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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series**

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*The JUSTICE Project:*  
**The Ideology of Social Shifting  
Through Physical Engagement,  
Collaboration and Authentic  
Performance**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

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***The JUSTICE Project:***  
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**Abstract**

*The JUSTICE Project's* research lives in this question: Can physical engagement motivated by ideologies of justice explored in a collaborative setting bring about social shifting?

*The JUSTICE Project* is an experiential performance work based on the premise that individuals have an innate sense of justice. Exploring themes of justice through self-expression and creative processes in a community setting invites the participant to explore intimate realms of cultural and personal experience. The material is communally explored then structured and woven together by Darla Johnson and Nicole Wesley, Artistic Directors. The exchanges and responses in this process encourage the creation of an authentic performance experience for the participants and the audience.

The fourth incarnation of *The JUSTICE Project* will take place at the University of Bedfordshire in England from February 15<sup>th</sup>–24<sup>th</sup>, 2013. The project will involve dance and performing arts majors. Prior to February 15<sup>th</sup>, the directors will begin to correspond with the participants via Skype, in November of 2012 and again in January of 2013. Analytical and artistic assignments will be given and discussed during the Skype sessions. Participants will begin researching, writing and choreographing material based on their personal ideologies of justice. During the residency, the project will be constructed through conversation, exploration and collaboration.

Data will be collected from reflective writing and responses of the participants and artistic directors, a video documentation of the rehearsal process and performance, and a questionnaire that critically evaluates the personal and communal experience of participants and producers/hosts of *The JUSTICE Project*.

**Keywords:**

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## Introduction

*The JUSTICE Project* was originally conceived in 2007 as a way to create a deeper sense of community through dialogue and dance making between people from two culturally specific locations. The premise of the work is to celebrate the authentic artistic voice and to embrace the transformation that arises at the intersection of self and community, revolving around dialogues of social, political and personal responses to justice. Questions we asked ourselves as directors included: How can a performance work based on the concept of justice inspire a community to listening and valuing tolerance? Can the work affect resolution and unity when there is conflict? Can an individual's ideas of justice educate, inform and evolve a group? Who has the privilege to make art? How can dialogues about social, political and personal justice bring about transformation and healing within a community? Can physical engagement bring about social change?

The two locations brought together for the project in 2007 were Spelman College, a historical Black college for women, and Austin Community College, a two year transfer college with an ethnically diverse population. Our time frame was limited to five days for the development of the project. The term *justice* was used as a conversational platform for community building and as a motivation for the creative and collaborative development of the project. The conversations around justice dealt with personal, social and political experiences of individual participants that were shared within the group. Our interest at the time was to focus on preserving the authenticity of the individuals' experiences, while at the same time deepening and building a communal voice. Using the participants' stories and experiences as our guide, an original work inclusive of dance, text and the individual spirit emerged.

After the Spelman College/Austin Community College collaboration, *The JUSTICE Project* was commissioned and facilitated on two other occasions. In 2009, we were invited to Newcastle, England to work with choreography students from Northumbria University. And in 2010, we brought together students from the University of Trinidad and Tobago and Austin Community College. The University of Bedfordshire was the fourth commission of *The JUSTICE Project* and, through each and every incarnation, we have found that this work is unique to its participants and the community in which they are working.

### *INITIAL CONNECTION – January 29<sup>th</sup> 2013*

In order to prepare the participants for such a rigorous schedule dealing with delicate subject matter, we organized Skype sessions to meet prior to our arrival at the University of Bedfordshire. The purpose of the Skype sessions was to introduce ourselves, provide more information about the project, answer questions, relay expectations, and assign readings and movement projects. Although not ideal, preparing the group via Skype before our arrival helped establish a mindset and relay project expectations regarding sensitive matters

and materials. We had two Skype sessions scheduled but only participated in one as the times for meeting were challenging for all parties and the international connectivity was poor during the first meeting.

The readings assigned were from the book *Dance, Human Rights and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*, edited by Naomi Jackson and Toni Shapiro-Phim. Articles “Practical Imperative: German Dance, Dancers and Nazi Politics,” by Marion Kant, and “Community Dance: Dance Arizona Repertory Theatre as a Vehicle for Cultural Emancipation,” by Mary Fitzgerald, were distributed as reading assignments. The participants were then asked to reflect on the readings in relation to their own understanding of justice/injustice and to create 1–2 minute solos representing their individual responses to the articles. Participants were asked to bring reflective writings and prepared solo works to the studio on the first physical workday.

### *DAY ONE – February 15<sup>th</sup> 2013*

Our first task together face-to-face was to facilitate a space of trust within the community by engaging in exercises that encouraged mental and physical openness and vulnerability. The participants were all affiliated with the University of Bedfordshire’s dance program, but at different degrees of study. Four participants were 1<sup>st</sup> year dance majors, three were 1<sup>st</sup> year performing arts majors, one was a 3<sup>rd</sup> year dance major and one was a 1<sup>st</sup> year Master of Arts student. As each of the participants entered the room, we got up to greet them. We shook hands, made eye contact and introduced ourselves, making a mental note of their names. We sat in a circle because we believe that sitting in a circle instantly eliminates the preconceived hierarchy of teacher and students and creates a more open environment. As part of the initial meeting, we discussed in depth what the expectations of the project were, including full participation and attendance to all rehearsals. Because our time with the participants was so short and because the development of the work was intense and intimate, it was imperative that they did not miss any of the scheduled rehearsals. Every moment, every conversation and every offering was crucial to the work. Missing rehearsals could have caused disjointedness and closed people off from allowing themselves to go deeper into the work.

During this exchange, one of the participants did share with the group that she would need to leave early to attend an outreach session on that upcoming Monday. Because the rules of engagement are structured in “all or nothing” format, this became the first conflict resolution moment within the group. We have found in the past that once the parameters are established in regards to the project expectations, inviting the group to openly discuss and find resolution is the first step toward group connectivity, trust and cohesiveness. Most of the group had something to share with the young woman regarding her potential absence. Some participants made suggestions to her that she might find a substitute or reschedule the class time. Another dancer broke down in tears, sharing with the group that she had planned to go home that weekend but cancelled because she had committed to this project. Although nothing was

decided that evening between the participants, the young woman did attend the full rehearsal on Monday, and it was never mentioned again. It was through this initial conflict resolution process that the participants gained trust, strength and motivation to commit to the project.

In addition to committing to the schedule, the group shared that they felt the readings were extremely difficult to grasp and that not all of them were able to create the 1–2 minute solos from their reflections. We felt that the participants would be able to acknowledge similarities and connect with each other through their personal conversational offerings about justice and injustice in the coming days and decided to schedule a time to read aloud and discuss the article in smaller groups.

*DAY TWO – February 16<sup>th</sup> 2013*

Day two was the first “working” day of *The JUSTICE Project: Bedford*. We had already established this cyclical motif during introductions the day before so we kept to the same theme of bonding in a circle. Our warm-up consisted of a fusion of Pilates, yoga and Feldenkrais. All of these physical practices and philosophies deal with understanding that the *action* of the body comes from a very central and internal source. We discussed having a “traditional” dance warm-up full of plies and tendus, but ultimately we realized our goal was to engage each participant as an individual and the best way, we felt, to accomplish this objective would be to practice movement forms that encourage authenticated responses.

The next task was to get the group connected physically through a series of weight sharing exercises. The partnering work served us two-fold. The participants explored ways of counter balancing for upcoming choreographic material, and at the same time, began building material and meaningful connections with one another. The connections were not only about trust, but also about finding a bond through physical touch. The participants then learned material for the *Flats* section, which involved partnering skills and choreography by Director Johnson.

After a brief lunch, we shifted gears and had the participants sit in groups of three to read one of the preliminary readings. The article, entitled “Practical Imperative: German Dance, Dancers and Nazi Politics,” by Marion Kant, dealt with the German dance community’s oppression of Jewish artists in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Some of the German oppressors were highly regarded and respected contributors to the art form who are admired in most current dance history books. The trios read the article aloud to each other with spurts of reflective discussion. After reading the article, the groups were asked to create a synopsis of the article, as well as to pose questions to the group based on their responses to the reading. This process ignited a rich conversation about personal justice and how each participant has had to manage “oppressive behavior” throughout their lives. The vulnerable offerings that were shared with the group were very human and common experiences. This allowed for the beginning of the establishment of a deep bond within the group.

We transitioned from the article reading to a group improvisation. We asked one of the participants, Edy Samuels, to put on something lively from his iPod. We all moved with abandonment and laughter. We noticed a motif of slow running that had emerged and that the whole group was sustaining in varying degrees. After the group improvisation, we began to use the slow running motif in what became the “Grid” section. The “Grid” section consisted of people intersecting one another, sometimes missing each other and sometimes colliding. We again divided the group into three trios. Trios were asked to use the remaining rehearsal time to begin working with personal reflections from the article and using the metaphor of a chain and/or linking to create choreography. We ended the day with a rough trio showing.

*DAY THREE – February 17<sup>th</sup> 2013*

A strong shift happened on the third day of the project. After the warm-up the group participated in a trust exercise in which each person was asked to look into the eyes of all the others, one at a time. We walked around the room taking turns stopping and looking at each other with the instruction to drop any veils or pretense and allow ourselves to be fully seen. A group discussion after the exercise revealed that each person felt more relaxed and trusting of the group. Director Wesley then taught set choreography and the partnering work from day two was reviewed. This took us to the lunch break, which included an assignment. Each person was asked to photograph two things: something in nature that reflected his or her emotional state, and a non-literal image that represented the number nine to represent the nine participants in the work. These would then be used in a video montage for the performance.

After lunch, work resumed with a sharing circle. Each person told a story of oppression or personal vulnerability. These stories were framed by the work that was done from the reading of the article on the previous day. Participants felt compelled to share from a deeply personal place of pain and vulnerability. The sharing led to the creation of solos that were choreographed from this authentic, emotional and visceral place. The solos were performed one at a time and the participants provided feedback for each other. From these solos we were able to begin work on the beginning section of the piece, called the “Pod.” Material from various solos was incorporated into a movement template. The sharing and teaching of personal choreography established ownership and provided mentorship opportunities for the dancers. Each person knew from hearing the others story where the movement had come from. Day three deepened the group connection and introduced the solo choreography into the working material for the piece.

*DAY FOUR – February 18<sup>th</sup> 2013*

Day four started with Bartinieff movement fundamentals taught by Director Wesley. This series of exercises helps to strengthen the student’s center of movement while connecting to the extremities. We then proceeded to

finish the opening section of the piece. This was a large accomplishment and allowed the participants to understand both intellectually and physically that we were creating momentum toward building the performance.

Next we started on a section of the work that uses a nine-foot opening between two curtains just behind the center stage mark. We called this section the “Flats.” Short moments of connection, intimacy, reflection and fun are seen passing through the opening as solos, duets and trios, each lasting between 20 seconds and one minute. This section was built on established and developing relationships among the performers. We then gave the participants a question to consider at home: “What do you have to say?” Finally, we created a sound cocoon, which proved to be a huge stress reliever. The purpose of introducing the sound cocoon was to open up the space for the participants to become comfortable with using their voices. The group lay shoulder to shoulder on the floor on their backs and started breathing and listening to each other to create a vocal improvisation. The sound cocoon became a laugh cocoon that lasted ten minutes.

*DAY FIVE – February 19<sup>th</sup> 2013*

Day five started with a short warm-up combining the yoga and Bartineff work. We went right into reviewing material and then the creation of a new section. Jai Hutchison wrote a monologue based on her personal story that she shared with the group. It was a poetic description of the moment of her father’s death and her state of being in the aftermath of that loss. We used the monologue in conjunction with the group improvising in the space as they walked in the grid pattern and also incorporating the trio lifts that were created on the second day of the process. We work shopped this section by allowing the participants time to settle into the exercise, which gave us time to see connections and how the flow of the process was working. We added the slow motion running in a line that swept all the participants across the stage from left to right, picking up the fallen monologist as they passed her. We agreed that this would be a good section in which to include the video montage. Before the break we reviewed and continued working on the “Flats.”

After the break we started on another new section that included monologues by Chanique Waithe and Edy Samuels. Director Wesley choreographed a gestural sequence that was performed by the rest of the group in a line facing the back wall of the stage. Edy sat down stage center and Chanique traveled the diagonal from upstage left to directly behind Edy. This section was a reflection on instances of vulnerability and empowerment. Our final work of day five was to sit in a circle to share and discuss each person’s response to the question, “What do you have to say?” The last section of the performance is called “I have something to say.” This discussion was important as it provided the group another opportunity to express themselves individually within the community. It also provided a subtext for the final section of the work.

*DAY SIX – February 20<sup>th</sup> 2013*

Day six began with a group discussion. The participants came into the space to reveal that there had been an incident in the student lounge the night before. A group of rugby players, who had been drinking, harassed every one of the participants in some way as they passed through the space after rehearsal. Some of the students were called “lesbians, sluts, bitches, he-she.” One student was chased after and picked up and brought back to the group of men where one of them pulled her pants down. The students informed the proper authorities but were left unsatisfied with the outcome. They informed us that they had taken the matter up with the Office of the Provost and were not going to let this happen again and that justice would be served. It was very emotional and proved to be an empowering incident for the students. We realized that this incident was something that needed to be incorporated into the final performance.

Warm-up for day six was self-motivated. We all started on the floor, utilizing the techniques that had been taught over the previous days. We proceeded moving up through space, arriving on our feet, started walking, and then moved into a free dance improvisation. After warm-up we revisited the initial trios and created movements that crossed the stage with two out of the three. The trios stayed connected as they traveled their paths, symbolizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of each group. They crossed the stage, one from downstage left to right and the other from upstage right to left. We used this section as a breather between the more intense sections of the piece. The third trio, which was more aggressive, became a section of the dance on it’s own as it crossed diagonally from upstage left to downstage right. Energetically this trio became the high point of the work as the dancers and the music lifted the piece toward the conclusion.

We then finished the “Flats” section, which provided a huge sense of accomplishment for the group. At the end of the rehearsal we again discussed what had happened the previous evening in the student lounge. Director Johnson wrote down the aggressive and derogatory remarks, which she later wrote into a chorus piece for the group. Our last event of the rehearsal was a run-through of the material we had created thus far. This was an important moment in the process. The participants received a chance to acknowledge all the work that they’d done toward creating the performance. The directors got an opportunity to look at the work objectively and to see what was working or not working in the piece.

*DAY SEVEN – February 21<sup>st</sup> 2013*

One of the guiding principals of *The JUSTICE Project* is that the individuals in the group take agency and are accountable for themselves and each other. We started day seven with a discussion about what that meant as we were moving toward the final stage of the project. We then worked through the transitions in the piece, lining up the music and movement with the

entrances and exits for each section. After a short break, we completed and cleaned the beginning section, the “Pod.” We worked on the timing of the crossing trios and reviewed the “Flats” section.

The last task for day seven was to set the section called “#9.” We incorporated the group text as a call and response-like vocal piece combined with a group lift of the young woman who was harassed physically by the rugby players. The company split in half; half ran out with her from stage left and the others ran out from stage right. She jumped up and dove into the arms of the stage right performers as the stage left performers lifted her legs. The group rolled her over and over as they traveled from up stage center to the center lip of the stage while reciting the text. The day ended on a high note. We were empowered through the action of creating art out of adversity.

*DAY EIGHT – February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013*

The day began with a warm-up question, “What do you need?” At this point, we’d had seven days of intense physical, intellectual and emotional activity and we needed to structure the session in a more passive, yet nurturing way. After constructing a warm-up from their immediate needs, we conducted a vocal warm-up. We needed to prepare performers who had monologues and to ready the group for working on the final section that involves speaking. After warm-ups and reviewing the “Pod” section from the night before, we introduced the final section of the project entitled “I Have Something to Say.”

The “I Have Something to Say” section has been implemented in all of *The JUSTICE Projects* thus far. It requires the participants to strip away the masks that result from the internalizing of their own oppressions and oppressive behavior, by expressing vocally their need to “say something.” The structure of the text has remained the same, although the physical or choreographic structure changes from community to community. We felt this group was all about simplicity. No bells. No whistles. Just to the point and with little choreographic structure. We practiced speaking low and moving into a more normal and leveled sound range. The group then practiced moving from a normal to a louder range with a more insistent delivery. It is a very confrontational moment in the work, but we have found in the past performances that the audience embraces the exchange as they, as witnesses to the vulnerability of the performers, have emotionally been with them since the opening section.

Before we left for the night we had begun to review the “Flats” section, when one of the performers, Helen, injured her wrist. We decided that was a sign to stop and we left rehearsal for a well-deserved group dinner at a local restaurant in Bedford. This, too, was part of the process. We were able to socially interact with the group, which deepened our relationships with everyone involved in the work. We were able to relax in our “director” roles and become part of the group, enjoying each other’s company.

*DAY NINE – February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013*

Day nine was our first opportunity to be in the theater and to run the work in its entirety. With technical duties to attend to regarding lighting, sound and video design, we assigned the group a *Round Robin* warm-up. This means the group gathers in a circle and rotates both physical and vocal exercises from participant to participant with an increased level of intensity. After a quick spacing we ran the work for the first time. The work was around twenty-four minutes and, although unclear during some transitional moments, it went smoothly.

After giving the group performance notes on the first run, we then asked the participants to write a paragraph or two regarding their experience in this project. We did not want to guide their responses during this reflection. We had prepared a questionnaire that we would distribute on the last day and were interested in seeing what they would write about without any guidance. After writing about their experiences, the group performed the work a second time in their costumes.

*The Process of Performance – February 24<sup>th</sup> 2013*

The final day of the project started in the morning with the technical rehearsal to prepare for the performance later that day. Lighting has been a key element in the presentation of the work since its inception. Areas of isolation and inclusion are designed into the lighting as a reflection of the work, which helps to clarify for the audience an underlying theme of the piece—individual and community. We spent approximately an hour and a half building lighting cues, setting up the video projector, establishing the sound cues and doing a technical/dress run of the piece.

Afterward we all gathered in the lobby of the theater where we handed out the questionnaire and began the discussion of closure. We wanted participants to know that after the end of the project there would be letdown and that even though we weren't going to be there, the rest of the community would still have each other to rely on and communicate with. It was important that the participants understood that we would all still be connected even though the project was finished. We then took a short break, which included time for them to work on the questionnaires.

Shortly afterward, the rest of the performers for the evening arrived and we had a dress rehearsal followed by a company potluck. The potluck proved to be a lovely and relaxed time for everyone involved in the show. We moved into the performance part of the day with a repeat of the *Round Robin* warm-up. At this point we gave up ownership of the work to the participants. We stepped away from the piece, trusting the performers, the process, and the integrity of the work we had guided and accomplished together.

The performance proved to be moving and effective. During the talkback audience members expressed their emotional connection to the work and that

they were impressed with how articulate and authentic the performers were. The participants were given feedback from their peers and faculty that reflected back to them the depth of their commitment, focus and artistry.

### *Results*

When analyzing the results of this project, it is important to observe the impact that the creation process and performance had on the participants. The participants quickly came together on the first day to problem solve and begin the work of community building. Here are some responses from a presenter and some of the participants.

*‘The JUSTICE Project offers students a unique opportunity to delve into their personal stories and experiences as the foundation for art making. Such processes need sensitive and skilful guidance, which Johnson and Wesley provide and create a safe environment in which the participants can fully explore themselves without fear. Students who have undertaken this project have deepened their self-knowledge, self-awareness and compassion for others and this has contributed immensely to their growth as artists and community members in the department. The JUSTICE Project enables participants to come to value their own experiences as a precious and worthy resource.’*

-Tamara Ashley, MFA, PhD, University of Bedfordshire

*‘We were all helping each other learn what we had to do. No one felt the need to take advantage or be the bossy one of the group. We all worked together really well and listened to everyone’s opinions. Also if someone in the group wasn’t quite sure about what they were doing the other people helped them and went over it with them.’*

-Amy Chambers, participant

It was through our early efforts at community building and taking the time to establish trust, create an atmosphere of inclusion and set boundaries that we believe the participants were able to delve into the concept of justice and dig deeply into their own creative voices. Creating this kind of safe, inclusive working atmosphere is what, we believe, encouraged the individuals and the community to flourish. We were able to provide the participants a working process that supported and included all of their voices. We were able to collaboratively build a strong, embodied and emotionally authentic performance that was representative of the performing participants and their community.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, we would like to begin with our initial question: Can physical engagement motivated by ideologies of justice in a collaborative setting bring about social shifting? What shifted? Awareness, confidence, tolerance, connectedness, trust, openness and the belief in the human spirit all surfaced through this process, as evidenced by the words of participants in *The JUSTICE Project*:

‘I value myself more now. I have gained a new sense of humanity and community. People ARE nice, loving and honest. I had forgotten that.’

- Jai Hutchison, participant

‘Community is flexible, open to challenges, caring and forgiving. This is what I learned.’

- Edy Samuels, participant

“Yes, I strongly think my idea of justice has changed. It has made me more confident and I can now accept people a lot more. I feel that justice opened my eyes to see that people should be treated equally and it can build a stronger community if people accept you for who you are.”

- Chanique Waithe, participant

The practices of inclusion, collaboration, community building and genuine listening to what the participants share and express through their bodies and voices are what we believe creates a project with depth, authenticity, resonance and transformation for all involved. Social shifting takes place within the container created by respect, vulnerability and tolerance of the human search for justice. It is a place where all human beings are heard, accepted and validated for their uniqueness.

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