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The Importance of Personal Narrative for Sustainable Education in the Performing Arts
Khaye Feygl – Bird of Life

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Synopsis – the story of a Jewish dancer/choreographer who after forty years in the profession finds his Jewish voice by creating a dance work that is a gift for his mother’s 80th birthday, and pays homage to his great grandmother, murdered by the Nazis in Poland.

The notion of a bird of life brings to mind many images. In Thailand, when one wishes to perform an act of “merit,” one may choose to purchase a caged bird, and then let that bird go free. Having a little pond behind the home, I share with my Thai wife and children in Hudson Ohio that I am fortunate to be able to observe how birds come and go at various seasons. In fact, these birds regularly remind me of how their lives are in synch with the seasons and their environment. My mother, a successful Jewish artist and author, who showed me how culture connects to humanity before it does to tradition, has always had a special relationship with birds in her art work. Is it just a coincidence that her *bubbie* (Yiddish for Grandmother), my “great-bubbie,” was named Khaye Feygl, which means bird of life? A bird has a chance to fly away just as the birds in my backyard fly away when my dogs come charging and barking. But my great-bubbie did not get that chance to fly away when the German soldiers came to her village and killed all the Jews. Perhaps the only way that my great-bubbie can “fly away” is through the art and dance carried forward in her memory. Perhaps that is why there are so many birds in my mother’s art work, and why it is my duty to create dances that might for a moment feel like flight as homage to one who did not get her chance.

As I near the sixth decade of my life and the forth decade as a dance professional, I find myself wanting to connect to a higher purpose in my creative efforts. As an educator, I am drawn to explore and expose both the dancers I work with and the audiences who view my work, to thought provoking works that strive for social justice and cultural sensitivity. While I still enjoy creating work with the key intention of beauty and entertainment, I am now intrigued with work driven by a personal narrative, or an exploration of life as a journey. After all, it is our personal journey that leads us to grow as artists.

As a child of four, living in Madrid Spain in 1964, I was chosen by David Lean to Play Sasha in the MGM classic, *Dr. Zhivago*. We were a Jewish family living in Franco Spain and I was playing the part of a Russian child caught up in their revolution. As a Jew of Polish and Russian descent now living in America, there has always been a missing part of my sense of identity, a connection to roots. Other than playing the part of a Russian boy in an MGM classic, I lacked any personal connection to Russia or Poland and only the vague awareness that members of my family that did not escape before WWII were murdered there. Having recently returned from a European (i.e., Spain and Paris) vacation followed by a teaching engagement in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, I bring back multiple stories of towns, cities and indeed nations where the historical presence of Jews is now sparsely represented by museums, memorials, or the odd plaque.

As a child growing up in Spain, I remember sharing Friday night Sabbath dinners at home and Passover Seders held by Air Force base at Torrejon. At that time, I was not aware of antisemitism. Having lived there from age 3-7 and experiencing a world framed by my father’s employment with the American Embassy, I dare say that I was sheltered from what may have been apparent to adults. When we moved to Princeton New Jersey



and throughout my life since, I have been keenly aware that a portion of the population has negative attitudes toward Jews, something I have since been reminded of throughout my life.

My dancing life began with Israeli and International folk dance at the age of 10. This form of physical expression connected family and my identity as a Jew. It wasn't until I was 17 that I found theatrical jazz dance and then ballet. Classes in ballet partnering soon led me into a career as a professional ballet dancer, spending 19 years of my life with winter seasons of the Christmas classic, *The Nutcracker*. During this time, I welcomed opportunities to dance Mazurka or Czardas sections of classic ballets, such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Coppelia*. Dancing these roles brought back my joy for folk dance and a connection to my Slavic roots, which I knew so little about. Only recently, I have become impassioned, and driven by a sense of urgency to make dance statements that educate my audience and the students I work with toward an appreciation of authentic cultural experience.

Two years ago, when my then 6th grade daughter shared that a student at her school, made a joke about gas chambers after finding out she was Jewish, I was saddened to realize her life would include hurtful moments and comments as mine had. That winter, I embarked on my first choreographed work with Jewish thematic material, but I backed away from making the connection clear to the audience. After my daughter's experience, I felt compelled to create a ballet that helped bridge the familiarity gap for the community we are part of, which has very few Jews. This was my initial idea and then the concept grew until I was planning a work that would be structured around the poems of several different ethnic minority writers. The first poet that I was introduced to was Mathew Lippman, through his book *Salami Jew* (Lippman, 2014).

As I read the poems in this book, I thought that perhaps my initial goal and direction would miss its mark because my audience would not be able to relate to the topics, humor, or imagery. I spoke with Mathew about my dilemma and he directed me toward poems he wrote that dealt with more common mid-life struggles and themes that would be more accessible to my audience. Exploring Lippman's other poems, I found a trio of poems that worked well together. There was no longer a Jewish theme to any of these poems. However, I was collaborating with another Jewish artist (poet), and we were creating a piece that told a Jewish person's story. It so happened that this piece also involved collaboration with a composer in Thailand and a visual artist in Tucson, Arizona. The title was *Peripheral Moments*. It was my first "kind-of-Jewish" choreography after close to 40 years as a dance professional.

The following year, I experienced a new choreographic work by Bill T. Jones titled *Analogy/Dora: Tramontane*, and later the same year, I saw a performance of *Irina's Vow*, directed by Kent State Professor Amy Fritsche. Both works told stories of people who lived through the Holocaust. Seeing these works being choreographed and directed by non-Jews and realizing that the audiences were both emotionally moved and educated, I felt an urge to return to my initial goal of finding my Jewish voice as a choreographer. Next, two things happened that made it impossible for me to walk away from this quest. First, I learned of my daughter having the opportunity for a summer study experience in Poland, the country that my bubbie escaped from; leaving other relatives who could not escape, and were apparently herded into the village synagogue and which was then burnt to the ground with everyone inside. Poland, a country that housed some of the worst concentration camps, was home to 3.5 million Jews before WWII and has approximately 60,000 Jewish citizens today. While there were some Polish heroes who tried to save Jews, this is the same country where violent pogroms were initiated by Poles and resulted in murdering more Jews after the war ended and the Germans were defeated. The same country that now makes it a crime to refer to concentration camps in Poland as Polish concentration camps, and is trying to rewrite history to erase the part Poles played in the murder of its former Jewish population.



Sometimes, we see a play, ballet, or movie, which creates a shift in how we perceive our purpose as an artist. For me, Bill T. Jones’ dance/theatre piece, *Analogy/Dora: Tramontane* had such an impact. Jones is not Jewish, but through his partner of more than 15 years, Bjorn Amelan, he “adopted” a Jewish mother, Dora Amelan. *Analogy/Dora: Tramontane* chronicles events which took Dora as a child from Belgium where she was separated from her parents (who were murdered by invading German soldiers) to Vichy France where she joined the Ouvre de Secour Aux Enfants, an underground Jewish children’s aid society, and ended up helping save the lives of approximately 500 children, whose parents were also taken away and murdered in concentration camps.

When I saw this work performed by the Bill T. Jones – Arnie Zane Company at the Cleveland Playhouse, I was fortunate to take part in a Question and Answer session with the choreographer and artistic staff including dancers and Bjorn Amelan, Jones’ partner and Dora’s son, who also designed the moving sets for this work of dance-theatre. I was so profoundly moved by the story and the fact that a non-Jewish choreographer, whom I have great respect for, choose to create a work telling the story of a courageous Holocaust survivor. The work exposes the different ways people perceive and respond to injustice. During the question and answer session, I was most curious as to how being a performer in the work impacted what was a mostly non-Jewish cast. My curiosity was motivated by my experiences both as a parent raising Thai-Jewish children in a mostly homogeneously white-Christian community and as a dancer having strived to keep connected to my faith despite the demands of my profession. I thought, “if a non-Jewish choreographer can create such a successful work about his mother-in-law’s courageous journey, I could venture to create a work about my mother and her experience as a child of Jewish immigrants in New York during this same period of time.”

During the post-performance Q & A panel, the moderator posed the question, “does thinking about it, studying it, talking about it, make it more likely that someone would stand up against injustice.” Then the panel which included Bill T. Jones, his Associate Artistic Director, and several dancers, were asked if their delving into this material impacted them (Jones, 2016). When asked this, originally Bill T. Jones responded, “that’s probably more of a question for them” motioning to the audience. But the question asked, is one that I asked myself, and later asked the *Khaye Feygl* cast via an anonymous poll was: “Did their interaction with the piece, learning, rehearsing and performing, changed their perspective?” One of the dancers in that panel explained that while he sees an individual’s life and cultural upbringing as responsible for shaping one’s character over time, performing or watching such a piece does become part of one’s experience gained perspective. He also shared how the work required the dancers to become intimately involved with the thoughts and actions of a woman who was courageous and stood up against injustice.

In deciding to write this paper and choosing to choreograph *Khaye Feygl*, I was driven to ask myself: “would I have the courage to expose my Jewish identity so publicly?”, “what did I hope to accomplish?” and “how would I know if I was successful?” As a child, I was taught that all Jews are responsible to perform *tikun olam*, meaning acts which heal the world. The question was how could I create a work that would do my mother justice while sharing a uniquely Jewish experience, accessible to my students and audience? My answers and motivation developed over the course of creating and rehearsing, and continue to evolve and be expressed as I share this work with others. But first, allow me to describe the journey.

As I began to interview my mother regarding her mother, my Polish bubbe, and the plight of our Polish ancestors, I realized that her upcoming 80th birthday provided me with both an opportunity and a deadline. As the interviews progressed, I knew that the title of the piece would actually be the name of my mother's Bubbe, Khaye Feygl. My mother, Mae Rockland-Tupa, a professional artist who has made American Judaica her life’s work and has pieces in the permanent displays of both the New York and the Berlin Jewish museums, became both my subject and my collaborating partner in a work that explores faith, identity, intermarriage and a personal Holocaust tragedy. Inspired by my mother and step-father’s artwork, Bill T. Jones’ ballet and the autobiography



Painted in Words, by artist and Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak, I began the task of recording interviews and building a cohesive story line that would capture this uniquely Jewish story and make it accessible to a predominantly non-Jewish audience (Bak, 2001). Along the way, I was introduced by my mother to the music of Wolf Krakowski, more specifically his rendition of the Yiddish folk song, *Tsen Brider* (Krakowski, 1996).

Tsen Brider dates back to before the holocaust, but there was a version of this song created as a Jewish requiem by Martin Rosenburg in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp just before he and all of his singers were put to death (Jacobson, 2000). The version Krakowski sings is a rockabilly rendition complete with wailing guitars. The history and irony of this song that pokes fun at death is a metaphor of our struggle as artists to make the world a better place.

The ballet represents moments from 1943-1980 and takes place in the Bronx, NY, Glencoe, MN and Brookline, MA. Using sets, projections and an original score that incorporates interviews, some of my own musical compositions and music by Wolf Krakowski, this 17-minute ballet is a story of love that goes beyond religion and is supported by art. It tells the story of a second marriage between a Catholic from Minnesota and a Jew from the South Bronx who meet in Brookline Massachusetts, where they are both artists.

We live at a time when America is going in two directions. We have signs that in some cases diversity, inclusivity and cultural sensitivity are values increasing their place in the American way of life. On the other hand, we have Nazis and the KKK marching in Virginia and acts of hate happening again all over the world. In *Khaye Feygl*, the audience learns how two people from different backgrounds discover each other and build a life that neither of them expected. Choreographing *Khaye Feygl* is an attempt to educate and dispel ignorance. In my small way, this is my *tikkun olam* effort. Decades of assimilation and intermarriage have blended with the results of the Holocaust in creating many environments where the presence of Jews is a memory of a time gone by. While it is a welcome change that Jews are accepted into society most places in the world, there is the bittersweet reality reflected in the often-heard comment: “what the Nazi’s began with the Holocaust continues on through assimilation.” *Khaye Feygl* tells a personal story of my mother, her mother and her bubbie. While reflective of the past, there is also a glimmer of hope that art and creative expression are helping to keep Judaism alive.

How did a ballet titled *Khaye Feygl* (Yiddish for Bird of Life) end up utilizing *Tsen Brider* (a Yiddish folk song that pokes fun at death) for the final scene, a wedding where everyone in the wedding party except the betrothed dies? How did creating this ballet become a catharsis for my need to connect to roots that were made unavailable due to events of the Second World War that cut down our family tree and left us without an “old country” to visit with anything but terror, sadness and dread? At first, I was inspired by plans for my daughter to teach Theatre and English to middle school children in Poland, the homeland where much of my family met their demise. A further sense of purpose came about from my desire to choreograph a work in honor of my mother’s 80th birthday. Then I discovered that my great-bubbie (my mother’s grandmother) came from a village, not far from where my daughter would be teaching.

My intention in creating the ballet was to allow both Kent State student dancers and audience members from Northern Ohio to become familiar with a unique story of a Jewish family and changes which took place over 40 years. Topics, such as the Holocaust, intermarriage and the power of art to transcend tragedy are explored in a narrative driven work set to interviews I conducted with my mother and step-father. History is something one must experience in a visceral way in order for it to shape one’s character as certain experiences do. When we hear about a hate crime in the news, we can so easily turn the page, click on another topic or otherwise divert ourselves from the horrid details. However, when we are forced to live through an experience within a theatrical experience, a film or a dance work, it becomes part of the culture that defines us. In my polling students, I was not surprised to learn that some students felt that the Holocaust was talked about too much. I was also pleased to



learn that more than half of those who participated felt a greater appreciation for and deeper understanding of Jewish culture after their experience learning, rehearsing and performing this work. There are those who deny the Holocaust ever happened and others who look away when confronted with today’s examples of human suffering. When I recall how dancers responded to learning about my family’s personal tragedy and taking part in a dramatic ballet that used personal narrative as the framework, I know that this form of artistic story telling is something that I must continue. While Khaye Feygl never made it out of Poland, examples of needlework that she created were saved and inspired my mother’s artistic passion. A generation later there is a ballet that is named after her and with this, the hope that the bird of life visits us often, reminding us of where we come from and giving us the courage to continue.

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Biography

As Soloist with Atlanta Ballet, Universal Ballet and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Rockland danced established repertoire of Balanchine, Bournonville, Feld, Fokine, Najinska, Petipa and Tudor and had new works created for him by choreographers including: Anastos, Bahr, Barnett, Kudelka, McFall, Munroe, Pazik and Taylor Corbitt among others. As Ballet Master for Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal, Rockland was asked to give master classes in cities all over the world. This led to his establishing connections in Asia that many years later have helped build Kent's East Meets West Program. Before coming to Kent State University where Rockland is currently Associate Professor, he was Associate Professor and Director of UNC Dance Theatre within in the department of theatre and dance at the University of Northern Colorado. While in Colorado, Rockland directed this university’s ballet program and was Founding Executive Artistic Director of Colorado Dance Theatre and The Greeley Conservatory of Dance. Working with business partners, Rockland renovated a 10,000-square foot building (now The Conservatory Building) as a center for the arts in Greeley’s historic downtown.



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Today, in addition to enjoying his teaching at Kent State, Rockland is a guest teacher for several professional schools including Joffrey Ballet's New York Intensive. This past summer he had guest teaching and choreography engagements with City Ballet of Cleveland, the Mid-States Regional Dance America Conference, Forest Dance and Highlands Ballet.