Circus in Winter

An Honors Thesis HONRS 499

By

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Abstract

The Circus in Winter is a novel written by Hoosier author Cathy Day that follows a circus as it is winter quartered in Lima, IN. Two years ago, I was one of fourteen students that worked collaboratively to adapt this book into a musical. Through researching circus acts, musicals, and movement qualities, I created the choreography for this production that premiered in University Theatre on September 29th, 2011 at Ball State University. To create a heart wrenching story that follows stableman and circus owner Wallace Porter, movement and choreography were created to connect the script and music for a cohesive and poignant production.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Assistant Professor Christie Zimmerman for her expertise and help while advising me during this choreographic endeavor. Her suggestions and support assisted me throughout my obstacles and inspired me to create a unique work.

I would also like to thank Associate Professor Beth Turcotte for giving me this opportunity to choreograph The Circus in Winter and participate in this collaborative production.
Background

During the spring of 2010, acting professor Beth Turcotte assembled fourteen undergraduate students of varying majors to write an original musical. Turcotte applied for a Virginia Ball Grant, which allowed these students to work at the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry for the spring semester while researching and writing the script and music for this original musical. This diverse group included students with majors in musical theatre, production and design, directing, stage management, music education, telecommunications, creative writing, and dance. After many initial discussions of a potential story line, the group discovered a book titled *The Circus in Winter*, written by Hoosier author Cathy Day. Over approximately the next twenty-four hours, we contacted various individuals, including Day's agent, and eventually gained the rights to create a musical adaptation of the book.

In a mere three months, we created multiple drafts of the script and score filled with numerous folk songs and intricate scenes. At the end of the semester, in April 2010 we not only performed a staged reading of our work at Ball State University in Sursa Hall, but also performed at the Drury Lane Theatre Oakbrook in Chicago, IL. Over the next year and a half, revisions continued to be made within the script and score and these updated versions were performed throughout the communities of Muncie and Peru, Indiana where the original winter quarters of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus were stationed. Finally, in the fall of 2011, under the direction of Turcotte, *The Circus in Winter Musical* was scheduled for performance by the Ball State Department of Theatre and Dance as a fully produced main stage musical in University Theatre. The show's
music director, dramaturg, and scenic designers were part of the original writing team, and I would serve as the choreographer.

Pre-Production

Before rehearsals began, I took notes on the music and reread the script, in addition to conducting some extensive research to develop the choreographic structure. The music that composer and recent Ball State graduate, Ben Clark wrote had a folk contemporary feel, as opposed to traditional Circus music to which the general public may be accustomed. The percussive beats and strong rhythm convinced me to develop very grounded and powerful movement. It was also imperative to mix the spectacle of the circus with a small town Indiana twist. Since the music had a contemporary edge to it, I wanted to move beyond the limit of what has usually been done or was the accepted standard with circus spectacle with very real, straightforward choreography.

My inspiration for the movements came from the musical Spring Awakening. Throughout this Broadway production, there was a lot of stomping, jumping, and harsh motifs that appeared. The dance captain of Spring Awakening stated that the “role of the choreography is to express the actors inner thoughts, struggles, and emotions throughout the show” (LeFevre). Throughout The Circus in Winter, there are constant struggles and problems that arise, and I wanted the choreography to match the characters’ emotions when words were no longer sufficient. I used some of these ideas and incorporated a circus element with them to create the choreography for The Circus in Winter.

I was responsible for choreographing the large production numbers as well as some of the specialty songs that featured the main characters. I also assisted Turcotte
with the spacing of certain scenes and songs. Before rehearsals started, I researched many circus performances from various productions including the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Although many of the numbers featured live animals, which I knew was not possible to replicate at Ball State, I was very interested in The Spanish Web. This was an aerial circus skill, where the performer was suspended and spun around a rope making beautiful poses. In *The Circus in Winter* book, the character Jennie Dixianna is known for performing such an act, so we were trying to incorporate this visual into the musical. Unfortunately, due to safety hazards, we were not able to incorporate this trick into the performance.

Rehearsal Process

The rehearsal process began one week before school started in the fall of 2011, beginning with music rehearsals, where the cast of seventeen actors learned the songs. As a choreographer, I attended these rehearsals and simply listened to the strong beats in the music and observed how the actors were naturally moving while singing. Clark conducted these rehearsals with the assistance of music performance instructor Alexandra Kocoshis. The notes they gave to the actors during these rehearsals added color and personality to each of the songs. I paid attention to the crescendos and decrescendos in the music, the moments of silence, when the actors took a breath, and the musical interludes that occurred in the middle of the songs. I took notes of these instances so that I could structure the choreography around these details.

I choreographed the majority of the movement at the beginning of rehearsals after the music was taught. I was in charge of entire rehearsals that were dedicated to
choreography. Turcotte discussed with me her vision of the movement and after observing an initial part of the rehearsal; she would leave and give me the freedom to work on my own with the actors. During this time, I would teach the students choreography while developing formations on the stage, and adding layers and levels of varied choreography. Turcotte would regularly come into the choreography rehearsals to watch the numbers’ progress and give me feedback, suggestions, and recommendations. Once she gave her opinions, this process would continue as each number developed where she would continue to give feedback while also allowing me to conduct rehearsals on my own. The trust that she had in me to choreograph on my own and develop the movement with little direction was very comforting. She provided constructive feedback without being harsh and she was very supportive of my choreographic process and complimentary of my work.

The opening of the musical featured two songs, “Amazing” and “Working Man.” These songs helped establish the scene and set the tone for the entire production. These were also the first two dances that I choreographed. The first number introduced the Hollenbach Circus and Menagerie and featured the main characters, as well as the acrobatic and gypsy performers. It was difficult at first to combine the organic contemporary stomping and emotion based movement with the acrobatics and spectacle choreography that is typical for a circus. Fortunately, some of the actors were very skilled tumblers so part of my job was to simply showcase their skills in the best way. I felt that it was important to make the tumbling passes and interesting lifts blend into the choreography and to create smooth transitions between both. I also had to carefully place the actors in the space in order to fit Caesar, a ten foot elephant puppet, controlled by two
actors on the same stage. It was difficult at first to maneuver the elephant in a seamless way. However, I was eventually able to move the actors around the elephant to create a cohesive picture.

My next challenge was finding an effective way to transition from “Amazing” into “Working Man,” a song set in Lima, Indiana that featured the townsfolk going about their daily chores. I found that it was important to keep the actors moving in and out of the scene with natural pedestrian movement. I also incorporated common household items as props in order to help create the music and establish rhythms. The audience was able to both see and hear the characters as they created rhythms using a butter churn, brooms, an anvil, and hammering nails.

Originally, I was not assigned to choreograph the poker game song, “Deal ‘Em Out,” but was very excited when I had the opportunity because of the song’s powerful driving force and fun vocal scat break. My biggest obstacle throughout choreographing this number was that the vocal harmonies were so difficult and precise that I had to simplify the choreography. The structure of the dance became strictly about showing the progression of the game being played with some added simple movement of the players circling the table and crates, which served as their chairs.

The most difficult experience throughout the choreography process was rehearsing and setting “Recognition.” In the song, Jennie Dixianna sang about her troubled past and abusive father, while two actors in the background portrayed the event through movement. Turcotte wanted the movement to be very realistic and tell Dixianna’s story in a very literal way. I worked intensely to portray this uncomfortable
situation in a tasteful way and created a dance of which I was very proud. I captured Dixianna’s struggle, and visually and effectively told the story in a way that made even me shudder from the eerie situation. Unfortunately, the dance was taken out of the production because another professor thought it did not leave enough up to the imagination. Despite the fact that the other writers supported my beliefs to keep the dance since it was necessary for the show, it ultimately did not appear in the performance. Although it was difficult to not take this cut in the material personally, I realized that I produced the best choreography I was capable of to support the story, and in the end the idea for the piece did not fit with the master plan for the performance.

Production & Accolades

After rehearsing for less than 2 months, *The Circus in Winter* opened to fantastic reviews and sold out audiences. The various elements including lights, set, costumes, props, music, and choreography came together for an entertaining performance where audience members left the theatre humming the songs. A review that appeared on the Indiana Insider Blog stated *The Circus in Winter* was “an absolute must-see musical” and “an amazing performance that rivals and even exceeds many of the professional performances I’ve seen over the years” (Deckers). An article from The Indiana Business Journal online stated that the musical “should be applauded not just for what it was on stage, but for the real-life learning opportunities it provided” (Harry). I also received positive feedback on my choreography and staging. I was personally proud of both my choreographic work and the show as a whole, especially since this was my first attempt at choreographing a musical, or any dance work over five minutes.
After this production was performed at Ball State University for two weeks, it was selected to perform at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (KCACTF) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the Playhouse Theatre. These two additional performances resulted in *The Circus in Winter* receiving several recognitions including The KCACTF Musical Theatre Award and Outstanding Production of a New Work. It was also selected to perform several songs from the production on April 20, 2012 at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC.

**Lessons Learned/Conclusion**

One of the biggest lessons that I learned from working on this production was how to accept criticism and incorporate changes. I learned that I could not take negative comments personally, especially from outside sources. The director told me her vision, and I executed her ideas with my own choreography and thoughts. During the rehearsal process, I also learned how to think on my toes and quickly make changes. Turcotte would give me small notes and suggestions and I had to take those, rework certain aspects, and implement changes daily. As a choreographer and teacher during this process, I learned by experiment. I went into a rehearsal with pre-planned choreography and if it did not work, I would try another tactic. After several rehearsals, I learned time management skills and how to teach the actors quickly, such as teaching three different dances in two days. I also had to analyze the actors' performances and execution of the choreography and give notes to help clean the numbers and develop the actors' characters.
There were countless drafts of *The Circus in Winter* script before this production was set on stage. However, the Ball State production was the first attempt at adding choreography and complex movement to the plot. If given another chance, I would be interested in exploring different possibilities for movement. For example, I might still embrace the grounded movement, but also add more circus spectacle to the first dance number. The dance I would like to rework completely would be “Higher Ground,” the song that depicts the flood of Lima. During this dance there was a stomp inspired section where the actors hit on pots and pans. I would like to utilize the different levels on the stage more and add extra movement and visual pictures in addition to the percussion sounds. We also used a piece of fabric that visually represented the water and how it engulfed the town. Unfortunately, there was not enough rehearsal time on the stage to create this number with the fabric and movement. In the future, I would work with a larger piece of material that covered the entire stage and experiment with different ways to move it, and create ripples and patterns across the set. Although I was pleased with the final flood dance, I would like to develop the idea more.

This project was truly a collaborative effort, both in writing the script, and creating the production. I had the privilege of developing the choreography and movement, but also of working closely with students and faculty to create this amazing production. Although at times I felt slightly out of my element, I have been able to really think outside of the box to create a unique piece of art of which I am truly proud.

I have been a part of this project for over two years and am honored that I was able to continue my journey with *The Circus in Winter* and debut my choreography. I hope that the audience of the show took away something positive from this production, as
I did. *The Circus in Winter* program featured a note from the student writers that were involved in the production. It concluded with these words:

If we take away nothing else from *The Circus in Winter*, the simple idea that we can all see things differently, and that there is always a new beginning to be had, is profound and inspiring. No matter where it goes from here, there is no doubt that this experience has taught us several things: a pile of fabric can shape an elephant, a stack of wood can build a barn, and a group of fourteen students can create a musical. Anything is possible!
Works Cited

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