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So...You Can Dance: The Blending of Two Perceptions

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

SO...YOU CAN DANCE:
THE BLENDING OF TWO PERCEPTIONS

By

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PROSPECTUS

Abstract

Popular television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance* showcase “live” dance performances, accompanied by a panel of expert judges that provide commentary feedback and professional criticism of each performer’s overall execution and performance from week to week. The professional feedback of the performances helps guide audience members, with little knowledge of dance technique, to determine which dancer was the most successful in the implementation of the work overall. Due to advancements in technology over the past century, the ability to instantly create and send information across the United States (within a matter of seconds) has helped elevate dance awareness in today’s current society. Due to this, I believe that society’s perception of dance has been strongly influenced by popular TV competitions and online media platforms such as YouTube. As a direct result, I am interested in dissecting what the general American taste for dance now includes. Through the utilization of online platforms to view past seasons’ performances and their accompanying viewer comments, I hope to document general trends in aesthetic preferences that both the judges and audience consider successful. Fundamentally this project investigates the core question: Is it possible to choreograph phrase work that embodies concepts of commercial dance, while producing a work using concepts of concert dance and its environment?

Contextual Information:

Originally performing in prestigious theaters and opera houses throughout the northern and eastern hemispheres, the world’s first dance companies enchanted audiences across Europe and Russia, as they first began creating evening-length ballets that transformed some of the most popular concert halls into magical new worlds where imagination and an escape from reality was

possible. During the early 20th century, dance finally gained major popularity in the United States, becoming a respectable and entertaining art form that often generated sold out crowds for multiple performances. With the boom of the Hollywood film industry in the early 1930s, a shift in dance ideologies shaped the way dance would be preserved in American culture.

Arriving in the United States around this same time, George Balanchine and his newly implemented educational institution, the School of American Ballet, became the corner stone of formal dance (mainly ballet) educational institutions that later played a large role in the further expansion of dance as a respectable and highly lauded art form in American society (Lee 2002). Also having a major influence on dance in the United States was Mikhail Mordkin, an American ballet pioneer and founder of the Mordkin Ballet, later renamed Ballet Theatre (and eventually being renamed again as the well known, American Ballet Theater). Debuting in 1940, Mordkin and Ballet Theatre, would revolutionize dance in western culture after establishing the “largest collaboration in dance history, comprising eleven choreographers, eighteen ballets, fifty-six classical dancers of whom fifteen were soloists, nineteen Spanish dancers, fourteen African American dancers, eleven designers, and three conductors” (Lee 2002, 327). Innovative ideas of dance technique emerged during the 1930s to 1950s, as Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn brought an equally influential form of dance to the West Coast through education. The Denishawn School and Company pushed the formerly conceived notions of dance by shifting its boundaries and manipulating overall aesthetics choices in movement, which would later become known as Modern dance (Brown 1998).

These emerging influences in Western society contributed so immensely to the growth and development of dance as a popular art form, various academic institutions throughout the United States, began offering physical education classes that included both Ballet and Modern techniques. Prevalent since the conception of dance in college settings, professional Modern

dancers such as Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey, helped improve and support the “thinking and goals of academic dance educators,” which by the 1960s allowed “dance on campus [to come] into focus as an autonomous art form” (Lee 2002, 335). As these newly founded ideas and concepts continued to develop in both professional and academic settings, the perception that a dancer should only cultivate expertise in one technique was rapidly disregarded, and quickly dancers with the capability to perform a variety of techniques became the “ideal” candidate for companies and auditions. As concert dance became an increasingly admired art form in the United States, it began to intertwine with another popular medium—film. In fact, dance on film (mainly, the movies) became a successful way to convey dance to an even larger audience after “it became apparent that dance was particularly compatible with the filmic form: both film and dance are characterized by motion and the art of editing shares similarities with the rhythmic component of dance” (Dodds 2001, 4).

The utilization of dance on film has been evident since early exhibitions beginning in April of 1896, when the projection of the Leigh sisters (a vaudeville dance team) performing their umbrella dance, became the first commercial screening presented in the United States. As a result, filmmakers and dancers took advantage of the opportunity to employ this inventive technology by documenting both social dance and theatrical dance concepts. Similar productions were made in the years following, until 1927, when the advancement of audio technology ushered in a new era. From the 1930s to the early 1950s, the production of filmed musicals were moving away from theatre art dance concepts, and eventually became “characterized by their elaborate song and dance routines, performed by star names such as Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, [and] Gene Kelly...” (Stoop 1984, 58). These dancers were known for their utilization of Tap, Vaudeville, and other popular social dance styles choreographed specifically for film, that resembled similar Broadway traditions by incorporating large staircases, revolving platforms,

choruses of dancers, and an overall stigma that placed production and visual experiences over the overall expression of the movement (Delamater 1981).

By the last half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the public's interest in dance and dancers became an important factor that led to the conception of a new genre of dance on film, which led to a corresponding upsurge in the support contributed by the government and corporate funding (Brooks 2002, xix). This stimulation of the public's increased interest in dance, exercise, and wellness was shown to have a correlation with the "general health and fitness boom that flourished during this period" (Dodds 2001, 7). As well as playing a prevalent role in movies, dance choreographed for camera became a hot commodity in music videos, after the 1981 premiere of MTV (Music Television), which broadcasted music videos 24-hours a day. Immediately producers of this new genre noticed the beneficial impact of layering dance, a newly integrated visual component, as a way to connect the audience to the music. Meaning, "the music was the driving force but the collaboration meant that dance on the small screen was watched by an enthusiastic new audience" (Brooks 2002, 59).

The appearance of dance on television dates back to as early as May 26, 1931, when Maria Gambarelli, radio show personality and former Metropolitan Opera Ballet performer, became the first dancer in the United States to perform on television (Dunning 1990). As televising dance continued to grow in popularity throughout the 1940s and 1950s, a slight shift in the production dynamics followed. Television companies began creating "film adaptations of stage musicals, such as *Oklahoma!* (1955) and *Cabaret* (1972)," as well as "narrative films [that used] dance as an intrinsic feature of the plot, as with the critically acclaimed *The Red Shoes* (1948)" (Dodds 2001, 6–7). Although dance on film and dance for television, were two distinctive ways of connecting dance to an audience, the overall similarities used between both were almost identical. Such as the utilization of innovative film technology and post-production

editing tactics to create and enhance their final outcome; or even the comparable search for a specific type of dancer that often lacked overall technique but obtained the ability to perform a multitude of 'trick' movements if called upon.

The tradition of dance on TV continued to grow and progress in the late 1990's and early 2000's. The popularity grew rapidly due to the immediacy of the Internet and the ability of television and Internet viewers to exchange comments and dialogue with one another in "real time" about what they were seeing. A presence of online audience and community dancegoers became even more popular, leading to one of the most popular dance television presences in the United States to date. In 2005, Nigel Lythgoe and Simon Fuller collaborated to establish a 'dance' spin off of the hit television show *American Idol*. They called it, *So You Think You Can Dance* (also known as *SYTYCD*). The goal was to find the best overall dancer, by challenging contestants to step outside of their normal comfort zone while still performing each week at a professional standard. For example, styles of dance that have been featured on the show in the past include Classical, Contemporary, Ballroom, Hip-Hop, Street, Club, Jazz and even Musical Theater. With plans to go into its 12th season in the States, *SYTYCD* has become one of the largest and most popular dance shows on television, which includes twenty-five spin-offs of the show in other countries, and nearly seventy accumulated seasons between them all.

Each season begins with an open cattle call that allows contestants to audition at a specified location throughout the United States. Through a series of audition rounds in front of producers, contestants are first asked to improvise in their selected style of choice, where they are immediately evaluated and either cut from the audition or sent on to perform a solo in front of a panel of expert judges and working professionals in the field of dance. After dancing for the judges, it is then decided if the dancer should be sent to Las Vegas for the next round of auditions or if they should be cut from the competition. Once they have decided who moves on

to the Vegas auditions, this process of elimination continues on until they narrowed it down to that seasons 'Top 20' (with some seasons only having a 'Top 16'). Each week from then on the dancers are paired up and given the task of learning an entirely new duet of any style of dance, that they must perform each week. After performing, the judges provide their professional feedback of the performance as a guide for audience members, with little knowledge, who determine how successful the implementation of the work was overall. After each duet has received feedback from the judges, a phone number is displayed across the screen, which can later be used for 'live polling.' This allows for any audience member watching the show to vote by calling or texting using the specified number registered for each particular contestant. After the 'live polling' ends the votes are accumulated each week, the contestants with the least amount of votes are eliminated from the show; this continues on until the winner is chosen at the end of the season.

Rationale

I often feel that the perception of 'concert' and 'commercial' dance are at odds; as a result I began to question whether or not they could successfully coexist. This is the reason for undertaking this project. With this project, I want to see if it is possible to use elements commonly associated with popular television shows, alongside the deeper concepts, ideas, and environment that are often explored in creating concert dance. With dancers and audiences normally separating the two styles from one another, you are often classified as either a commercial dancer or a concert dancer. If we eliminate this concept of separating the two styles, and instead focus on using commercial and concert dance intertwined, we have created a unique way to connect a larger audience to alternative forms of dance that are not represented on television.

It is important to note that when talking about ‘commercial’ and ‘concert’ dance in this project, I am specifically referring to the utilization of Contemporary dance technique in both forms of media. This has been done in order to easily compare and contrast elements of both ‘commercial’ and ‘concert’ on a smaller scale, due to the limited amount of time for the completion of the project, as well as narrowing down the vast amount of information that is available when trying to define both subjects individually. Contemporary dance at its most basic definition is “anything current with a pluralistic aesthetic” although in other places it is defined as “modern dance that departed from the form’s develop[ed] in the first half of the twentieth century” (Fisher 2014, 317). Adding to its definition, *SYTYCD* and its panel of judges later termed contemporary dance as lyrical/modern dance that began “fusing all forms, and that the uniqueness of each genre is starting to be muddled” (Looseleaf 2012).

Significance

With a generation that has easier access to technology than ever before, television shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* have rapidly changed the way that society views dance as an art form. Although this show has focused mainly on highlighting dance as an art form, the style of dancing and approach to creating the work uses ‘commercial’ based ideas to enhance the overall experience of the audience members. I believe that through observation of this popular television show, we can recognize characteristics of ‘commercial’ dance that can be utilized interchangeably with ideas of ‘concert’ dance, creating a new form of dance that successfully incorporates both styles in a single venue. While the perception of ‘concert’ and ‘commercial’ dance are often separated from one another, allowing the two elements to fuse together can create a unique style of dancing that ultimately could stimulate the progression of larger audience to theater venues and, through fusion, leads to social and artistic relevance to both forms.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Procedures

To satisfy the requirements of my honors project, I will spend a combination of two semesters to synthesize the entire project. The first semester, will be used as a way to gather research on both commercial and concert dance forms. This research will inform audiences of how simultaneously both perceptions can coexist in order to create a hybrid form of presenting contemporary work. As well as separately defining these ideas and perceptions, this project will explore further how they are used and manipulated within their current constraints. During this semester of the project, I will begin turning the research into a movement-based project that will be presented in the Nancy Smith Fichter Dance Theatre in April of 2015.

Working with fourteen B.F.A. Dance candidates from Florida State University's School of Dance, I will schedule three hours of rehearsals each week for the duration of seven months to develop a final choreographic work that embodies this new hybrid form of movement. Also to further the choreographic development of the project I plan to work with six B.F.A. Dance candidates from the School of Dance, to create two short phrases that will help establish prominent elements that are often present in both concert and commercial dance.

Methodology

In order to research and investigate what society's perception of dance has been shaped into as a result of an ever-evolving world of technology, I will be using a combination of both movement analysis and dance ethnography to aid in shaping my research.

Movement analysis of dance, at its most basic level, is the study of the human body's moving parts in relationship to the entire production. I will be using movement analysis research

to gather movement concepts through online media platforms, such as YouTube. With this I can grasp a deeper understanding of common choreographic tactics used throughout multiple seasons of SYTYCD that are most frequently portrayed on television. Using a cultural study approach to analyzing the movement, I will also examine how the images portrayed through the media can be grouped together individually becoming a sub-culture of dance itself. With further understanding of the movement style, it becomes possible to create a global dance community rather than separating genres further from one another. Also I will be using Laban Movement Analysis, developed by Rudolf von Laban, leading innovator of dance notation and effort/shape theory. This will help shape the content of the choreography with live dancers, using it to keep the structure and ideas of dance from the choreographic perspective. This includes using Laban effort/shape theory to help easily move back and forth between both perceptions while keeping common elements intermixable.

Another research method that will be employed during the creation of this project is dance ethnography, which on the most basic level is the observation, description, and understanding of movement prominently through human experience. By immersing myself in the styles of commercial dance and concert dance, I will set aside preconceived notions of the formats of these styles, and instead examine the overall structure of these styles through firsthand experience. This will allow me establish a basic structure for both styles individually, which will later help to establish a successful working cohesion of both worlds.

Materials

In order to conduct my research on television dance shows and the affect they have on society's perception of dance, I will need to find many seasons of *So You Think You Can Dance*, by searching for online formats of the performances. With these videos I will be able to filter

through the show's dramatic content and solely focus on the dancing that is performed. This will later aid me when translating movement that is considered popular dances into material for a final movement project that fits in a concert stage environment. Also to help establish choreography, I will be using YouTube, an online social media platform that allows anyone to share videos and comments. With this I will go through clips of popular pieces performed on the show and take into consideration which elements factored in to the overall enjoyment of performance.

REFLECTION

As a dancer and student at Florida State University, I often feel that the perception of 'concert' and 'commercial' dance are at odds; as a result I began to question whether or not they could successfully coexist. This is the reason for undertaking this project. My project seeks to establish basic characteristics of 'commercial' dance that can be utilized interchangeably with ideas of 'concert' dance, creating an innovative form that incorporates both perceptions into one venue. With dancers and audiences normally separating the two styles from one another, one is often classified as either a commercial dancer or a concert dancer. Allowing the two ideas to mold together creates a unique style that brings larger audiences to theater venues, and through this fusion lends social and artistic relevance to both forms equally. If we eliminate this concept of separating the two styles, and instead focus on using commercial and concert dance intertwined, we create a unique way to connect a larger audience to alternative forms of dance that are not completely represented on television or proscenium stages.

It is important to note that when talking about 'commercial' and 'concert' dance in this project, I am specifically referring to the utilization of Contemporary dance technique in both

forms of media. This has been done in order to easily compare and contrast elements of both ‘commercial’ and ‘concert’ on a smaller scale, due to the limited amount of time for the completion of the project, as well as narrowing down the vast amount of information that is available when trying to define both subjects individually.

When beginning to think of how to create movement I first posed the question; what is Contemporary ‘commercial’ Dance? Pace University in New York City, claims to be the only program of it’s kind in the city that provides a BFA in ‘commercial’ Dance. Taken straight from the university website, the school defines ‘commercial’ dance as a “blend of the highest quality of dance training, preparing students for diverse careers on stage, television, film, and the entertainment industry” (*BFA in Commercial Dance* 2011). While this only provides us with a simple definition for Contemporary ‘commercial’ dance, I began to question even further, how do scholars and experts in the field define Contemporary ‘commercial’ dance? In the article “Modern vs. Contemporary,” Victoria Looseleaf states that *So You Think You Can Dance* and it’s panel of expert judges, termed ‘Contemporary commercial’ dance as Lyrical/Modern dance that began “fusing all forms, and that the uniqueness of each genre has started to become muddled.” Still leaving me with a vague definition of Contemporary ‘commercial’ dance, I then tried to define what elements are common perceptions of Contemporary ‘commercial’ dance?

During my first rehearsal with my cast, I asked my dancers to use one word or sentence to describe their perception of what commercial dance means to them. Some of their responses included: musicality, pop music, dynamics, presence, doing the impossible, high energy, multiple camera angles, simple narratives, “drama, drama, drama”, large jumps, lots of turns, and of course BIG tricks. Although these elements were prevalent in a vast majority of works we viewed from the show *So You Think You Can Dance* during our beginning research, it also

became important to note that Contemporary ‘commercial’ dance does not solely have to be confined to it’s perceived elements to be considered effective.

Next I needed to establish; what is Contemporary ‘concert’ dance? A basic definition of ‘concert’ dance can be defined as; any dance performed before an audience, often presented in a theater, and is usually choreographed and performed to music. According to Jennifer Fisher in her article *When good adjectives go bad: the case of so-called lyrical dance*, we can define Contemporary ‘concert’ dance as “anything current with a pluralistic aesthetic, and even more specifically, it is modern dance that departed from the form’s developed in the first half of the 20th century” (Fisher 2014, 317). Keeping this in mind, I once again asked my dancers to use one word or sentence to describe their perception of concert dance. Some of their answers included: not smooth, abstract, broken, non-Lyrical, individual vs. group, proscenium stage, non-traditional music, slow, only one camera angle, never past 180 degrees, and NO tricks. Although these elements are considered the common perception of Contemporary ‘concert’ dance, it is just as important to note that it is not confined to strictly these characteristics.

I believe that these two perceptions, concert and commercial dance, have constantly been separated further and further, while all along both ideas have been informing each other by drawing influences from characteristics prominent in both. I also think that we can shift this concept by not trying to create validity that one is better than the other, but instead allow for the creation of a new hybrid form of movement that lends social and artistic relevance to both forms equally bringing larger audiences to one venue.

In order to test if it is possible to interchangeably use ideas from both perceptions, I allotted movement research rehearsals that were used to analyze how different characteristics

were interchangeable with one another. At the same time, I created a five-minute group piece over a span of 7 months that embodied this research through personal experiences.

In our research rehearsals, I worked with six B.F.A. Dance candidates from Florida State University's School of Dance, in order to create two short phrases. I began by picking seven characteristics at random from the list of answers the dancers perceived as ideas of Contemporary 'commercial' dance. Those words were: Dynamics, Musicality, Drama, Doing the Impossible, For the Audience, Turns, and Simple Story. I then had each dancer pick three of those words, and make a short movement phrase that embodied those words. Next, I paired the dancers into duets and had them combine their movement phrases. After that was created, we moved on to putting all the phrases together until we ended with our first complete phrase. Next as a group, we went step by step through the original phrase deconstructing and applying changes to the quality and dynamics of the movement in an effort to bring forth characteristics popularly used in Contemporary 'concert' Dance. This allowed both perceptions to have an equal amount of presence in the work.

In order to develop my group piece and final choreographic project, I embraced dance ethnography, which on the most basic level is the observation, description, and understanding of movement prominently through human experience. By immersing myself in the styles of 'commercial' dance and 'concert' dance, I sat aside preconceived notions of the formats of these styles, and instead examined the overall structure of these styles through firsthand experience. This allowed me to establish a basic structure for both styles individually, which later helped to establish a successful working cohesion of both worlds.

Working with fourteen B.F.A. Dance candidates from Florida State University's School of Dance, I scheduled three hours of rehearsals each week for the duration of seven months to develop choreographic works, which I personally felt embodied this new hybrid form of

movement. The final choreographic project titled *Wo(man)*, premiered in Florida State University School of Dance's annual showcase, Days of Dance 2015. During the fall semester, while accompanied by fourteen dancers, I spent three hours each Saturday to begin developing the work. Utilizing basic characteristics associated with commercial dance, I used elements such as pop music to create a simple story in order to inform the work. After performing half of the final product during a mid-January showing, I received choreographic feedback from a selected panel of professionals from Florida State University's School of Dance. Some of the criticism included, creating a solo to contrast the group, more moments of stillness, and breaking the movement into trios and duets with less dancers. Taking this feedback, I returned to the studio for the remaining three months to better shape the piece into a final product. At the beginning of April, as part of the requirements to be selected into Days of Dance, I presented the final piece to be adjudicated by a selection committee that determined which pieces to include in the show. My piece, *Wo (man)* was selected to be performed in Days of Dance, FSU's School of Dance spring concert.

Continuing this research in the future, I plan on using the online media platform YouTube, as a choreographic research aid. I will begin by conglomerating an assortment of clips from the television show *So You Think You Can Dance* to use for movement research. After watching each clip, I will document popular trends by sifting through the comments left by online users in order to generate a basic understanding of society's current perception of dance. During each rehearsal, I will set up video footage to document and capture the new material, as well as the overall change in the piece over time. Using this footage each week, I will create a computer-edited video that shows the choreographic choices used in the dance throughout the rehearsals, which will then be posted to a unique YouTube account associated solely with the

project. This video will allow online users to tune in, see the work in progress and provide feedback on any aspect of the work that they feel is important or stood out to them. This will create a conversation between potential audience members and myself, as the choreographer, in order to create a more accurate idea about the uses of intertwining previously conceived notions of concert and commercial dance. Each week following the posts, I will use information collected by the comments of online users to manipulate the choreography even further in future attempts to mix the forms even further.

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