dance companies began to present socialist messages in their works, denouncing capitalism and advocating socialism.
An umbrella organization called the Worker's Dance League formed in 1932, giving its first performance in 1934. The league's goal was to "create an avant-garde that could refigure social relations and/or choreograph their moribund stagnation, thus hastening the advent of socialist revolution" (Franko, 1995, p.26). It described itself in its' brochures as a "national organization dedicated to fight against war, fascism and censorship and devoted to raising the dance to its highest artistic and social levels" (Franko, 1995, p.57). In addition to the formation of the Worker's Dance League, the journal *New Theatre* was founded in 1933. Among other things, it promoted and documented the revolutionary dance movement.

Revolutionary dancers turned up their noses at modern dancers, claiming their choreography to be "steeped in pessimism, mysticism, exoticism, diversified abstractions, and flights from reality" (Prickett, 1994, p.14). Any dance not created expressly for the purpose of furthering a social cause was criticized. Those who joined the revolutionary dance movement were not necessarily communists, but did adhere to Marxist philosophy (Prickett, 1994, p.14). In "The Tasks of the Revolutionary Dance", an article in the September/October 1933 issue of *New Theatre*, Nell Anyon argues that the well-known modern dancers of the time were a direct result of post war capitalism, which did not express anything meaningful, it was all abstract and did not concern the general population. She claimed that dance needed to make contact with life. At the current time, it had degenerated into commercial enterprise. She argues that there is one salvation for dance, to work towards the collapse of capitalism and the creation of a new society for inspiration (Franko, 1995, p.114).
There was a general consensus that dance techniques were too bourgeois. Revolutionary dancers wanted to give modern dance a political vocabulary that would revolutionize modern dance (Franko, 1995, p.26). Agitational propaganda dance or agit-prop dance was the resulting style that emerged. The movement, however, in its attempt to send out political messages, digressed from dance to pantomime (Franko, 1995, p.37). Despite the enthusiasm to support the cause and fight oppression through dance, the form suffered. Revolutionaries believed content was of more importance than technique. Many choreographers turned away from any sort of formalized technique claiming that revolutionary dance would come into existence “through a sudden intensification of energetic movements, a glow of red in the costume, a brief but hearty session of practice at clenching the fists” (Franko, 1995, p.28). There was also a sentiment that dancers can’t rely on techniques already learned, that a well-trained dancer cannot necessarily portray hunger, strike, and oppression (p.28). As a result, choreography ceased to be grounded in modern dance technique. Instead the message became the primary element. Generally speaking the revolution dances were predictable and symbolic, the characters represented the plight of all workers. They sought to demonstrate that although the proletariats were powerless in lack of resources, they did have power in their conscious action to change society (p.15).

Another style that came into existence was mass dance. It focused on the simplicity of small movements and involved a large number of dancers moving simultaneously. Mass dance classes were offered to help people appreciate the simple movements and to make dancers better revolutionaries. “Through mass dance, the
worker-dancer sheds all remnants of bourgeois subjectivity and becomes 'social woman'" (Franko, 1995, p.30). Jane Dudley, in an article entitled “Mass Dance” in the December 1934 issue of *New Theatre* explained that:

The dancer learns to move communally, to express with others a simple class-conscious idea. In this way, large numbers of people can be mobilized not only to dance but to observe, and through the discussion of the theme and the problems of movement brought forward by the leader and dances, clarity of ideology can be given (p.119).

Edna Ocko, in her June 1934 *New Theatre* article “The Revolutionary Dance Movements” applauded the use of dance as a vehicle for social messages. “The dance, because it immediately establishes rapport between audience and performer, is a remarkably flexible vehicle for the conveyance of revolutionary ideas” (Franko, 1995, p.124). Not all commentary on the revolutionary dance movement was positive, however. Harry Elion in an article also published in *New Theatre* (September 1934) entitled “Perspectives of the Dance” pointed out weaknesses of revolutionary dance. He argued that there was no understanding of relations between content, form, and style. He complained that most of the dances failed to develop subject matter or conflict. Rather they depicted drudgery and oppression and then a sudden transformation to freedom. They never presented the struggles encountered in reaching freedom. He argued that in order for there to be any kind of dramatic development, conflict must be included as part of the dance form (p.128). Emanuel Eisenberg, in a review in *New Theatre* (“Diagnosis of the Dance” July/Aug. 1934) of the 2nd annual Festival and Competition given by the Worker’s Dance League, criticized the predictability of most revolution dances. He recognized that most of the groups who performed were at most only two years old, but was disappointed that the dances were all “around” and “about” revolution as opposed to
being "out of" or "towards" revolution. A typical dance started with six to ten women on stage with long black dresses on. They swayed for a while to oppressive, monotonous music, and then there was some dramatic change in either the music or lights or a dancer in red runs across the stage. This led to a revolt and all of a sudden everyone was happy. There was never any basis for instigation of revolt and the problem of method was never addressed. Eisenberg claimed that it was not enough to show oppression by displaying women "teetering jerkily as burden-bearers". The dance needed to show the conditions created by oppression that were "intrinsic in our daily lives; so long as a serious and appreciable recognition can take place in the audience; so long as the picture made is instructive and dynamic and exciting and not a cross-section of past-oppressive phenomena given for their own drab sake" (p.116). A dance reviewer in Los Angeles attending a concert of dances against oppression and tyranny observed that no one seemed to be changing attitudes. "Those who responded favorably to the not-so-subtle symbolism cheered wildly for the dancer. The uninitiated shrugged the whole thing off as danced lectures or rabble rousing" (Warren, 1977, p.58). Revolutionary dances, although not successful in destroying capitalism, were created with the expressed intention to create social change. The major criticism of this dance movement was that it failed to combine of social messages and artistic choreography.

Lester Horton, a modern dance teacher and director of his own company from the 1930s to the early 1950s, had a profound impact on the world of modern dance. He was influential not only through his modern dance technique, Horton, which is widely used and performed today, but also through his example as a well-rounded artist enthusiastic about working with dancers from all backgrounds. He took an all encompassing approach to
dance, teaching his dancers about technical theater and costume design as well as dance technique. He also encouraged his dancers to be politically active and aware. He made a political statement in the makeup of his school and company, which was integrated during a time when racial diversity in dance companies was socially unacceptable (Warren, 1977). Alvin Ailey, a student of Horton's who went on to create a legacy of his own says of his mentor:

In the 1940s and 50s the American dance world practiced a pervasive racism. For a variety of reasons; our feet weren’t shaped right, our butts were too big, our legs wouldn’t turn out correctly; blacks simply weren’t wanted; and so on... The white ballet companies didn’t want us; neither did the modern dance groups, with the exception of Lester and Martha Graham. Lester - a happy exception - opened his arms to talent when and where he saw it (Ailey, 1995, p. 51).

For a while Horton joined the revolutionary dance movement of the thirties in order to spread political ideology through dance. In 1936 he focused mainly on creating propaganda. He was praised by critics of the time for maintaining choreographic integrity as well as sending social messages. One such work, Dictator, a quintessential agitprop piece, was reviewed as a powerful and direct piece with little left to the imagination (Warren, 1977, p.61). Another major work of Horton’s was entitled Conquest, choreographed in 1938. It focused on Mexican history and the Spanish conquest. Warren (1977) asserts Horton’s strength as a choreographer in this work, “Conquest was a perfect vehicle for Horton. He was able to combine his fascination with folklore, his interest in ethnic forms, and his desire to make a pertinent statement of social significance in one effort.” (p.87). Other pieces Horton created with social messages were Warsaw Ghetto, The Park, and Bench of the Lamb.
Two women, Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham became prominent figures in the dance world in the 1940s. They both took huge strides in modern dance by placing black dancers in the mainstream. Their companies proved to the American public that black dancers deserve a spot in the limelight. “Dunham opened the stages of the American theatre for serious and artistic performances by black dancers, and Primus brought the sense of dignity, authenticity, pride, power, and beauty to those of African ancestry through the medium of dance” (Emery, 1972, p. 266). Primus choreographed a number of works with the expressed intention of drawing attention to “the inequities and injustices in the lives of American Negroes” (p.263). Some examples of such work include; Strange Fruit, a reaction of a woman towards a lynching, Hard Time Blues, a protest against sharecropping, and The Negro Speaks of Rivers, a protest against general ignorance of black heritage in America. Some words that have been used to describe these works and others are; “definitely and legitimately exciting”, “well-unified and atmospheric”, “both skill and taste in execution”, and “excellent stagecraft” (p. 264). Primus said of her own art form, “I do not dance to entertain but to help people better understand each other...because through dance I have experienced the wordless joy of freedom, I seek it more fully now for my people and for all people everywhere” (p. 266). Primus used her medium to speak out against racial and social injustices in an attempt to bring about greater understanding across racial lines.

Katherine Dunham majored in anthropology at the University of Chicago. She used this foundation to make a connection between dance, music, cultural ceremonies, and social history. Her choreographic style is a result of having traveled and studied dance in the West Indies. During her years of contribution to the dance world, the late 1930s to
the late 60s, she was a pioneer in establishing a place for the black concert dancer. She reflects, “for my part, I am satisfied to have been at the base of the awakening of the American Negro to the fact that he had roots somewhere else, to have presented dark-skinned people in a manner delightful and acceptable to people who have never considered them as persons” (Emery, 1972, p. 261). As a young high school student in the late 1940s, Alvin Ailey began to realize his own passion for dance upon seeing the Dunham company perform. “I was lifted up into another realm. I couldn’t believe there were black people on a legitimate stage in downtown Los Angeles, before largely white audiences, being appreciated for their artistry” (Ailey, 1995, p. 40-41). Dunham’s leadership was in her intent and success in opening the dance world to black dancers. Her powerful and charged professional performances presented by black dancers was a statement demanding attention.

Talley Beatty was one of the original Dunham dancers. He danced and choreographed from the late 1930s up until the early 1990s. After dancing with Katherine Dunham, he formed his own company and toured Europe and the United States for five years. His work has been described as “not always pleasant, sometimes shocking, and most of the time creating a powerful impact, his works are the black experience. He has created, through dance, a portrayal of what it is to be black in America” (Emery, 1972, p. 271-272). In particular, his later works focused on racial injustice, discrimination, and the inequities of the black experience in the United States. Of Montgomery Variations, choreographed in 1967, Clive Barnes of the New York Times said, “a mood study of the face of violence - tough, painful and pathetic. Mr. Beatty does not moralize, nor does he offer a story. He just paints a shriek of pain across a blank stage. It is enough” (p. 271).
Alvin Ailey has created a living legacy with his own spiritual and moving choreography as well as with his diverse, versatile world-renowned modern dance company. Although Mr. Ailey passed away in the late 1980s, his company continues to thrive and will celebrate its 40th year in 1998. In 1949 he was introduced to Lester Horton, who soon became his mentor and close friend. Horton’s influence carried over strongly in Ailey’s choreography. He formed his own company in New York in 1958. Since then the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre has performed in Australia, Europe, Africa, the Far East, and the United States. Ailey made a deliberate point of not only presenting his own works, but also those of a diverse array of other choreographers. His intention in this being to broaden the experience of the dancers and the audience (Emery, 1972, p. 272). Another of Ailey’s purposes was to present dance that ordinary people would understand and appreciate. Dance, he stated, should be “a popular form, wrenched from the hands of the elite” (Ailey, 1995, p. 101). Not only did he seek to make dance accessible and enjoyable to all audiences, but he maintained an integrated dance company, pulling dancers from any and all ethnic, racial and class backgrounds. This in and of itself was a political statement, placing pressure on other dance companies to diversify. Clive Barnes of the New York Times wrote, “When Ailey, I think our black leader in American dance, demands such ethnic variety, and so successfully achieves this racial mix, can our ‘white’ companies afford to stand aside?”. Mr. Ailey not only maintained an integrated company, but “also employ[ed] indiscriminately black and white choreographers” (Dunning, 1996, p.253).
While much of his work was created for the purposes of expression and celebration of human life and the human form, some of his choreography centered around social issues.

I am trying to show the world we are all human beings, that color is not important. That what is important is the quality of our work, of a culture in which the young are not afraid to take chances and can hold onto their values and self-esteem, especially in the arts and dance. That's what it's all about to me (Dunning, 1996, p. 388).

*Masekela Language*, choreographed in 1969 is “a brooding depiction of broken, weary lives lived in a dusty little roadside café” (Dunning, 1996, p. 245). In this setting, Mr. Ailey indicts South African Apartheid and it’s devastating effect on everyone involved. The message is portrayed in such a way, however, as to apply the U.S. as well. George Faison, one of Ailey’s former dancers, believes that Alvin, by drawing attention to South Africa, was masking the fact that he was really talking about apartheid in the United States (p.246). Of *Masekela Language*, one of the dancers Sylvia Waters said “It was one of the most intense things Alvin did, for everybody. I remember when you had just finished dancing it, you couldn’t really talk to anyone and people couldn’t talk to you” (p.248).

*Black Belt*, also premiered in 1969 took an intense look at the realities of ghetto life. It started out as a dance, and culminated in a race riot. In *Cry*, a solo created specifically for Judith Jamison, Mr. Ailey made a tribute to “all black women everywhere—especially our mothers” (Dunning, 1996, p.271). In it, Jamison portrayed images of a working woman, scrubbing the floor, washing clothes, toiling, running, moving from “oppressive drudgery to emotional anguish and finally to wrenching joy in 16 exhausting
minutes" (p. 271). Ailey exercised leadership by intentionally employing social messages in his work and by actively working to change the nature of dance, making it accessible and enjoyable to all people.

Bill T. Jones has been on the forefront of modern dance in the 1980’s and 90’s. He has received two New York Dance and Performance Awards, a Dorothy B. Chandler Performing Arts Award, The Dance Magazine Award, and a Macarthur Fellowship. He is known for pushing the envelope, intentionally making his audiences uncomfortable, and addressing such issues as racism and AIDS. By including controversial and “inappropriate” movement and subject matter in his choreography, Jones seeks to broaden the horizons of his audience and society in general.

There are things we do with our bodies that are deemed so volatile we are not supposed to say the words that describe them... [some words, terms] are inappropriate. Be it in language or movement, I can suggest them. If I am skillful (and I am not always), these words, these gestures can engage, demystify the fearfully unfamiliar, and broaden the ever-evolving social discourse. This is a promise of my dance (Jones, 1995, p. 232).

One of Mr. Jones’ most well-known works is his three and a half hour Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin / The Promised Land. This piece, performed by Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane & Co., toured for two years. During that time, despite being denounced by the Vatican, it was praised for its reliance on community, its creation process, its scope, and its humanity. Jones explains it as follows:

Through a complex matrix of meanings between the real world and the world of theater, through non traditional casting and nonlinear juxtaposition of iconographic events, I tried to suggest the disorientation that I, and I suspect millions of others, feel around issues like power, sex, race, religion, and even art. The truth of the piece was in its disorientation (Jones, 1995, p. 209).
One of its unique aspects was that in each city it was performed, members of that community were used in the performance. The final image of the piece was all of the dancers and community members coming on stage and removing their clothes. Jones in his desire to disorient his audience and stir them up is intending change. He wants to challenge people's thinking, making them a little uncomfortable in the process. Although he is well-known for his controversy, he is also well-respected in the dance community. This is evident in the awards and recognition he has received. He has found a balance between social message and maintaining the integrity of the art.

Mallika Sarabhai is a currently active Indian dancer and choreographer who uses dance to reach out to the poor and uneducated women living in the slums of India. In her concerts, both in the United States and in India, she always includes at least one piece commenting on current social issues. She sees her role as a choreographer to be an instigator of uncomfortable discussion. Her mission is to speak to “the converted, the pseudo-converted, the complacent, the right-wing. I shall touch them all, even if not enough to change them, at least enough to break their complacency” (Kolmes, 1995, p.56). One of her works, entitled Sita's Daughter's is a protest against a 6,000 year history of oppression of Indian women who attempt to think for themselves and who desire liberation. She uses this piece to speak to women about such unspeakable issues as rape and aborting female babies. While the performance of this piece in the theater is an hour and ten minutes, it lasts much longer when performed in the slums. This is because the audience members interrupt the performance to share their own experiences, to hold Sarabhai's hand, and to express their understanding. Sarabhai sees herself as a voice for these women who are usually uneducated, illiterate, and not in a position to speak for
themselves. Of one of her performances in the United States, *Dance Magazine* wrote, "Sarabhai’s undeniable theatrical power can be appealingly overwhelming - she’s like a matriarch manquee from the Hindu pantheon who turns everything upside down with an inspired truculence" (McQuade, 1997, p.103). Other works she has created include *Shakti*, which spoke to an elite audience about feminist issues, and *V for... A Reflection of Violence*, intended to challenge and agitate the audience about our human tendency towards violence.

Urban Bush Women is a dance company with a mission to instigate social change. They identify themselves as “an ensemble of artists, educators, organizers and administrators dedicated to exploring culture as an expression of social complexities and a catalyst for social change... It weaves contemporary idioms and the folklore and spiritual traditions of African-Americans to create dance/music/theatre works that celebrate the human spirit” (UBW/FSU, 1998). The company was founded by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar in 1984. She has acquired an eclectic group of dancers of all different shapes and sizes, and creates for them choreography stemming from her own experiences. Ntozake Shange of the *New York Times* says of Urban Bush Women,

> The ensemble that Jawole Willa Jo Zollar has assembled and sustained takes women’s bodies, racist myths, sexist stereotypes, post-modern-dance conventions and the ‘science’ of hip-hop and catapults them over the rainbow, so they come tumbling out of the grin of the man in the moon (Shange, 1991, p.20).

One of their works, *Batty Moves*, celebrates African American women’s buttocks. It obliterates the “rules” that do not allow good girls to revel in their own bodies. It is also a celebration of women’s bodies that is not centered around sex. “Instead of using
pelvic motions to arouse erotic longing, the Urban Bush Women will dance in a way that makes shimmying hips into declaration and celebration of a woman's self far removed from the sex trade" (Eastman, 1997, p.3T). Both Mallika Sarabhai and Urban Bush Women are current leaders in the dance world, exercising leadership through their intention to bring about social change.

The common thread among all of these dancers and choreographers is their leadership in intentionally using their art form as a social change agent. Some, like Bill T. Jones and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, have confronted social issues with their dance, while others like Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, and Alvin Ailey have made social/political statements by forming their own companies and performing publicly against all odds. The challenge of using dance as a vehicle for social messages is to send out a message while maintaining the artistic integrity and balance of the choreography. This is a balance that the revolutionary dance movement, for the most part, did not achieve, and was criticized for. Those artists that have and do maintain the balance, however, have stunned, awed, inspired, and moved audiences- at times bringing them to tears, at others to their feet.
Methodology

In researching dance and its effectiveness as a social change agent, three major research methods were combined: historical analysis, participatory action research/action research, and qualitative data analysis. This strategy attempts to examine and analyze dance as a vehicle for social change. For the purposes of this project “dance as a vehicle for social change” was defined as any dance created with the intention of instigating change in the attitudes or actions of the audience.

Historical analysis included literature review of primary and secondary sources such as dance reviews, autobiographies, biographies, and analytical writings. The historian’s intentions were to “obtain information about the past and then to make judgments about the significance, meaning, importance, and relevance of these bits of information” (Cantor & Schneider, 1967, p. 19). This literature search focused on choreographers and companies who have used dance as a vehicle for social change and their methods in doing so.

The action portion of this project combined the principles of participatory action research (PAR) and action research. Argyris and Schon (1991) define PAR as “a form of action research that involves practitioners as both subjects and coresearchers.... It aims at creating an environment in which participants give and get valid information, make free and informed choices (including the choice to participate), and generate internal commitment to the results of their inquiry” (p. 86).

Karlsen (1991) explains that action theory is based on the assumption that one cannot understand a social system without changing it in some way. It is only through action and involvement in a community or situation that one can fully grasp the
surrounding elements (p. 145). This project used PAR by involving participants and researcher and incorporated action research by actively intending social change. Walton and Gaffney (1991) describe action research as a five step process. It is as follows:

1) Identify problems to solve and other opportunities, causal factors, environmental constraints, and relevant practice, 2) Formulate proposed changes and the implementation plan, 3) Initiate changes in targeted areas, 4) Assess changes and implementation methods, 5) Deepen, institutionalize, and diffuse changes (p. 102)

Building on action research by including active participation of the subjects and an intended change in the community, part two of this project followed Walton and Gaffney’s progression of actions. The problem was identified as the prevalence of domestic violence in all levels of society in the United States. I researched the environmental and causal factors surrounding the issue, examining the characteristics and coping behaviors of the victims, survivors, and abusers.

The proposed changes were to present the issues surrounding domestic violence in a creative, powerful manner, thus raising awareness of the issue and empowering survivors of domestic violence by giving voice to their experiences. The implementation plan for these changes was through the medium of dance. An original dance piece entitled *Silent Cries* was choreographed and performed at the University Dancers’ Spring Concert, *Dance Into the Light*. The audiences included elementary, high school, and college students as well as the general public. *Silent Cries* was also performed and informally adjudicated at the American College Dance Festival at the University of Maryland.

The act of performing the dance piece was the initiation of change. The change was not channeled in any specific direction, but rather left to the discretion and participation of the audience. Karlsen (1991) states,
We do not ‘own’ the change process. But we can hope for some kind of maturing process that eventually can make new steps possible and even, if practical, prepare for them. There are no clear solutions for these issues, but they certainly present a challenge to the way we define our roles and to the kind of methods we apply (p.153).

There are no clear and immediate solutions for the prevalence of domestic violence in the United States. It was hoped, however, that Silent Cries might instigate as Karlsen says, a maturing process that can eventually lead to new steps.

Assessment of the impact of Silent Cries was accomplished by administering questionnaires to a random sampling of audience members at the University of Richmond performance. Oral responses and feedback were received at the University of Maryland as well as a formal letter of critique from a University of Maryland Dance professor concerning the choreography. In addition to providing a basis on which to measure the impact of the dance, the questionnaires provided an opportunity to test my own assumptions. As Karlsen (1991) explains,

The involved researcher can often be so trapped by the situation and his or her own role in it that it may be difficult to get an adequate perspective on what is happening. In such cases, it is an advantage to have ready-established structures that ensure that one is confronted by others and has one’s own assumptions tested (p.156).

Analysis of the findings was completed with the use of qualitative data analysis. McMillan and Schumacher (1993) define this method as “an inductive process of organizing the data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among the categories” (p.479). The data received from the questionnaires was separated into groupings of responses and assessed for trends and patterns. These findings were analyzed in order to determine the effectiveness of the dance piece in instigating change.
Deepening, institutionalizing and diffusing changes are discussed in the Conclusions and Need for Further Study. From the results of the data analysis, suggestions were made for possible future use of this research as well as possible uses for dance as a change agent.
Findings

Process of Creating *Silent Cries*: Combining Choreography and Social Research

*Silent Cries* is an original dance piece that portrays the complex web of issues surrounding domestic violence through movement, music, costumes and voices. Stories and statistics alone can sometimes seem stagnant and detached. Using dance to convey the statistics and stories, however, gives the audience a character and an individual to whom they can relate. The intent of *Silent Cries* was to openly confront domestic violence against women by presenting it personally and expressively through dance. Due to the short length of the work and the complex issues included, the piece focuses specifically on situations in which heterosexual women are victims of or have survived physical abuse by men. It should be noted, however, that both men and women can be abused by a partner, in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships.

The goals in creating *Silent Cries* were threefold: to make a connection with, to educate, and to empower the audience, the intended audience being any and every adult attending the performance. My hope was to shed new light on the issue by presenting it in a personal, expressive way; through dance, thus making a connection with the audience. In the performance of *Silent Cries*, a wealth of information was provided about men and women in abusive situations, with the hope that audience members would learn at least one new fact. One of the central points stressed was that anyone can get trapped in an abusive relationship, regardless of race or class. This was clearly stated in the text read during the dance and was reinforced by the selection of costumes suggesting three diverse individuals from different backgrounds. I assumed that some of the audience members
would be coming from the perspective of the victim or survivor. This piece was directed towards them as a source of empowerment. Domestic violence is not always a publicly discussed issue and the victim is often blamed. I aimed to verify and state out loud for any abused women within ear shot that they are not alone and that they are not to blame for the situation.

The content of the dance was developed by researching domestic violence both on the internet and through discussions with experts at the Richmond YWCA's Women's Advocacy Program. From these sources, statistics concerning the frequency of abuse and the obstacles to escaping it, personal accounts from survivors of domestic violence, and descriptions of the typical cycle of abuse were compiled. These facts and figures were condensed and arranged into a script format (Appendix A). With the help of the Assistant Technical Theater Director at the University of Richmond, actors participated in several recording sessions. At that time we also incorporated music into the soundtrack. The structure of the script was changed and edited numerous times, juggling the various voices, music, and lines of text. I chose to use three female voices and one male voice. The male voice was included because men, often the abuser but not always, are effected and involved in the issue as well as women.

After the soundtrack was completed, I started the process of creating movement. After working alone for several weeks, I began to work with the dancers as well. Two hour rehearsals were conducted once a week from the end of October until the middle of February.
Results

I sought responses concerning dance technique and domestic violence content from three different sources: the Development Director for the Women’s Advocacy Program at the Richmond YWCA, general audience members at the University Dancers’ concert in February, and a Dance professor at the University of Maryland who served as coordinator of the informal concerts at the American College Dance Festival (ACDF).

The Development Director from the YWCA provided feedback concerning the accuracy of the information included in *Silent Cries*. She served as an expert in the field of domestic violence for this project. She attended a dress rehearsal of the dance and completed a questionnaire (Appendix B). Further information was collected during a subsequent telephone interview.

A random sample of general audience members provided data by completing a questionnaire that was distributed at two different evening performances (Appendix C). On Thursday night, the ushers passed out questionnaires and pencils with the programs as audience members were being seated. Participants were instructed to return the completed questionnaire to an usher. On Saturday night, the questionnaires were folded and inserted into the program. Pencils were not passed out, but left in a box at the back of the house. These were also returned to ushers. Approximately 150 questionnaires were distributed and 50 were returned resulting in a 30% response rate.

The performance at the ACDF was an informal concert held in a studio theater at the University of Maryland. *Silent Cries* was performed along with three other works. Then the dancers, choreographers, and audience members, about 30 people altogether had a discussion about the performance. Most of the comments concerned choreography, and
I received several questions and suggestions. Additionally, the concert coordinator, considered a dance expert for the purposes of this project, wrote a formal letter critiquing the work.

**General Audience**

The goal of the questionnaires was to determine if the information and portrayal of the piece was accurate and to measure its’ impact on the audience in terms of creating change.

**Table 1**

| Question One: “From your experience does this dance piece accurately portray the issues surrounding domestic violence? Please explain.” |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| No              | 9               | Tentatively     | 10              |
| Yes             | 30              | Strong Yes      | 30              |
| Blank           | 1               |

Although the “no” responses were in the minority, they revealed strong sentiments regarding the inappropriateness of dance as a medium for such a message and the lack of physical violence in the movement. Those who focused on dance commented that “dance is a strange way to attempt to portray this”, and asked, “can dance accurately portray the issues surrounding a brutal, humbling, life-altering tragedy?”. Other responses asserted that the piece was not enough. They wanted more “violence”, more “depth”, more “expression”, and more of a “sense of the issues”.

The “tentatively yes” responses were mostly “I think so” statements. People explained that they had no experience with domestic violence but thought the dance
“seem[ed] to cover the issues”. Two of the responses pinpointed a specific aspect of the piece that was accurate, thus implying or stating that the rest of it was not: “voice overs yes”, “yes but primarily through voices rather than dance”.

Of the 30 “strong yes” responses, five simply said “yes”, “very well”, or “very good”. The remaining 25 stated specific moments or reasons why the piece was accurate. Seven reasons were related to the emotion or movement of the dancers: “the dancers portrayed their anger”, “yes, because the emotions that develop through it”. Five made references to personal experience: “yes- home situations and police response”, “yes, I know people that have been abused and it was accurate”. The remaining 13 either commented that the points were realistic from what they’ve heard or that the facts/statistics were effective: “It certainly matched everything I have ever heard”, “yes, stories, statistics, songs”.

Table 2
Question Two: “Do you feel any differently about domestic violence as a result of the performance? Please explain.”

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nine of the “no’s” simply stated “no”. The other 23 provided reasons for their negative response. Eighteen expressed that their feelings did not change because they were already informed about or against domestic violence before they saw Silent Cries: “No. I was already aware that domestic violence was a problem, and not being solved”, “I still feel that it’s horrible”, “I can’t say it changed my beliefs, as they were already strong, but it was definitely a powerful piece”.

The positive explanations varied. Six of the 15 positives indicated that they were made more aware of the problem of domestic violence or of the facts involved: “The piece made me very aware of the problem especially with the statistics”, “brought it to consciousness”. Three responses mentioned that they learned something: “…surprised at the imbalance between animal shelters and battered women’s shelters”. “I didn’t realize how common the incidents occurred, or how unwilling to help the authorities are”. Two participants referred to emotions they were feeling: “yes- more passionate”, “only that it’s pitiful and all victims have my sympathy”. Two responses said that it confirmed their views: “it helped to affirm my views”, “powerful performance - I have always been horrified by domestic violence”. One participant indicated that they realized “it can be interpreted in dance”.

Table 3
Question Three: “Did you feel any emotions during or immediately following the dance? If so, what triggered them? Please explain.”

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreadable</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three explanations given among the “no” responses cited either the lack of new information, the costumes, or the voices as reasons for why they did not feel emotion. “I would have liked a new perspective. Much of the information and situations have been written about many many times.”, “I found it to be more of an intellectual - academic experience. I feel the piece may have been more effective without the voices - too didactic.”, and “I couldn’t get past the costumes. Dancers looked too blue collar - this
crime does not discriminate by class. But the final statement was very effective.” The remaining “no’s” did not provide explanations.

Tables 4 and 5 list the emotions and triggers and how many times they were mentioned in the “yes” responses to question three. Among the “yes” responses, 33 specified an emotion, a trigger, or both.

Table 4
Emotions specified in the “yes” responses to question three

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorrow/Sadness</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discomfort/Uneasiness</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shock/surprise</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goosebumps/Shivers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horror</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helplessness</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Help</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief at Not Being in the Situation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desperation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anguish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5
Triggers specified in the “yes” responses to question three.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violence</th>
<th>Movement/Dance</th>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Voices/Words</th>
<th>Dancers</th>
<th>Problem of Domestic Violence</th>
<th>Truth Portrayed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Of the “yes” responses that cited statistics as triggers, four of them made specific reference to the statement that there are three times more animal shelters than women’s shelters in the United States: “The fact that there are more animal shelters than shelters for battered women”, “statistics are shocking - 75% of women killed trying to leave, 3 times more animal shelters??”. Some of the emotion/trigger responses were as follows: “sadness, frustration, helpless”, “yes - the drama of the dance and the truth it pictured evoked feelings of anger and pity and sorrow”, “I feel frustration at the problem of domestic violence”, “I felt very sad and I wanted to hug the women, triggered by the frustration, anger, and fear in the dancers”.

One of the “yes” responses indicated a connection with the participant’s personal experience, “yes, reminded me of last roommate that other friends and I convinced she didn’t deserve such treatment”. Another audience member mentioned questions brought to mind, “I could picture the women being beaten and couldn’t understand why they keep going back for more”.
Table 6
Question Four: “Do you feel that any of your actions, attitudes, or behaviors will change because of this dance? Please explain.”

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Middle</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7
Changes in attitude/action/behavior specified in the “yes” responses to question four

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fifteen of the “no” responses simply stated “no”. Seven gave reasons associated with no change in attitude and no new information received: “No, my attitude will be the same”, “No, I have always been an advocate for domestic violence awareness…”, “no - I didn’t get any new information. There was nothing new offered to think about”. The remaining five “no’s” were as follows: “No. From a male point of view I can’t understand why a man would want to or need to take his aggression out on his wife or partner”, “no because I am not in a situation to do something or not do something”, “no - be realistic!”, “I’m not a batterer”, “probably not”.

The “in the middle” responses did not cite specific changes in their own attitudes or future actions, but neither did they explicitly say there had been no change: “I’m a feminist already - I know I should do more to directly help women through volunteering at shelters or something”, “they were confirmed”.

The majority of “yes” responses mentioned awareness, and a number of them also mentioned a specific action they would take: “behaviors - more support for battered
women's shelters. I do some now... but my level of consciousness has been raised, so I will probably act more upon my beliefs than I might have before seeing *Silent Cries*, "maybe become more aware of domestic violence issues, pay more attention", "volunteer to help battered women and children - especially through the school system". One of the responses referred to attitude, "attitude - less blaming of the female always going back to the man".

**Domestic Violence Expert**

The questionnaire for the domestic violence expert contained one question that was slightly different from those distributed to the general audience (Appendix B). She was asked in question four if she felt that the dance had any "potential for changing or improving general actions, attitudes, or behaviors surrounding domestic violence". Overall she felt that the information in the statistics and facts were "accurate and compelling". The dancers and their movement, she commented, were also true to life. She explained that the "dance revealed the control, tension, anger, and loss of self-esteem that women in domestic violence situations may experience". Her feelings about the issue remained the same but she wished more people could see the piece, both domestic violence survivors and community members. She commented that "the combination of chilling statistics, engaging music and choreography were moving - and the dancers seemed very connected to the piece". Concerning it's potential for creating change she felt it would be an effective catalyst for discussion because of its ability to "illustrate situations that words cannot accurately describe".
ACDF Discussion

During the post-performance discussion at the American College Dance Festival, audience members expressed mixed feelings towards Silent Cries. One man said it had made him uncomfortable because he was made aware of things he didn’t want to learn. His attitude towards the dance was not negative, however, he felt that it was effective because it forced him to think about the issue. Another woman commented that it made her angry. One person asked if it was intended for men and women. Several others chimed in, commenting that all the statistics were about women as victims or survivors. One of the other dancers said she wouldn’t want to be a man watching the piece. While there was some consensus that the section with statistics overlapping was well done, many felt the opening could be restructured. Two people suggested that the dancers move and establish their characters with the audience before the text begins so as not to abruptly throw the viewer into the heat of the issue. The original man, however, said he liked being thrown into it. He explained that if he’s going to be hit in the face, he’d rather it come from the very start. Another person suggested using less text in the beginning, choosing only the most important words to focus on. Another woman commented that she was not convinced that the actors were actually experiencing the emotions they were speaking about. One person addressed the synthesis of text and movement. She felt that she could have gotten the same message just from listening to the words. She did not feel like the movement connected well to the soundtrack.

During and after the discussion two women shared that they had had personal experiences with domestic violence. One stressed the importance of referring to abused women as survivors as opposed to victims. She also thanked me for addressing the issue,
stating it's something that needs attention. The second woman shared that she had a boyfriend at one time who was abusive. In her experience she had not realized what was happening until she was in the middle of the violence. She encouraged me to find a way to incorporate that dynamic into the choreography. She also thanked us for performing Silent Cries and said it moved her.

Dance Expert

The dance professional from the University of Maryland prefaced his questions and suggestions with the following comment, “First let me say I thought your dance was well crafted, had a very strong statement and the artistic direction was consistent. The dancers demonstrated your vision quite well”. He offered several questions for consideration:

Who is your intended audience? What is domestic violence? Is your research complete? Is that important? What is the purpose of the dance? Is it Art for Art’s sake? Is it a reference/illustration for the abused of domestic violence? Do you want to speak of all victims of domestic violence or just a specific group? For example, women in a heterosexual relationship? The passive partner in any relationship, like the parents abused by their adult children, or boys who are abused by their older brothers?

Following these questions, he offered four suggestions. The first was to establish the community of women before the voices begin speaking about domestic violence. “This will allow the audience to get a feel of who the dancers represent” by presenting the women in their routines before they are involved in an abusive relationship. This would also add the dynamic that “awareness of being in an abusive relationship is gradual and not just an overnight realization”
His second suggestion was to "acknowledge that this is only a subset of the people who are abused. This gives depth to your study and makes it inclusive rather than exclusive".

Concerning choreography, he had one movement that troubled him. It was when the police are mentioned in a Tracy Chapman song. "Your movement at this point became imitative and far too literal. Also the icons you used to depict the police (marching and saluting) are much more associated with the military, soldiers, which gives that section a guerrilla mode". He suggested that if I keep those movements I may want to include other literal representations throughout the piece so that the police icons don’t stand out as being "inconsistent, and untrue to the concept of the rest of the dance". Some possibilities mentioned were icons for women, domestic violence, homeless people, or safe haven.

Finally, the dance expert referred me to choreographer/feminist Deborah Riley at the Dance Place in Washington D.C. Recently she choreographed an evening length work concerning domestic violence. As part of her research she worked with survivors at a shelter and members of a therapy/recovery group.
The original intentions of *Silent Cries* were to make a connection with, to educate, and to empower the audience. The results of the questionnaires indicate that these goals were accomplished in many cases. The following discussion will outline how the dance met each of goals and to what extent

Indication of whether or not *Silent Cries* connected with the audience is in the presence or absence of an emotional response from the viewers. While a majority (32) of the participants did not change their feelings towards domestic violence, 40 people experienced emotions during the performance. This evidence supports the accomplishment of the first goal, making a connection with the audience. The statistics and movement of the dancers were the most commonly cited triggers of emotion, which ranged from fear and anger to sorrow and shame. The following are some of the more expressive responses.

"Very powerful; the words, the music, the movements, the heavy breathing of the dancers and that green dress - it flowed so beautifully - there was a lot of emotion in the fluidity of that dress. I could feel the anguish, fear, denial, shame - the dancers were very expressive."

"anger - that this problem persists as a plague to society - disappointment - that our fellow ‘man’ would prefer to turn their collective backs, frustrated - at the apparent helplessness, disillusioning statistics"

"I felt horrified, disturbed, and deeply bothered, but I felt it was very well done."

"The sharp, committed movements of the dancers effectively enunciated the words and feelings of the piece, I had shivers the entire time."
Another comment indicating a connection was made by a man at the ACDF discussion. He said he had felt uncomfortable because the dance made him think about things he knows exist but that he does not like to think about.

To determine if “Silent Cries” was an educational experience, I examined responses indicating the participant learned something new. Of the five examples, four were in response to question #2 asking if they felt differently about domestic violence as a result of the performance.

“I didn’t realize how common the incidents occurred, or how unwilling to help the authorities are.”

“I know more from the statistics.”

“I still feel that it shouldn’t happen and it taught me some new statistics. But my view still remains that it should never happen.”

“Yes, I was surprised at the imbalance between animal shelters and battered women’s shelters. Shameful.”

These comments indicate a heightened awareness and increased knowledge of the issue of domestic violence. In addition to these responses, seven participants mentioned increased awareness when asked if their attitudes/actions/behaviors would change. The other learning response was to question #4 which asked if the participant would change any of their actions, attitudes, or beliefs.

“Attitude - less blaming of the female always going back to the man.”

Although this last respondent does not explicitly claim to have learned something new, a change in attitude is explicit. Before viewing the dance the person was likely to blame the victim and now the audience member has obtained information that counters that rationale. Although the number of responses referring specifically to learned information
are few, they do exist. It appeared that a large number of participants had already heard
the statistics and did not glean anything new from them.

“No, I think that I was well informed and aware before.”

“No, already very aware.”

“No - I didn’t get any new information. There was nothing new offered to think
about.”

In terms of educating, one of the points I wanted to emphasize more than others is
the fact that anyone can become involved in an abusive relationship. I received three
responses concerning this issue, and two of them indicate that I did not make my point
clear. The first two quotes are in response to question #3 and the third quote is a
segment from question #2

“The piece was a very powerful one my emotions were uneasy. Because whether
we know it or not domestic violence hits everyone.”

“I couldn’t get past the costumes. Dancers looked too blue collar - this crime does
not discriminate by class. But the final statement was very effective.”

“...who is your intended audience and will you really reach them? If not, you’re
preaching to the choir and that’s not exceptionally challenging.”

The first responses are from people who were aware that domestic violence reaches across
class and race. It is apparent that the second respondent felt, however, that *Silent Cries*
perpetuated the stereotypical working class battered woman image. The third respondent
assumed that the general audience was not effected by or involved in abusive situations.
This discrepancy indicates that the intended message was not clearly received by all
members of the audience. The choreography, costumes, and soundtrack should be
improved in order to more clearly emphasize the point
These comments trigger several concerns. First, was *Silent Cries* preaching to the converted? Second, if the audience was converted, does that lessen the impact of the dance? This is something that revolutionary dances were often accused of: sending out a message to those already in full agreement. Thirty two people felt that they were well informed of the issue before the performance and their opinions did not change. Thus, over half of the participants could be considered “converted”. The performance, however, was not fruitless. At least some of those already informed were nonetheless moved by the performance. Forty individuals answered a yes or tentative yes when asked if they experienced any emotions during the performance. Not all participants learned something new, but the issue was brought to the top of their minds. One person commented that they were “disturbed, despite already being familiar with the facts and statistics”.

Additionally, 12 responses reported learning something new or an increase in awareness of domestic violence. “It made me more conscious/aware of my feelings - feelings usually buried deep under other ‘life issues’ so that I don’t think about them much until it directly affects someone close to me”. This evidence that participants experienced emotions and an increase in awareness or knowledge despite a majority’s previous knowledge of domestic violence indicates that *Silent Cries* made a connection with the audience, educating them and raising awareness levels. The change initiated, however, may not have been as great as it would be in an uninformed audience. The surveyed audience had an already formed base of knowledge concerning domestic violence. Thus the amount of change possible was less than in an audience with no knowledge base.

The third intention of the dance was to empower any victims, survivors, or those personally involved in the issue. Although the questionnaire did not ask questions
concerning empowerment or past involvement, some responses indicated familiarity with the issue. The following responses were to question one:

“Yes-home situations and police response.”

“Yes - you portrayed it exactly as it is.”

“Yes it does. I volunteered at a battered women’s shelter at home and it was in a highly secret location to keep them and their children safe.”

“Yes, I've known women in these relationships and they do believe, for a while, that it is their fault.”

“Yes, I know people that have been abused and it was accurate. I was very moved.”

In response to question three:

“Yes, reminded me of last roommate that other friends and I convinced she didn’t deserve such treatment.”

In addition to these written responses, three individuals personally shared with me that they had either come from abusive families or been in abusive relationships. All three of these people expressed thanks for addressing the issue. Altogether, at least nine individuals reported either implicitly or explicitly that they have been personally affected by domestic violence in some way. While I do not have concrete evidence that these people or others were empowered as a result of Silent Cries, it is evident that some of the audience members could relate to the issues due to personal experience.

Something to consider in the analysis of the questionnaire responses is the appropriateness of the questions themselves. Questions one, two, and four each received between two and three responses that answered the question briefly and then expanded on a different issue. In response to question one, “I have no experience with domestic violence, but this was a very powerful piece”. In response to question two, “No, but the
music and dance generated frustration at the situation”. This tendency, although not widespread among the participants, could indicate that the questions did not fully tap into what audience members wanted to say. Of those that deviated from the question asked, five went on to explain in some way that it was a “powerful piece”.

Question four also received some responses deserving attention. Its’ wording may have caused any “no” respondents to seem like they were advocates of domestic violence. As a result, 11 participants felt the need to justify their negative responses. Two in particular were defensive in tone. “I’m not a batterer” and “No, I have always been an advocate for domestic violence awareness and will continue to be so”.

**Improvements for Silent Cries**

There are several aspects of Silent Cries that could be improved. Some changes should be made in the choreography, text, and costumes to further emphasize the ability of domestic violence to touch anyone. The community of women depicted in the dance should be more clearly specified so as to give the audience parameters to work within. Due to the nature of the University Dancers’ concert, the dance was less than five minutes long. This is a short time period in which to sufficiently address all of the complexities of domestic violence. The scope of Silent Cries could be narrowed or the entire piece could be lengthened in order to allow a more in-depth depiction.

**Improvements for Data Collection**

Due to timing and planning difficulties, only one representative from the YWCA was able to view the piece and complete a questionnaire. Ideally, a larger group of
experts as well as a group of domestic violence survivors could have viewed the performance and provided feedback.

The context in which the questionnaires were distributed were not the most conducive for accurate and plentiful feedback. On Thursday night the questionnaires and pencils were handed to audience members as they were seated. This allowed them to anticipate *Silent Cries* and to plan on completing the questions. On Saturday night, the questionnaires were folded inside the program, thus many people may not have been aware of them. Additionally, pencils were not distributed leaving those with no pencil or pen no way to complete the questions. On both nights there was a several minute pause between *Silent Cries* and the next piece in the program. It was not long enough, however, to complete the entire questionnaire. The following piece was 20 minutes long and was followed by intermission. It can be assumed that the majority of participants completed the questionnaires during the intermission. Ideally, the audience members could have had ample time to complete the questionnaire immediately following the piece.

The questions themselves could have been worded differently in order to encourage people to expand on their answers. Although many people described their feelings, many answered with one word responses. Open-ended questions could have been more effective. Additionally, question four could have been less accusatory in nature. It may have been perceived as a leading question, looking for a specifically stated change in behavior. Those who answered “no” may have felt the need to explain themselves so as not to be considered a batterer.

It would have been beneficial to contact the choreographer in Washington D.C. who has created work about domestic violence. Her input and ideas could have been
particularly relevant. Unfortunately, however, information about her work and how to contact her was received too late.
Conclusions

From responses of audience members, a domestic violence expert, and a Dance professor, it is apparent that the performance of *Silent Cries* was a catalyst of change. While not all viewers were raised to a new level of consciousness, a number of participants reported raised awareness and/or intentions to take action in support of domestic violence survivors. An overwhelming majority of those polled reported some form of emotional response to the dance. This is evidence that even with a well-educated audience, dance has the power to make a connection and move hearts. The domestic violence expert as well as general audience members commented that the emotions, frustration and tension, difficult to describe in words, were powerfully depicted in *Silent Cries*. When asked what triggered the emotions, ten responses cited either the movement or the dancers themselves. Dance has the power to bring the audience into the performance, making them emotionally involved in the action. This power has great potential for leading change as it can present an issue in a different light, challenging audience members to see it from a different perspective. By making a personal connection with the audience, it can move people to consider the issue from a personal closeness, as opposed to a detached distance.

The creation and implementation of *Silent Cries* involved the interaction of a leader and followers for the purpose of creating change. This captures the central issue of both James Macgregor Burns’ and John Rost’s definitions of leadership. Burns argues that “the leadership process must be defined, in short, as carrying through from the decision-making stages to the point of concrete changes in peoples lives, attitudes, behaviors, institutions” (p.414). He further explains that the crucial aspect of leadership
lies not in its resulting changes, but in the intentions for change (p.415). Rost agrees with Burns, saying that “leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (p.102). The decision-making and creative process involved in producing *Silent Cries* was leadership in its intention to connect, to educate and to empower.

In addition to exercising leadership in the form of intended change, the collaborative creation process was transformational. The dancers, the choreographer, and the actors were actively involved and as a result were educated about domestic violence and the surrounding issues. “Transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both” (Burns, 1978, p.20). The dance and its creative components were a source of education and further contemplation for all individuals involved. Additionally, I came to a new understanding of domestic violence in creating a way to communicate its emotions and complexities through movement. The dancers also experienced transformation in being challenged to express the feelings of a situation they had never been in. Their level of awareness, empathy, and knowledge of the subject were raised considerably.

Leading change through dance also sets an example of leadership for other dancers and choreographers. It makes a statement that dance can be used as such a medium, encouraging other artists to use their talents in similar ways.
Future Recommendations

One of the potentials for Silent Cries and other dance pieces similar to it is as a catalyst for discussion. This is a suggestion that the domestic violence expert made in her evaluation. The dance could be used to get people in touch with the issues and draw out their emotions. A discussion could follow starting with audience member’s reactions and moving into possible solutions or paths forward. The domestic violence expert felt that this could be done both with survivors and others.

While Silent Cries made a connection with this audience, it’s primary role was not that of an educator. This piece, however, could be extremely educational for those not already familiar with the issues. In addressing social issues through dance, the choreographer should determine who would benefit most from the performance, and make an effort to bring the dance to that audience.

Another important aspect of leading change through dance is to reach as wide and diverse an audience as possible. This may involve traveling to different venues and different cities. It is important to not restrict performances to formal theatrical occasions. That would restrict it’s exposure to those who can afford tickets and who are interested in the arts. Performances should also be held in schools and community centers for minimal costs.

When publicly disseminating information about social issues, it is crucial to ensure that the information depicted is accurate. If possible, consult experts on the issues in order to capture real life to the greatest extent possible. It defeats the purpose to educate an audience about inaccurate or unrepresentational information. Stereotypes should be avoided and choreographers should be careful not to be exclusive in their portrayal of
social issues. For example, *Silent Cries* excluded men who have been abused as well as homosexual abusive relationships. If exclusions must be made, it should be recognized in the program.

Further studies need to be done to confirm and give legitimacy to this form of social education and change. If dance can be proven to be an effective vehicle for social change in large scale studies, such results would be extremely beneficial in securing funding for social change dance projects as well as the arts in general. More funds would in turn provide more dancers and choreographers the opportunity to reach wider, more diverse audiences.
Appendix A

Silent Cries Script

Voice I: FEAR, ANGER, ISOLATION, GUILT, DENIAL

Voice 2: He doesn’t like it when I leave the house during the day. He likes to always know where I am, he thinks I’m going to cheat on him or something (laughingly).

Voices 1 and 3  FEAR, ANGER, ISOLATION, GUILT, DENIAL

Voice 1: It really wasn’t that bad. He only hits me every few months.

Voice 2: It will be different next time, he really does love me.

ALL: FEAR, ANGER, ISOLATION, GUILT, DENIAL

Voice 3: The violence is followed by a period of time and sometimes contrition... Then it all happens again.

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pause

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Voice 1: It’s my fault, I made him angry. If I can just make him happy everything will be all right.

Voice 2: If he can just stop drinking he will stop beating me.

Voice 3: A man who beats a woman once will do it again. And again. And again. Study after study shows the abuse - if anything - will worsen each time.

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pause

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Voices 1 and 2: How do I get out of this? Where do I turn, who do I talk to? Will anyone listen to me? What if he finds out, what if he kills me? Where do I go? (frenzy)

TRACY CHAPMAN, then fade into background for police fact (after tears in eyes)

Voice 3: Too often police dismiss complaints of battering based on a desire not to interfere in another man’s home, belief that a wife deserved what she got, or fear of personal injury in a domestic dispute.
Voice 4: When I got to the apartment door, he opened it. He grabbed me by the shirt and threw me inside. He threw me across the room. He grabbed my son, and threw him across the room. We were both on the floor, and he started kicking us. He was yelling at me that I had no right to ask him to leave, that I was lucky he was with me, that no one else would have me. He was screaming, who was I anyway, and things like that. He had smashed all the pictures in the house, every dish in the cabinets. Everything was a shambles. I had bruises all over and my arm was messed up. My shoulders and arms and legs hurt. (pause) It’s all we knew. Looking back, I can’t believe we lived that way. It seems crazy.

Voices 1 and 2: It’s not about being black or white, rich or poor. It can happen to anyone, anywhere and it does. It’s about people who don’t know where to put their frustration and anger.

(Each statistic repeated three times, voices overlapping)

Voice 1: National statistics show that 75% of women murdered by their abusive partners are killed in the attempt to leave or after they have left.

Voice 2: A man who beats a woman once will do it again and again and again

Voice 3: Women are most likely to be murdered when attempting to report abuse or to leave an abuse relationship.

Voice 1: Up to ¼ of domestic assaults reported to law enforcement agencies were inflicted after separation of the couples.

Voice 2: Currently there are 2000 battered women in the U.S. who are serving prison time for defending their lives against their batterers.

Voice 3: Up to 50% of all homeless women and children in the U.S. are fleeing domestic violence.

All: There are three times more animal shelters than battered women’s shelters in the United States.
Appendix B

Domestic Violence Expert Questionnaire

Sex
Age___
Occupation__________________________

1. From your experience, does this dance piece accurately portray the issues surrounding domestic violence? Please explain.

2. Do you feel any differently about domestic violence as a result of the performance? Please explain.

3. Did you feel any emotions during or immediately following the dance? If so, what triggered them? Please explain.

4. Do you feel that this dance has any potential for changing or improving general actions, attitudes, or behaviors surrounding domestic violence? Please explain.

5. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview at a later date? If so, please provide a name, address, and daytime telephone number.

Thank you for your time and insight.
Appendix C

General Audience Questionnaire
This is a questionnaire concerning the dance piece entitled *Silent Cries*. It is part of a research project concerning how dance can be used to effect social change. If you are willing to participate, please take a few minutes to complete this in the pause after *Silent Cries* or during intermission. Then fold it and return it to an usher. Thank you.

Sex ______
Age ______
Occupation ____________________________

1. From your experience, does this dance piece accurately portray the issues surrounding domestic violence? Please explain.

2. Do you feel any differently about domestic violence as a result of the performance? Please explain.

3. Did you feel any emotions during or immediately following the dance? If so, what triggered them? Please explain.

4. Do you feel that any of your actions, attitudes, or behaviors will change because of this dance? Please explain.

5. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview at a later date? If so, please provide a name, address, and daytime telephone number.

Thank you for your time and insight.


Mayes, A. (personal communication, April 8, 1998).


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