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"Choreographing Empathy" in *Walking Miracles*, an Original Dance/Theater Work Created from Stories Told by Six Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

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Abstract: *Walking Miracles*, a dance/theater project, was created from the stories of six adult survivors of child sexual abuse and completed due to the conscientious work of many collaborators. A psychotherapy group of fourteen sessions was audiotaped and attended by the six survivors, three dancer/choreographers, and one psychotherapist. Our goals were to provide positive psychotherapeutic experiences for the survivors and the foundation for a dance/theater piece that would then be presented to the public at the conclusion of the group sessions. Our hope was that audiences would gain a deeper empathetic understanding of child sexual abuse and would become stronger allies for the survivors and stronger advocates for child abuse prevention. Empathetic abilities were critical for this project—in the psychotherapy process, in the care taken to protect the trust and confidentiality of the survivors, and in the creation of the script, choreography, music, and poetry. I will examine the nature of empathy and the processes for creating specific movements from such dark experiences. How does one approach a work about issues so intensely personal? What care do we need to provide for the participants during the progression of the work? What are the ethical aspects of such projects that use the personal narratives of hidden communities?

Keywords: trauma; child sexual abuse; empathy; choreography; dance; theater

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1. Introduction

In 1996 and 1997, I initiated and completed a complex collaborative dance/theater project created from the stories of six adult survivors of child sexual abuse which resulted in a staged theater production. *Walking Miracles*[1] was performed as the culmination of an eight-month collaborative project that included six adult survivors of child sexual abuse, three dancer/choreographers, psychotherapist Callie Justice, poet Jaki Shelton Green, composer James R. Carlson, four additional actors, and co-directors and creators Jeffrey Storer and Ed Hunt, founders of Manbites Dog Theater. The central source material and research for this work was an audiotaped fourteen-session psychotherapy group, led by Callie Justice and attended by the three dancer/choreographers who would create movement for the final product.

The goals of the group sessions were made very clear to all group participants—to provide positive psychotherapeutic experiences for the survivors and to provide the foundation for a dance/theater piece that would then be presented to the public at the conclusion of the group sessions. While the three dancers would interpret and express their understanding of the stories and feelings spoken by the survivors through their movement, they would not initiate or directly participate in the group discussion about the survivors' experiences. Their role was to create movement that attempted to demonstrate the effects of the trauma experienced by the adult survivors. The survivors themselves would not attempt to create movement; they would concentrate on the sessions as psychotherapy. However, they saw the dancers' creations in the sessions and were asked to comment on them.

Walking Miracles was possible because of the many pre-established histories of collaboration and some new histories forged with many artists; because of the dauntless courage of a group of six adult survivors; because of the meticulous work, professionalism, and skill of one psychotherapist; and because of the excellent advice and collaboration from other professionals in the field.

As a work of social action, our goal was to reveal to our audiences the complex issues and lasting effects of trauma that adult survivors face. Our hope was that members of the audience, through the experience of the performance, would gain a deeper empathetic understanding of child sexual abuse and would become stronger allies for the survivors and stronger advocates for child abuse prevention. It was mandatory to address such questions as how one approaches a work that deals with issues so intensely personal. Of what attitudes, concerns, and mindful approaches should we be aware? What care do we need to provide for the survivors through the progression of the work? What are the ethical aspects of such projects that use the personal narratives of marginalized and/or hidden societies? The journey required us to grapple with the hard questions that determined the methodology for the work.

Empathy was central to the process of *Walking Miracles* and will be discussed in its own section. Empathetic abilities were critical in the psychotherapy process, in the care taken to protect the trust and confidentiality of the survivors, and in the creation of the script, choreography, music, and poetry, all of which attempted to reflect the emotional states of the survivors. In addition, stimulating an empathetic relationship with the audience was necessary if the reception of this material was to be successful. In the section on empathy, one objective will be to provide some insight into my method of creating movement for two specific sections of the production, Soul Abuser and Rage. When encountering discussions of a specific choreographer's methods, it is more common to find only general comments on a creator's overall oeuvre. But how does one draw movement from within that expresses intense emotion for a specific situation and that is true to the source? During my sixty years of training and experience as a choreographer, dancer, and director, I have found that the path is through empathetic response.

2. Art as Social Action

Many artists and artists scholars have an abundance of ways to categorize projects that can be designated as art as social action. In *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*, author Tom Finkelpearl (Finkelpearl 2013) examines many different projects through contextual analysis and dialogue with the artists. For example, art historian Grant Koester of the University of California San Diego contrasts projects that are principally designed by artists with those that invite collaborative creativity with the participants (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 4). Finkelpearl uses the umbrella term 'social cooperation' for the latter projects. To what degree do artists plan and direct a project and to what degree do they allow/encourage input, collaboration, participant creativity, or even equality of authorship for all participants (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 6)?

What is the importance of aesthetic excellence in social action projects? Although project initiators must answer that question individually, Ernesto Pujol, a conceptual artist based in New York and recognized for his multimedia public art practice states, "... [C]reativity is part of the human condition ... [but] art is a talent-based trained professional practice. ... [Projects'] success as artworks is as important to me as their success as educational tools" (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 106). For Mierle Laderman Ukeles, an art activist and 'maintenance' artist, "Even though you've identified the first move, the answers reside outside the ego of the artist. However, there are authoring moves, directing moves, judgments that I don't hesitate to make because I feel that's my job as the artist" (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 295). David Henry (artist, curator at the Walker Art Center, the RISD Museum, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston) added, "I would add to your criteria for collaborative art making that, in spite of the fact that all participants need to know the

larger goal and their role in achieving it, the artist needs to retain aesthetic control for a successful collaboration" (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 106).

A further question is, what should art as social action do? According to James Thompson and Richard Schechner, a social theater performance "... ought to become a performance that can transform the practitioners, the participants, and the public's existing knowledge and experience. It ought not to just map onto or sit authoritatively above" (Edmondson 2018, p. 271). Erik Ehn states, "Art is built of actions and causes action. The essential action of the artist, the audience, is to see, to experience, to witness (and deriving from witness—to give testimony), to trust" (Ehn 2007, p. 34). Kester cautions that the makers of a kind of art that attempts to communicate should be wary of using an objectifying insensitivity and instead engage in a "reciprocal openness" with those speaking (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 47). Pujol believes there is too much art 'stuff' already, but "there is an urgent need for the meditations and insights that art provides humanity" (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 110).

How is *Walking Miracles* a production of social action and with which of the values outlined above is it engaged? I will first provide an outline of the process and then in Section 4, examine those questions.

3. The Process[2]

I conceived of this project when I served as a direct services volunteer for Rape Crisis of Durham. I desired a volunteer commitment that required training—in this case fifty-seven hours—and a strong level of empathy. While volunteering, I began to ponder the possibility of creating a dance choreopoem about the aftereffects and healing work of rape victims, envisioning a series of group sessions that would include a therapist, survivors of rape, and three dancer/choreographers who would respond in movement to what the survivors were saying. I spoke to Liz Stewart, then Director of Rape Crisis of Durham, about this idea and it was she who suggested such a project could be very empowering for survivors of incest. She believed that in many cases incest survivors do not trust their body's responses because their bodies have betrayed them in the past. As a result of that discussion, I shifted my focus toward survivors of incest, later expanded to adult survivors of child sexual abuse. One primary goal of this project remained the same, however, to develop a performance piece based on the stories told by the survivors in the group and the movement created by the dancer/choreographers in response. I submitted a grant application to the North Carolina State Arts Council for a Choreographer Fellowship, which I received in 1996. Frankly, I was terrified by the complexity and the gravity of the project.

Even initially, I did not see this work as portraying the immediate trauma of abuse, but rather the journey from an emotional state of violation to the various stages of coping until the experience no longer controlled the survivor. I intended to audiotape the sessions with the permission of the participants and with the understanding that the artist collaborators were working toward a performance product. The survivors would have complete control over what text and what movement was used in the finished work.

I next spoke to Dr. Vedder, a licensed psychologist who was a consultant at Rape Crisis of Durham. She suggested that I select a therapist with an interest in this project who would also be a compatible partner, and she helped me to shape the structure of the group phase of the project.

I was extremely fortunate in being able to interest Callie Justice, a psychotherapist recommended by Dr. Vedder, in this project. Callie is a specialist in working with adult survivors of child sexual abuse. She was meticulously careful in defining the process of group selection, addressing issues of confidentiality within the group, constructing safety nets for all those involved in the project, and screening both survivors and performers.

Callie Justice is from the object relations psychodynamics school of psychotherapy. Psychodynamic Psychotherapy was the theoretical basis for leading the psychotherapy sessions and all the actions of the psychotherapist surrounding those sessions, including confidentiality issues, and group member selection. Psychodynamic Psychotherapy em-

phasizes the unconscious relationships that have been internalized in childhood and which continue to influence adult relationships. Two books critical to the methods of Callie Justice are *The Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis and *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman. Herman especially emphasizes the necessity of the end phases of healing, which includes a reconnection to the society that had abandoned the survivors in their childhood. As an important step in their healing, the survivors in the project group expressed a need to know that the wider society was supportive of them.

A letter (A1) describing the project was sent to approximately fifty area therapists and organizations, asking them to inform potentially interested clients about the project. Callie screened interested candidates and selected our final group of four women and two men. Efforts were made, ultimately unsuccessfully, to have racial diversity among the six survivors. However, though all the survivors were white, we felt fortunate to have both men and women involved. At that time (in the 90s), we did not ask for self-identifying genders. Because it was very important that the survivors have a strong support system in place, we made sure that all had strong relationships with individual psychotherapists who supported their participation in the group.

While we were selecting the group members, I also spoke to Jaki Shelton Green, a multi-award-winning poet who was named Poet Laureate of North Carolina in 2018. According to Michael Chitwood, her "words are spoken at the crossroads of poetry and social consciousness" (Green 1983, back cover). I asked her if she would listen to the audiotapes and create poetry for the project. I also asked James R. Carlson, a Ph.D. candidate in music at Duke University, to compose the music. Both agreed.

Because of the difficult and special nature of this project, I approached only dancer/choreographers who were mature, perceptive, sensitive, and creative, whom I had known and with whom I had worked for a long time. Thaddeus Bennett (Figure 1), a specialist in African dance and martial arts and a member of my Ways and Means Dance Company, agreed to do the project. The second dancer, Thema Bryant, was a powerful dancer/poet with whom I had worked when she was an undergraduate and who was then working toward a Ph.D. in Psychology. They are both African American and I, as the third dancer/choreographer, am white.

The psychotherapy group met once a week for twelve weeks, took a two-week break during the final week of rehearsals and the week of performance, and then met for two more weeks to process and share responses to the performance and to reflect on the entire group experience.

Before the group sessions began, I thought the following would happen. As the survivors talked, we dancers would express in movement our understanding of what was being said. The survivors would then provide feedback to us on the authenticity of the movement and how well the movement reflected what was being communicated. I assumed that sometimes the dancers would work together between sessions to develop the movement, and then show it to the group again for more feedback. Sounds good, does it not? Well, that did not happen. I recall that during the first session, I did a little improvising to break the ice, but during the second session, Thema Bryant said she had created something from things that had been said in the first session. She spoke and moved to the following:

> My story is my property. These are my stories, my secret property. Because I choose, these secrets no longer own me. They are my property. Survivors keep secrets. We grow up keeping secrets to survive. To survive I drink; to survive I sleep; to survive I fade out, fade out, fade out. My story is my property. No fear! Insides screaming but no fear! My best day was when my father died, but no fear! Knowledge brings hope. I am not walking pathology! I am not walking pathology! I am walking wisdom! I am holding on to that little girl, pulling her out from under my bed, setting her free to be walking wisdom! Within this stream of light, I name healing, I name renewal, I name rebirth! And this is my

> story, in your face! My story is my property and it's mine, it's mine, it's mine, mine, mine! (Tharp 1997)

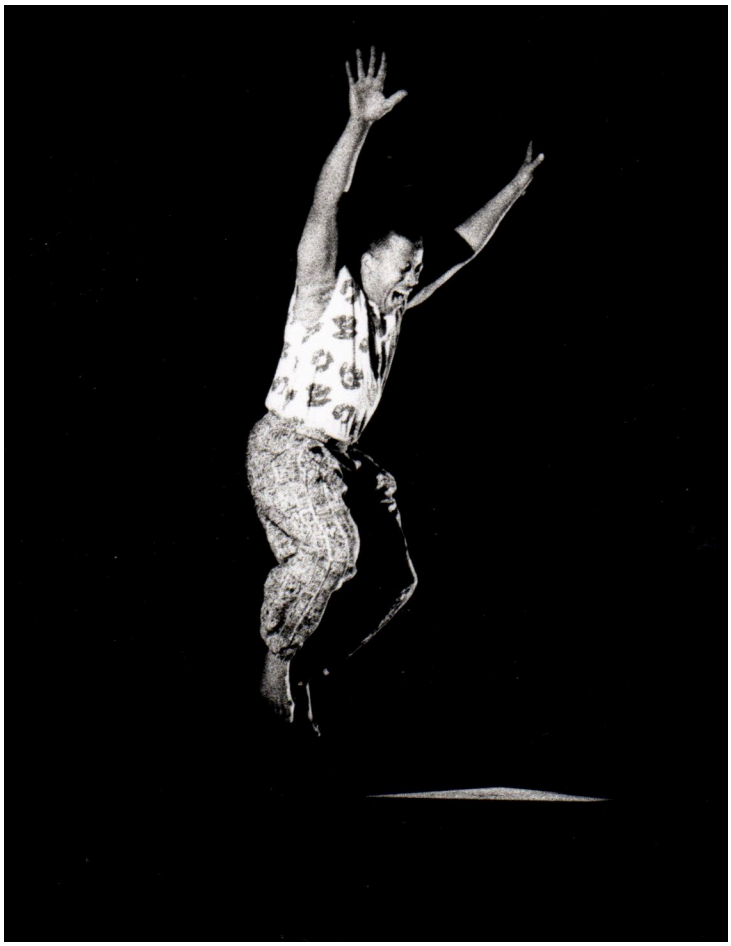

Figure 1. Thaddeus Bennett in *Walking Miracles*. Photographer: Navin Mahabir.

After her performance, there was dead silence for quite a while. At that point I think all of us realized this project was going to be much more than we had ever anticipated. Thema Bryant's dance immediately catapulted us into a whole different level of processing. In fact, the survivors never once really analyzed or commented on the "authenticity" of our dance during any of our sessions. Instead, they said the movement we performed led to a deeper level of conversation about the aspect under discussion or opened new avenues. The 'dance' became almost another survivor commenting on the abuse experience.

I soon came to realize that this project could not result in a half-hour choreopoem with thin strands of text making an occasional appearance. The survivors were incredibly eloquent and said so much that needed to be heard. This was going to have to be a dance/theater project, with a full script and a cast that included actors as well as dancers. Oh boy. Thus, about six weeks into the group sessions, I began talking with Jeffrey Storer and Ed Hunt, the directors of Manbites Dog Theater, an experimental professional theater company in Durham of which I was a founding member. I asked Jeffrey to be co-Artistic Director with me for the production phase of this dance/theater project. With the three dancer/choreographers in place (two of whom had acting experience), we cast an additional dancer/actor, Andrea Davey, a young first-year student at Duke University, and actors J. Paul Stephens, Etheldreda Guion, and David Ring. The cast was chosen for its diversity in age (from 18 years to over 60 years of age) and race (four African American actors and three white). We hoped that the diversity of the cast would reinforce the evidence that child sexual abuse can happen to any race, gender, or age (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The cast of *Walking Miracles*, clockwise from top left: Barbara Dickinson, J. Paul Stephens, Etheldreda Guion, Thaddeus Bennett, Andrea Davey, Thema Bryant, David Ring. Photographer: Navin Mahabir.

Even as the group was still meeting, Jeffrey, Callie, and I began to mold a script culled from the tapes of the group sessions, from the poetry of Jaki Shelton Green, and from the dance studies that had been created by the dancer/choreographers. We were guided by the strong themes of survival that had surfaced in the psychotherapy group; the progression of the piece was patterned after a similar progression of healing experienced by the survivors. Callie cautioned us to have grounding elements included in the work. For example, an actor would state where he was at that moment, what he saw around him, and would observe that s/he was not being abused now. Callie also emphasized the need to balance the more intense sections of the performance with those that displayed the courage and humor of survivors. Thus, the piece developed a rhythm that flowed between the more harrowing sections and the more positive ones. Although we felt it was important to include the telling of actual abuse experience in the production, the emphasis was on the abuse aftereffects, on the nature of the journey to healing, and on the deep wisdom and honesty developed by these remarkable people.

During this time, I also began working more closely with James R. Carlson, a graduate student in Duke University's Ph.D. Program in Music Composition, who had agreed to write the music for *Walking Miracles*. I knew that the music would be a critical component for the success of our production, and James proved to be a collaborator *par excellence*. Although not a member of the psychotherapy group, he was authorized to hear the recordings. He attended every meeting and rehearsal available to him, and we had numerous conversations. He would compose sections in advance for us to listen to and comment upon; as the work developed, so did the music. Jim enlisted professional musicians, Randall Love and Rachel Carlson, as well as the Ciompi Quartet,[3] the internationally acclaimed professional string quartet that is in residence at Duke University. We would thus have access to superb musicianship when the music was finally taped for the production.

The work was made up of scenes that we unofficially labeled:

My Story is My Property
Soul Abuser
One Step Forward, Two Steps Back
Disappearing/Hiding/Secret
Survivor Mafia
Rage
Stepping Into Self
Celebration

As well as portraying the survivors, the cast also played the abusers, but the abusers never communicated through speech, only by the threat of their physical presence. In session, the survivors said,

> "I find it hard to concentrate and function at times because I can see the abuse happening over and over again. Sometimes the littlest thing can remind me of my abuser or my abuse and I'm gone—I'm back living in the past".
>
> "My body keeps the memories longer than anything. . .. It's like my body keeps playing this tape and it plays that tape over and over. I'm being intimate with my partner and then it's as though I'm all alone and the tape is playing".
>
> "I recognize my perpetrator in myself—because I have thoughts to perpetrate as he has done to me, and it makes me sick and yet it's in me and I can't get it out. And I think if I kill myself, then that's one less person who will continue the cycle".[4]

During one of the later sessions, a survivor asked to read a letter she'd written to the world. Adapted for performance, this edited letter became the final section in the script of *Walking Miracles*.

> ANDREA: I want you to know that I am tired of everyone focusing on the abusers.
>
> ANDREA AND DAVID: What about the people they hurt?
>
> ANDREA: I want them to know the victim's life will never, ever be the same again. When I was a child I walked on eggshells all the time—I could never be truly relaxed.
>
> .....
>
> I never knew whether I spoke too much? too little? not enough?
>
> ANDREA AND ETHELDREDA: Did I say the wrong thing?
>
> ANDREA: Whether I moved enough or not enough? Did I wear the right clothes? enough clothing? too much clothing?
>
> ANDREA AND THADDEUS: Was I still enough?
>
> ANDREA: I questioned my every move,
>
> .....
>
> wondering—always thinking maybe if I did something different this time, I would not get hurt. "Put the past behind you", that's what everyone says. If I could, you can believe I would.
>
> .....
>
> ANDREA AND BARBARA: I'm doing the best I can.
>
> ANDREA: . . . learning each day what eases my pain and helps me to move on. I want people to start recognizing
>
> ANDREA AND PAUL: the honor, the strength, the integrity and the courage,
>
> ANDREA: survivors have, that I have,

> ALL: that we have,
>
> ANDREA: in doing the healing work.
>
> .....
>
> I feel the contours of the knowledge that I have now—I can see things that I didn't feel before—
>
> ANDREA AND THEMA: there is a certainty to my knowledge.
>
> ANDREA: If a survivor allows you to be a friend or healer or witness or in some way take part in their journey, I think it is a blessing (Dickinson et al. 1997, p. 10).

The survivors came to the dress rehearsal and to all performances. Talkbacks followed each performance, and most of the survivors came on stage as discussants in those talkbacks. All but one survivor wanted their names listed on the program. *Walking Miracles* was named one of the 10 best theater works of the year by *The Spectator*, an independent local weekly magazine.

An encore production of *Walking Miracles* was performed in Reynolds Auditorium at Duke University on 21, 22, and 23 November 1997.[5] All the personnel who were involved in the original production took part in this one. Kenny Dalsheimer, an award-winning filmmaker and producer, filmed the staged production of *Walking Miracles*, and he, along with several survivors, therapists, educators, and community activists, conveyed keen interest in seeing this piece reach an even wider audience. Dalsheimer desired to create a professional video of this work, designed for film. He planned to refilm some of the scenes in Scarborough House[6], a vacant historic home in the Hayti district of Durham, and combine it with parts of the footage from the original stage production. To that end, Jeffrey Storer and I joined him in working together to adapt the script and scenes for video. The goal was to have a video that was a theatrical work designed for video, which retained the power of the original work in this different medium. Key scenes were shot during a four-day filming with the original cast. Filmed scenes of the theater production were then combined and edited with the newly filmed sections. The video[7] was completed in 2000, and a distributor was found. If you would like to watch this video, please read the *Postscript* at the end of this paper.

4. *Walking Miracles* as Social Action

Walking Miracles is what Richard Schechner would call 'is' performance rather than 'as' performance. The production was designed as a traditional theater presentation with a script, actors and dancers, sets, costumes, and music, and a clear separation between audience and performers.

Those with the greatest authority for the artistic aspects of *Walking Miracles* were Barbara Dickinson, who initiated the project, Callie Justice, psychotherapist, and Jeffrey Storer, Artistic Director of Manbites Dog Theater. The three of us molded the script from our source material—the audiotapes of the psychotherapy sessions, the movement created by the three dancer/choreographers who were present in those sessions, the poetry created by Jaki Shelton Green as she listened to those audiotapes, and the music of James R. Carlson who responded to the script with musical options as it developed. Whereas the audiotaped sessions were the meat of the script, selected almost verbatim from the sessions, the adult survivors themselves did not play a role in the actual building of the script or of the choreography. However, the survivors had absolute content authority; they could remove or veto any text, movement, or actions in the finished product, or ask for modifications, without argument from the project directors. In this way, I believe we fulfilled in part the concerns of the following two artist/scholars. Sondra Farganis, Director of the Rose & Erwin Wolfson Center for National Affairs at The New School NY, states, "Built into the very notion of socially collaborative art is the "recognition of the Other", giving moral status to the Other" (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 227). Pujol states, "Clarity and transparency of process are key to project ethics. Because information is power" (Finkelpearl 2013, p. 103).

Ownership for the survivors and transparency of process were two of our concerns; confidentiality and safety were others. How were we to convey to others through performance the lasting effects of trauma and, at the same time, maintain an ethical approach as it was being created that not only protected but also nurtured the adult survivors?

Callie Justice felt it was important that the adult survivors who were selected were in the later stages of their healing work. They would have been aware of and working on their experiences of childhood trauma for some time, and they would have the ability to attend to their own emotional safety. If a flashback were triggered or new memories of abuse surfaced, they would know how to ground themselves back into the present and seek the support they needed. In addition, they must have permission to join this project from their current therapist, or the therapist they had seen for a long time, and to whom they must have continued access if they needed individual treatment along with the group psychotherapy experience of this project. We were grateful that the North Carolina State Arts Council funding made it possible for survivors to participate at no cost.

All the participants in the group sessions agreed not to discuss any of the content of the sessions with people who did not have approved access to the audiotapes. Nor should we reveal information that might identify the survivors. The sessions were audiotaped with the permission of the survivors. All those outside of the group who needed to hear the tapes were approved by the survivors in advance. Publicity for the performance would not include any information that could be used to identify survivors without their expressed permission. All of this was agreed to by written contract (A2) which applied to those present in the room during the group sessions. The dancer/choreographers signed another contract that covered the rehearsal and performance phase of the production, as did the four additional performers in the project (A3). Similar contracts were signed by all others involved in the project—those who used the audio tapes to write poetry, to compose music, or to shape the script for the performance. The survivors were given the choice of what to do with the audiotapes after the project was completed. They made the decision to destroy them. All of this was done with respect, to give the survivors as much control as possible over what was shared within the group. Similarly, they were asked to give feedback on the movement performed in the sessions and had veto power over any movement in the final production. In all cases, inside the sessions and out, they confirmed that the movement they were seeing was a successful rendition of what they were feeling.

Callie interviewed the seven performers in the cast to make sure they were aware of the potential impact of performing in *Walking Miracles*; she required them to assess their ability to do this difficult work. Some potential actors, initially eager, found themselves emotionally unable to do so and thus had to address if they also needed a process of healing. Callie's care for the survivors, cast, and creators also extended to the audience. Grounding episodes were included in the production. Children fourteen and under were not allowed in the performance. Volunteers from Rape Crisis of Durham were available for each performance to speak to audience members as needed.

In *Performing Trauma in Central Africa*, Laura Edmondson spoke about the issue of commodification when performing the trauma of the violence of war in Central Africa. She described commodification as "the recasting of trauma as a thing to be appropriated and consumed . . . [, the] domestication of unspeakable acts into reassuring stereotypes of distant suffering, in which the consumer's precious fiction of safety and security is affirmed" (Edmondson 2018, p. 3). I hope and believe that with the care taken for all participants in this project and by giving the survivors power to veto any aspects of the production or demand modifications, we were able to avoid the ethical lapse of commodification.

What was the importance of aesthetic excellence in this project? As a choreographer and performer for over sixty years, Director of the Dance Program at Duke University for eighteen years, and faculty member for thirty-four, I have always valued artistic excellence, especially as it pertains to theater as social action. I believe the impact will be stronger if created with artistic skill. The collaborators with whom I have chosen to work throughout my career possess the same attitude. There was no question that all of us involved desired

that the end product had aesthetic value. Given the nature of the subject, we wanted to draw on our artistic skills, knowledge, and empathetic abilities to present a powerful product that would reveal the lasting effects of abuse on adult survivors and awaken an empathetic response from the audience.

Survivors who have worked through their abuse experiences are possessed of what Peter Marin, in describing Vietnam veterans, called "a terrible and demanding wisdom" (Marin 1991, p. 47). At a horrific cost, they have learned the depths to which human beings can descend and the heights of courage and transformation of which we are capable. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman recognizes that some form of public activism can be a useful part of the last stage of abuse recovery work. She explains that survivors who feel the need for social engagement "discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis of social action. While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others" (Herman 2015, p. 207). *Walking Miracles* is such a gift—a gift of hard won "terrible and demanding wisdom"—offered with the hope that it will support other survivors in their recovery work and increase public awareness of the experience of childhood sexual abuse and its long-term effects.

5. Empathy

Although artists in this project may have experienced degrees of abuse, it is most likely none of us have experienced the degree of childhood trauma experienced by the six adult survivors involved. How then do we express the effects of their emotional and physical trauma in a way that reaches the depth of their feeling and honors their courage?

Empathy is core to most aspects and layers of this production. Empathy is the fundamental ability that allows us to get as close as possible to the inner states of being of another person. According to Schumann et al. (2014), there are two subcomponents of empathy: affective empathy and cognitive empathy (also known as empathetic accuracy). The former allows us to share in and respond to emotions; the latter, by using the intellect, lets us understand different perspectives and the emotions involved (Schumann et al. 2014, p. 476). Sympathy has been defined as empathy with care. To make the distinction, Joel Smith poses a rather horrific example of empathy without care—a torturer who empathizes with the pain to better to enjoy the torture (Smith 2017, p. 716).

Can empathy be developed? Schumann et al. state, ". . . across a variety of fields, scientists have found support for their view that empathy—and especially the vicarious sharing of others' states—often occurs automatically" (Schumann et al. 2014, p. 476). They challenge that notion, however.

> We propose that when faced with such empathic challenges, people can either disengage from the situation or expend empathic effort. We define *empathic effort* as a willingness to invest time or energy in feeling empathy, and we argue that people can modulate their empathy experience by amplifying the amount of effort they exert . . . so that they may come to share the target's physiological or affective states. (Schumann et al. 2014, pp. 487–88)

Comparing test subjects who held a fixed theory of empathy, that empathy is inherent or unchanging, and those holding a malleable theory, that empathy can be developed, the researchers engaged subjects in seven studies. They concluded that those with a more malleable mindset would work harder to develop their empathy, despite how challenging or distressing the situation (Schumann et al. 2014, p. 198).

In a later study, "Empathy is Hard Work", Cameron et al. agreed that empathy can be developed but also avoided, with the result that empathy was widely avoided if the intellectual, emotional, and material costs were deemed too high.

> When deciding whether to enter into empathy-eliciting situations, people may weigh the expected value of mental costs (e.g., effort, negative affect, feelings of

> inefficacy) along with material costs and offsetting rewards, such as the desire to be moral or behave in accordance with social norms. (Cameron et al. 2019, p. 963)

For performers and choreographers who deliberately engage in and create from themes that require empathy, the ability to empathize and sympathize are central skills for our craft. With every exploration in the studio and every performing and choreographic experience, we make an effort to hone and deepen these skills. We do not count the costs of engaging physically, mentally, and emotionally in empathy because our understanding of the situation, the person, and their emotional state is the key to creating movement that will engage the audience so that they also empathize with that emotional state.

Margie Gillis, Canadian choreographer, and solo performer of extraordinary power who possesses a potent ability to connect to her audiences, is a master at her empathetic craft.

> She wanted to "touch people on a very intimate and profound level" with choreography that was created from a visceral emotional state. She had the ability to enter into, and be taken over by, a single emotion or idea, remaining for long periods in that visceral landscape. There, she explored through motion its subtleties, details, and power, a process that allowed her to create the architecture of the choreography from the psychology of that place. Such a process required great vulnerability from her, an openness to exposure and to risk that was matched with strong psychological resilience (Dickinson 2018, p. 189).

The emphasis on the visceral is a key aspect. Emotions have a physical resonance even as movement has an emotional resonance in the body. This reality is the foundation of the field of dance therapy. A choreographer must meld the emotion with the movement so that the impact is more powerful in that joining.

A deeper insight into the craft of such choreography is provided by a description of part of the process for Gillis's "Voyage", which concerns a nineteenth century immigrant recently arrived in the New World.

> Gillis's process was to enter into the inner life of the immigrant, and by doing so, to discover her visible, physical persona. Through this process, she was able to arrive at choreography that most clearly revealed the character's inner world as connected to her outer presence. Thus, the immigrant becomes the real entity for Gillis, and the noise of the 'I' that distracts from the pure vision of the character is removed. A vocabulary of movement and behavior is developed so that "every small action is full and evocative of that inner life . . . What could this character do and not do" (Dickinson 2018, p. 198)?

Researchers in many fields have found that emotions and the body's physicality are interwoven to the point of being almost inseparable. Dance ethnologist Deidre Sklar defines her concept of kinesthetic empathy as "the capacity to participate within another's movement or another's sensory experience of movement" (Reynolds and Reason 2012, p. 305). Reynolds conceives of "an embodied intensity that impacts the spectator kinesthetically" (Reynolds and Reason 2012, p. 132).

In *Choreographing Empathy*,[8] Susan Foster (Foster 2010) makes a detailed historical study and analysis of the interwoven nature of choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy in Western art practices from 1700 to the present day. She considers the audiences' empathetic responses as embedded societal conditioning that changed over time. This includes how the performers were trained and what the audiences expected to see. She first drew my attention to 'mirror neurons' which were discovered by neurophysiologists in the 1990s (Foster 2010, p. 175). According to Acharya and Shukla (2012), "Mirror neurons represent a distinctive class of neurons that discharge both when an individual executes a motor act and when he observes another individual performing the same or a similar motor act" (Acharya and Shukla 2012, p. 118). Mirror properties were found to "include the somatosensory cortex and are thought to make the observer feel what it feels like to move in the observed way" (Acharya and Shukla 2012, p. 119). They found many studies that determined that

the mirror neuron system affects emotions and empathy (Acharya and Shukla 2012, p. 120). Foster agrees, concluding that in the twenty-first century, "... empathy, usually associated with emotional reactions by psychotherapists, and kinesthesia, the sensing of the body, are seen as closely interconnected" (Foster 2010, p. 11).

Emily Beausoleil, an art and culture theorist and contributor to a groundbreaking book on conflict resolution, writes about the interconnectedness of all the body's systems.

> In recent years neuroscientists have begun to explore the physiology of emotion, communication, receptivity, attunement, empathy, and creative thinking, ... [and they] have demonstrated the intimate and complex relationship between cognitive and 'embodied' states (Beausoleil 2013, p. 3).

Beausoleil continues,

> A whole psychosomatic network of neurological, hormonal, gastrointestinal, and immune systems keep the entire body in constant communication. ... Cognition, attitudes, and emotions are all grounded in the physical cues from this elaborate body-wide network (Beausoleil 2013, p. 4).

Our life's experiences and the attendant emotions are patterned in our muscles and connective tissues, especially the fascia. Trauma can be stored in the body. Ida P. Rolf, biochemist and creator of *Structural Integration*, recognized that over time the patterns of response to emotional/physical experiences can perpetuate themselves and, if negative, can lead to a distortion of the body's mechanical design for movement in a way that hinders change and growth (The Rolf Institute 2024b, "History"). Rolf developed Rolfing Structural Integration in order to "... restore balance and proper alignment by freeing the body from those unconsciously developed patterns" and allow new experiences to create new patterns according to the natural design of the body (The Rolf Institute 2024a, "Frequently Asked Questions").

5.1. Going Deep—Choreography

I have chosen two sections of *Walking Miracles*, 'Soul Abuser' and 'Rage', as examples of my choreographic process. It was necessary that I delve into the inner state of both situations to create effective choreography. Each time that I returned to work on a section, it was imperative to go back to the same specific emotional place; otherwise, the movement would not reflect a consistent inner world. To make the process more complex, choreography requires a two-sided consciousness. On the one hand, I must be completely submerged in the immediate moment of movement and image; I must BE the emotion as I search to find the right movement. On the other hand, I must try to remember the movement so that I can craft and repeat the choreography. Similarly in performance, I must monitor what comes next (e.g., I must remember to push off my back foot fully here in preparation for the next step) even as I am living the emotion. Such duality of choreography and performance demands hours of practice delving into a consistent state of being and coming out of it again.

5.2. Soul Abuser

The survivor is often complicit in the secrecy of abuse and in the presentation of the family and family relationships as normal. The non-perpetrating caretaker or parent does not physically abuse but also does not protect. The survivor often barters this complicity for approval and gestures of love from the "unseeing" parent. The child who hears "I only love you if you take care of me" becomes the caretaker of the parent by collaborating in this ignorance/innocence. Image, mask, picture, and photograph—all of these become a complex weaving of layers in abuse.

As I was creating this section and this character, I entered as closely as possible into the imagined state of the soul abuser. I had to create a specific person in my being, someone who refuses to allow herself to recognize the abuse of her own child. She must never let the deeply hidden feelings that are aroused by such knowledge be recognized by herself or

become evident to others. There is a rigid necessity for denial—for fear of exposure, for fear of the abuser, for the intense need for normality, and a rejection of the real nature of the abuser. She possesses a deep-rooted and massive guilt. In addition to rigid control, she must "act naturally" in social situations, and indeed in familial situations. She and the direct abuser make it absolutely clear that the child, and therefore the whole family, must appear happy and content.

As the soul abuser (Barbara), my need for physical rigidity became the dominant physical response and permitted me to be seemingly impervious to the distress of my child and to ignore all attempts by the child (Thema) to tell me of her experience of abuse within the family. My denial was so much easier when Thema was complacent, and the pressures on me to deny were not so forcefully challenged.

As the scene began, I bent over, and with great determination and intent used my hands to force the shape of a smile on my face as the lucky mother of a perfect child. I reached with 'joy' to Thema and Andrea. Andrea represented the inner child, the revealer of Thema's actual feelings of agony. She stayed beside and slightly behind Thema for most of the scene, a constant physical force of the nightmare that was Thema's inner life. A smiling Thema came and knelt beside my statue of a body, and I caressed her in her acquiescence. But then Andrea, the inner child, in too much distress, surfaced, pushing at Thema. Thema began to pull and grab at me in a desperate need to tell the truth. I tried to force her back into confinement in the role of happy child, but she was too emotionally demanding. I struggled to extricate myself from her anguished seeking and walked away, standing to face the audience—society at large. Thema, vanquished, and needing to retain something of a mother's affection came to me and forced a smile on her face as I had done, acquiescing to the denial of abuse and the presentation of the family that I demanded. Only then did I again bend towards her and caress her, even as she was trembling in repressed anguish.

In this scene, the intense pain and the stress on the child are ongoing and both must be expressed frequently to the mother even though the child has learned repeatedly that nothing will improve. The adult Thema is able to confront her mother and release her rage at what has been done to her. "Mommy? Mommy! What's your name? No, Mommy, your real name. Betrayer of my soul! You sacrificed me and I will not be sacrificed anymore" (Tharp 1997)!

5.3. Rage

In the twenty-first century, in clinical studies of anger due to child sexual abuse, attitudes have gradually shifted as to how anger can play a role in the healing process. Previously, most researchers often regarded anger only as a maladaptive force that led to misdirected socially inappropriate behaviors. More recently, anger is seen as a beneficial part of treatment that can empower the victim and direct the anger to the proper recipients. In a study on female survivors of child sexual abuse, R. I. Scott and H. D. Day demonstrate that they were early proponents of this latter attitude.

> Survivors may deny their anger; disguise its expression by being overly compliant and perfectionistic; fear expressing anger; identify with the power of the perpetrator and manifest self-destructive, self-blaming patterns; or inappropriately and indiscriminately express anger. . . . The validation and disposition of anger are perhaps the most difficult issues for female survivors of childhood incest trauma to face. Specifically, the healing process must include learning to recognize and validate their right to possess and express anger, as well as mastering the skills to direct anger toward the appropriate individuals. Due to the fact that traumatic memories are usually extreme and intense, recognizing and appropriately expressing the associated anger are essential to the recovery process (Scott and Day 1996, p. 209).

Patricia Van Velsor and Deborah L. Cox also emphasize the difficulties with rage in another study. "Because rage is the most appropriate emotional response to being sexually

traumatized, the child is continually bombarded with feelings of complete fury with no understanding of or safe receptacle for processing them" (Van Velsor and Cox 2001, p. 619). And, "... [S]urvivors attempt to cope with their anger through the extremes of suppression and numbing to uncontrollable outbursts, leaving them more disempowered as they struggle to contain and manage these feelings" (Van Velsor and Cox 2001, p. 619).

In "Anger in the Trajectory of Healing from Childhood Maltreatment", Sandra P. Thomas et al. describe five types of anger: Self-Castigating, Displaced, Self-Protective, The Anger of Indignation, and Righteous Anger on Behalf of Self or Others (Thomas et al. 2012, p. 174). They observe that "Righteous anger has a moral component. It is evoked by realization of injustice (in this case, childhood abuse), and it mobilizes energy that the angry person can use to take decisive action" (Thomas et al. 2012, p. 175).

When Callie Justice began searching for survivors of child sexual abuse, she insisted that they be in the more advanced stages of healing and possess a long and close relationship with a therapist. Her wisdom was borne out in this project when we performers began to physicalize the rage of the survivors, a rage that they were able to express in a healing, rather than in a damaging way. 'Rage' became the sixth out of eight stages presented in the production, with only 'Stepping into Self' and 'Celebration' to come after it. For many, righteous rage must be felt and expressed before a calmer contemplation on the abuse experience can be conducted. In the production, the performers' rage was directed at the abusers and those complicit in the abuse; at those who belittle the experience; and at those who think survivors should just 'get over it' and move on. We felt that, at some point in the production, the rage, often controlled and simmering, must burst forth. It was designed to be cathartic. I was happy to see a validation of our decisions in the article by Scott and Day (1996). By "educated survivors" the authors mean that the survivors have had extensive work in psychotherapy and have knowledge of much, if not all, of their traumatic experience.

> Educated survivors will be able to openly acknowledge, validate, and process the occurrence of traumatic childhood incest memories and be more inclined to appropriately express the associated painful, angry feelings. They will be more aware of and connected to long-term negative effects associated with childhood incest trauma. Survivors with this ability will redistribute and redirect their anger, guilt, and shame toward the responsible individuals, defusing and correcting their former destructive, irrational cognitions concerning personal responsibility for the abuse. In essence, personal guilt will be mitigated and rightfully returned to the perpetrators and any other offending individuals involved (Scott and Day 1996, p. 217).

And Thomas et al. suggested that "[t]herapists could give greater attention to empowering the physical body that was once so cruelly violated, perhaps through martial arts training, in which the body literally "fights back" (Thomas et al. 2012, p. 178).

The section on Rage explored my empathy for the abused by generating deep feelings of rage that I had experienced. This, of course, is how empathy works—feeding off emotional experiences that one has had that are as close as possible to, in this case, the abused. As I was creating this section, my body sensed that at some point in healing the rage must erupt physically, vocally, and emotionally (Figure 3).

In my choreographic sessions I worked to become the character, the abused. I tried to experience the depth of the rage, for so many years buried deep and hidden in a pressure cooker of despair, even as the abused was forced to portray a false normality of existence. To manifest the rage, I, as the abused, had to dig deep into the core of me where it was concealed and then allow it to erupt. My movement became the clawed fingers of my hands as I dug into my guts, reaching deep toward the spine of repressed anger and carving out the cancer. As I did so, the anger burst through my mouth in a grimace of hate and revulsion that became a scream. I roared with it, attacked the space with it, and it felt good. The physical sense of uncleanliness was profound. I was overcome by the filth of all my abuse experiences—the filth of what was done to me; how I felt myself complicit in it; the

agony of knowing what is in me; and the terror that I may inflict it on others. I became feverish with the need to clean myself—to scrub and scrape myself of all the experience, all the evil, all the dirtiness, and I scoured and scratched and rubbed at all the places I could reach—even to exhaustion. As I taught these movements to the actors, they too had to tap into their most negative experiences to create the reality of rage. With that release, we felt able to step into self, without the subconscious control of rage. Abuse may have played a part in shaping the survivors, but part of healing is that they gradually control whom they will become. The abuse is not the essence of survivors.

Figure 3. Rehearsing "Rage". Andrea Davey (L), Barbara Dickinson (R). Navin Mahabir, photographer.

6. Conclusions

When I look back twenty-seven years to the eight months of creation of *Walking Miracles*, I am still satisfied and proud of the work we did. My confidence in all the artists with whom I had previously collaborated assured me of a level of integrity during the process and a high level of artistic quality in the finished work. I also believe we, guided by Callie Justice, took great care with the survivors throughout the process. In the fourteenth and final session of psychotherapy, the survivors urged us to continue the work that this project had begun, in any way we could design, since that was one reason they had chosen to be involved. However, they made it clear they were not going to pursue that continuation with us; their part was finished. Their urging is why I felt no qualms in writing further about this project twenty-seven years later without further contact with the survivors.[9]

As a work of social action, *Walking Miracles* educated and revealed to our audiences the complex issues that survivors face. Our goal was that members of the audience, through the experience of the performance, would gain a deeper empathetic understanding of child sexual abuse, become stronger allies for the survivors, and stronger advocates for child abuse prevention. Some in our audiences were survivors themselves. One woman spoke of needing to believe what her subconscious and her body had been telling her. We hoped that those who had survived abuse at any age might recognize the need to address their

trauma. We envisage that the video of *Walking Miracles* will continue to serve as a catalyst for social change, healing, and greater understanding.

The six individuals who participated in the group are virtuosi at surviving the unspeakable. Their ability to tell their stories with eloquence, humor, insight, emotional awareness, and courage represents the consequence of many years of extremely hard work. We all felt the great weight of the trust given to us by the survivors. At the end, they said they were profoundly affected by the process of creation, and all felt they had moved forward with their healing. One reason expressed for this was that it was rare, if not impossible, to find a group made up only of those who had already spent many years in therapy. Another reason was the catalyst the movement provided during the psychotherapy sessions. The survivors felt it embodied their pain and pushed them into a deeper level of exploration. One survivor who had kept her abuse secret decided to 'come out' by the end of this production. When, near the end of the sessions, they said they did not care what happened in the production because the sessions themselves were worth it, I felt a huge weight had been lifted. When they saw the dress rehearsal and the actual performances, they said the final product was better than they could have hoped for or imagined possible. One survivor said there were a hundred ways to f__k this up and we did not! To fulfill a difficult trust given to us by six such remarkable people was the most important mark of success for us all.

7. Postscript

There is a link available to the video that was made of this project. Viewers, who have (or may have) experienced trauma of any kind are encouraged to be well supported when viewing this video. As was recommended to the audiences attending the stage production, we ask that viewers of the *Walking Miracles* video be mindful of their responses throughout. Some responses to the video might be difficult to experience. It is always okay to stop the video and take a break. At a few points during the video, an actor steps out of his or her role in the performance and addresses the viewers from the perspective of the present. You may want to use these 'grounding moments' as opportunities to pause the video, and perhaps to take a few breaths, and be aware of your own present situation, by simply looking around the room, and noticing particular features of the time and place where you are now. Healing the wounds of trauma is possible when survivors become connected with past abuse experiences in a present context, which supports their dealing with the trauma differently than was possible when it first occurred.

Please note: *Walking Miracles* is not intended for children and contains explicit descriptions of child sexual abuse.
To view the video, please email bhdic@duke.edu and ask for the link and password.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/arts13060182/s1.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Since your paper will only address the process by which you created *Walking Miracles*, we wouldn't consider the performance or experience of creating that body of work to be research with human subjects. As such, you do not need IRB review to write your journal article. Hyewon Grigoni, Senior IRB Specialist, Duke Campus Institutional Review Board, campusIRB.duke.edu.

Data Availability Statement: Additional data in the form of the audiotapes taken during the psychotherapy sessions is unavailable due to confidentiality agreements.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

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[2] Parts of this section were included in The Society of Dance History Scholars' Proceedings of the 2004 Conference as an unedited record of the papers presented.

[3] The Ciompi Quartet: Eric Pritchard, first violin; Hsaio-mei Ku, second violin; Jonathan Bagg, viola; Fred Raimi, cello.

[4] *Walking Miracles*. Dialogue notes for an early draft if the script.

[5] This encore production was made possible by funding from the original North Carolina State Arts Council Fellowship money, with grants from the Institute of the Arts of Duke University, and with grant monies dedicated to the remounting of *Walking Miracles* from the Ways and Means Dance Company and Manbites Dog Theater.

[6] Special thanks to Edythe Stanford and the Scarborough Foundation for the use of the J.C. Scarborough House, Durham, NC.

[7] The Video Project is a co-production of the Ways and Means Dance Company, Manbites Dog Theater, and The Groove Productions.

[8] The title of this article was created before I became aware of Susan Foster's book *Choreographing Empathy*. Foster focuses on the empathetic responses of audiences as they changed over different periods of dance history. I too am concerned with our audiences' empathetic responses for this specific project, but I am also attempting to describe the process of creating movement that is empathetic to the experiences of the survivors.

[9] The author contacted the Duke University IRB office before writing the paper. The email response from that office is included in the Supplementary Materials to this paper. The key paragraph in the email was as follow: "Since your paper will only address the process by which you created *Walking Miracles*, we wouldn't consider the performance or experience of creating that body of work to be research with human subjects. As such, you do not need IRB review to write your journal article".

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