

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Bridging the Gap: Between Commercial Dance and Dance in Higher Education

THESIS

submitted in part partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

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2015

DEDICATION

TO

Manzella Vincent, Benjamin Vincent and Benjamin Vincent Jr.

in recognition of their love and continued support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT OF THESIS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: THE FOUNDATIONAL FORMS OF COMMERCIAL DANCE	5
CHAPTER 2: SPECIALTY SKILLS AND SUPPLEMENTAL CLASSES FOR THE COMMERCIAL DANCER	17
CHAPTER 3: FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY IN COMMERCIAL DANCE	28
CHAPTER 4: THE USE OF HAIR, HEELS, AND THE FACE IN COMMERCIAL DANCE	44
CONCLUSIONS	

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincerest appreciation to all the dance teachers, professors and educators that have taken a genuine interest in my education and improvement over the years.

I thank the dance professionals Carmit Bachar, Brian Friedman, Lauren Gaul, JoAnn Hunter, Scott Jovavich, Lisa Lindholm, Terry Lindholm, Rhonda Miller, Elizabeth (Liz) Ramos, Desmond Richardson, Jamal Sims, Jamal Story, and Charlie Sutton for taking part in this research.

I am thankful to the University of California, Irvine dance department faculty, for their positive contributions to my research knowingly and unknowingly. The information I have gained from each and every faculty member has enhanced my dance life.

I thank Professor Mary Corey and Assistant Professor Sheron Wray for agreeing to be on my thesis committee. Their intelligence and in-depth understanding of dance historically and culturally is truly admirable and has enhanced my research.

My deepest appreciation goes to my thesis Chair, Associate Professor, Loretta Livingston, for not only being an exemplary educator but also an incredible human being. She has been a supportive, understanding, intuitive and efficient mentor. I feel fortunate that I was under her guidance throughout my research.

Lastly, I thank my mother Manzella Vincent, father Benjamin Vincent, and brother Benjamin Vincent Jr. They have been a source of constant love and support in my life.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Bridging the Gap: Between Commercial Dance and Dance in Higher Education

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Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2015

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Commercial dance is employment in which dancers are hired to perform in and on film and TV, music videos, corporate events, advertising campaigns, musical artist's tours, exhibitions, industrials, Broadway and for-profit venues such as Las Vegas nightclubs. Many dance programs in higher education have a concert dance focus (ballet and modern), and do not have a curriculum that fully prepares dancers for the commercial dance sphere.

Arts based qualitative research was utilized for the pedagogical intent of furthering dancers' knowledge with regard to commercial dance, so that they have an embodied understanding and can make a living in the field. Interviews were conducted with dance professionals Carmit Bachar, Brian Friedman, Lauren Gaul, JoAnn Hunter, Scott Jovavich, Lisa Lindholm, Terry Lindholm, Rhonda Miller, Elizabeth (Liz) Ramos, Desmond Richardson, Jamal Sims, Jamal Story, and Charlie Sutton. The interviews with the professionals gave rise to pertinent topics and information that can help create more versatile and marketable dancers for all facets of the commercial dance world, and be implemented into university dance departments.

Introduction

My inspiration to be a professional dancer was first and foremost motivated by all types of music. The first time I really responded to music through dance was at the age of three. My mother had taken me to an Earth, Wind & Fire concert and she said I danced all night in the stadium until I blackened my little, white socks. Growing up, I was also inspired by popular media and pop music icons. I watched music videos of Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Madonna and Paula Abdul, and these images inspired my desire to dance on film and tour around the world with recording artists. My mother put me in tap dance classes which led to my desire to study jazz, hip-hop, ballet, modern, Latin dance, and various forms of vernacular dance. Who knew that years later, as a professional dancer, I would dance in stadiums around the globe, performing onstage with world renowned artists like Madonna, Britney Spears, Shakira, Ricky Martin, Prince, and Gloria Estefan.

What caught my attention as a child was the union of my body rhythmically moving to music, and the sense of belonging and community I felt when dancing with others who seemed to experience the same feeling. It was the feeling of the union of my spirit, the music and community, all mixed together that filled my soul. What caught my attention as a young dancer in my formative years was the look of strong, attractive dancers in films, music videos and on television, dancing with artists to whom I loved to listen, while almost appearing super human doing so. However, what I capitalized on as a performer as an adult was my versatile training and ability across various forms of classical and vernacular forms of dance, as well as my capacity to create an appropriate image for whatever dance job I sought to attain. The energy (spirit) I feel when I dance, my love for dance on film and for musical artists, along with my

versatility and ability to portray a strong physical image, are the attributes that make me valuable in the commercial dance world.

By “commercial dance” I am referring to dance employment in which dancers are hired to perform in and on film and TV, music videos, corporate events, advertising campaigns, musical artist’s tours, exhibitions, industrials, Broadway, and for-profit venues such as Las Vegas nightclubs (Guarino and Oliver 28).

For years I enjoyed a career dancing, choreographing for film, television and stage work, acting predominantly on film and television and touring with artists. I attribute much of my sustaining success to my diversified dance training in both concert and commercial dance. Education has always been an important part of my progression in the dance world. I earned my Bachelor of Fine Arts in dance from the concert based dance program at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. My undergraduate college level dance education was invaluable because it broadened my concepts of dance, improved my skills in classical dance forms like modern and ballet, made me a more knowledgeable and articulate dance educator, and gave me a degree that has benefitted me in education and employment. Conversely, my undergraduate education in a primarily concert based program did not fully prepare me for the commercial dance realm. My college training supplemented the commercial training I received from commercial dance studios, workshops and intensives.

While earning my master’s degree at the dance department of the University of California, Irvine, I started to ponder what information/training dancers should be receiving to work in the commercial dance sector. While teaching many young dancers across the United States and Canada, I found that many of them found it challenging to find college level dance programs with a commercial dance focused curriculum. In addition, I personally encountered

many dance educators at the college level who had a limited knowledge of dance outside of the realms of ballet or modern, not to mention a somewhat negative attitude to dance which did not fall in the realm of concert dance. While researching my thesis, I was told by two educators in higher education that university dance is for the maintenance of the classics and not for commerce. However, I believe that dance curricula can be expanded to include training that would help inform dancers seeking an education to advance them into a commercial dance career.

Given my history in university dance programs and commercial dance, I am interested in furthering dancers' knowledge with regard to commercial dance styles and topics, so that they have an embodied understanding, and, moreover, can make a living in the field. I am hoping to contribute information that may supplement programs that are concert dance centered, thus creating more marketable dance professionals that can compete in the ever-changing concert and commercial dance worlds. Simply, I want to see young dancers with the same aspirations I had be prepared to enable their dreams to come to fruition through dance education at the university level.

The purpose of this study is to understand what skills emergent dance artists must have to successfully work in the commercial dance world. The data was compiled through interviews conducted with thirteen commercial dance professionals (dancers, agents, choreographers, teachers). In addition, I have added my own stance or anecdotal information drawing from my seventeen-year career as a commercial dance professional. Once these skills are identified, they could be implemented in American dance degree granting programs interested in preparing dancers for the commercial dance market.

My task was to conduct open-ended interviews and document analysis including but not limited to reviewing existing literature existing on the topic, dance videos and films, and scholarly articles. The outcome of the research is an investigation into topics and skills that could be addressed in higher education to facilitate a readiness for a commercial dance career. It must be mentioned that there is a slight difference in the amount of certain types of commercial work based on geography. For example, it is argued that New York City has more musical theatre employment, compared to Los Angeles, which is geared toward film and television employment. This is not to infer that New York and Los Angeles are the only two regions to find commercial dance work. There are various cities to find commercial dance employment. This research deals with preparing dancers for the entire commercial arena regardless of where they seek a job.

CHAPTER 1

THE FOUNDATIONAL DANCE FORMS OF COMMERCIAL DANCE

The purpose of this chapter is to define the dance styles and forms that best serve a dancer as a professional performer in the commercial realm of dance and that might well serve to build a framework for teaching commercial dance in higher education. In talking with dance professionals from the commercial realm, I found that there were quite a few large areas of agreement and a few surprises.

Rhonda Miller

Choreographer, dancer, and dance educator Rhonda Miller is another individual that is interested in helping dancers flourish in the commercial dance world. Miller is an Associate Professor of dance at Pace University Dyson College of Fine Arts in New York City and has had a twenty-year career in commercial dance in New York and Los Angeles. Miller helped develop the commercial dance major at Pace in 2012, based on her perception that there was a gap in dance education at the college level (Kay 50).

When asked what qualities make a commercial dancer most viable, Miller's response is, "Well one, they have to have solid technique." Throughout the interview Miller stresses the importance of ballet, modern, contemporary, jazz, tap, and hip-hop. Miller emphasizes that an embodied knowledge of world dance forms such as Bollywood, Indian, and African dance also makes students more well-rounded. In my view Miller is suggesting that these world dance forms can enhance a commercial dance career and create versatility, as opposed to being the key forms to train in.

Miller is adamant that commercial dancers be trained in hip-hop because of its prevalence in American culture, various jazz styles, and in the performances of various recording artists. Most of the jobs I work on as a professional dancer from television commercials to music videos require an understanding of vernacular or hip-hop dance. For the purpose of this paper, when discussing vernacular dance I am referring to social dances that have developed out of American culture, have been created by everyday people and are not traditionally taught in a dance studio. For example, hip-hop and house dancing are branches of vernacular dance (Guarino and Oliver 29-30). Most musical artists that I worked with in my career preferred the grounded quality of hip-hop dance as opposed to the lightness and verticality associated with ballet. Miller also stresses the importance of tap training primarily for the purpose of enhancing a dancer's musicality and understanding of syncopated rhythms. My next interviewee seems to echo Miller's idea that many styles important to a commercial dance career are lacking in many college level dance programs.

Jamal Story

Jamal Story is a dancer, choreographer, and graduate of Southern Methodist University's dance department. Story has worked extensively in the concert dance world with such companies as Donald Byrd's The Group, Complexions Contemporary Ballet, and in the commercial realm with artists like Madonna and Cher among others. In our interview Story affirms that college dance programs predominantly stress only the classic forms of dance as opposed to commercial styles. Story states:

The problem with most academic institutions when it comes to technique is that the technique is always falling in the category of ballet or modern or jazz...one thing is not good to prepare you for the entire world of dance in the commercial industry. It is necessary to have access to everything...to Latin jazz, to tap to hip-hop...to all of it. The goal of ballet unless you are training a ballet dancer should be simply to give someone

discipline...the discipline in their bodies to better get all of those other styles into the instrument that they are working with.

Story further discusses how many of his professional dance colleagues “hustle” from one dance job to the next. Story explains that it is their versatility as dancers that allow them to switch from “straight jazz,” to contemporary modern, to Broadway jazz, to hip-hop to voguing, and then to krumping. Story echoes Miller’s concept that commercial dancers need to be versatile. It seems that a more comprehensive and less “peripheral” understanding of vernacular dance (hip-hop, krumping and voguing) forms is necessary to fill the void between commercial dance and many college level programs. Story feels that not all of these forms of dance could be “taught in bulk” in university dance divisions. Story’s assertion may be true however, there appears to be a need to implement some of the commercially viable forms of dance into higher education.

Story, like Miller, states the importance of a strong foundation in ballet or modern is to gain “technique.” Technique for the purpose of this paper will be defined as the core principles of movement used in ballet that have transferred into modern dance and various forms of jazz dance. These principles are alignment, flexibility, and strength. According to Story, technique is acquired from exercises like *battement dégagé*, *battement tendu*, and *grand battement*. Story explains that the purpose and discipline of acquiring classical technique (modern dance and ballet) is to give the body the “know how” to learn other styles and forms of dance. Story relates that ballet or modern dance creates a framework from which other styles can be built upon.

Story further explains that a commercial dancer needs other forms of dance to supplement his or her training. He mentions the importance of “straight” or classic jazz. Although different in look and technique, the term Classic jazz defines the style of jazz that developed during the 1920s around the same time as jazz music, as well as the style of jazz that

originated with its codification by artists like Jack Cole, Luigi and Matt Mattox (Gurarino and Oliver 27). Story includes Broadway jazz, hip-hop, Afro Cuban dance, and vernacular styles of dance like voguing, house dancing, and krumping to his list of dance styles to know. My personal experience in commercial dance supports Story's claim. My training in modern and ballet served as my foundation, but throughout the majority of my career I predominantly performed using various forms of vernacular dance and jazz.

Lastly, Story also mentions that he would like to see university dance divisions implement strength building programs that would support "extra risks" or "special skills." Special skills will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. He mentions weight training, pilates (which many dance departments incorporate today) and gyrotonics to help give dancers strength beyond what traditional dance classes offer. Story's recipe for success in commercial dance is versatility and is echoed by Lauren Gaul.

Lauren Gaul

Former Radio City Music Hall Rockette, choreographer and Associate Professor of dance at Pace University, Lauren Gaul, found that her education and versatility as a dancer was key to her marketability. In 2000 Gaul received her undergraduate degree in dance performance. She attended Ann Lacy School of American Dance and Arts Management at Oklahoma City University for her undergraduate degree. Gaul chose Oklahoma City because she felt it was one of the few dance programs that was not primarily focused on ballet and modern. After a ten-year performing career Gaul went back to get her masters degree in pedagogy from SUNY Purchase. Gaul does not feel higher education recognizes careers in commercial dance. She went back to school to get her masters degree to prove to herself that her commercial career was valid.

Gaul attributes the “void” in college dance programs to various factors. Gaul identifies a lack of hip-hop and diverse forms of jazz in dance programs as a big oversight in dance curricula. She also recognizes that jazz and hip-hop are constantly changing and not easily codified. In addition, many commercial dancers start their careers young and find it difficult to go back to school and get the education necessary to teach at the college level. Lastly, she mentions that hip-hop and jazz companies did not find their roots in higher education like modern dance. Gaul is very clear about the styles of dance she wants to see in university dance programs because of these factors.

Gaul is specific about defining the dance styles that are most purposeful for a commercial dancer. Gaul does echo Miller in saying that hip-hop should be a primary focus in dance departments. Gaul believes that her tap training was vital because it improved her hip-hop skills. She speaks most passionately about jazz training being paramount to a commercial dance career. Gaul is adamant that specific principles of jazz, like working in *plié* (grounded), utilizing quick weight shifts, forced arch, building complex coordination, having a sense of contraction and isolations aided her hip-hop dancing. It seems logical that all of these rhythmic dance forms (tap, jazz, hip-hop) can aid one another since they all have roots in West African dance (Oliver xv).

Gaul explains that various styles of jazz need to be taught in a university setting to facilitate commercial careers in dance. Gaul feels the jazz styles that are of primary importance to a commercial dancer are Latin jazz, Jazz Funk, Pop jazz, Classic jazz, and Broadway jazz. Latin Jazz is a combination of European, African, North American, and South American dance forms (Guario and Oliver 29). Jazz funk is a style influenced by rhythm and blues (31) and Pop jazz is characterized as a fusion of traditional jazz and hip-hop, danced to popular music (29).

Gaul mentions Gus Giordano's idea that jazz dance is ever evolving with the changing of the times, and she feels that jazz is hard to codify for this reason. I further assert that because jazz is ever evolving, university dance programs do not always incorporate current styles like Pop jazz or Jazz Funk. These are styles that can greatly serve dancers entering the commercial dance arena. Gaul is clear about identifying marketable jazz styles and the importance of an embodied understanding of the principles of jazz dance. The next interviewee does not have a connection to a college dance experience but she has had an extensive Broadway career.

JoAnn Hunter

As a dancer JoAnn Hunter has performed in 12 Broadway musicals and has choreographed six Broadway shows as either the choreographer or the associate choreographer. Hunter attributes her success on Broadway to her formative training with her teacher Nancy Le Febvre DiCiccio. Hunter recalls that she started in ballet, then tap and progressed to jazz and acrobatics. She asserts that she had to study everything from jazz to lyrical to modern. Her mentor Le Febvre DiCiccio was adamant about bringing various guest teachers to her Rhode Island studio so that the dancers would not get stuck in one style. The theme of versatility is evident in Hunter's training. According to Hunter the "more well-rounded" a dancer is the better prepared the dancer will be for the real world. Hunter provides more specificity on what she feels are necessary styles for a commercial dance career.

When auditioning dancers Hunter explains that she looks for performers with a strong center. She considers ballet the base of all the dance forms, but Hunter further states, "When I said a ballet base...I'm not talking about...I'm not interested in looking for a ballerina at all. I just know that you know how to balance." The theme of having strong classical technique from ballet is a recurring one with the professionals I interviewed. Hunter and Miller note that an overt

outward appearance of a ballet dancer is not necessary for the commercial realm. Hunter discovers in the interview that there are other “elements” that she looks for when auditioning dancers. The other “elements” are not derived from ballet technique but from jazz technique.

Hunter realized it is Theatrical jazz technique that helped her feel strong, sexy and confident as a dancer. Consequently, Hunter looks for strong Theatrical jazz training when hiring dancers. Hunter acknowledges that she loves clean sharp dancers that can stop on a dime, have individuality, are grounded and can command a room. Hunter unknowingly had described key kinetic and social elements of jazz (Cohen 5). Hunter hires dancers that are grounded and exhibit individuality. The use of weight into the floor (grounded) is a kinetic element of jazz dance, while exhibiting individuality is considered a social element that defines jazz dance (Cohen 5).

Hunter unknowingly is attracted to principles of the Africanist aesthetic in the dancers she hires. Clean, sharp movements with an attack are characteristics of ephibism. Ephibism is considered a youthful attack with sharpness and force (Gottschild 108). This term comes from scholar Robert Farris Thompson’s Africanist aesthetic nomenclature. Hunter does not identify the attributes she likes as elements of jazz or exhibiting Africanist principles, but scholarly research helps to see these connections. A more thorough investigation of jazz elements and the Africanist aesthetic will be discussed later in the paper. Lastly, Hunter seems to be in alignment with the previous interviewees in that she believes versatility is a key component to commercial dance success. The next professional interviewed has an iconic image within the professional dance world.

Desmond Richardson

Desmond Richardson is not only a commercial dancer, but a world-renowned concert dancer and co-creator of Complexions Contemporary Dance Company. Richardson explains that he started as a street dancer before beginning his classical training at the High School of Performing Arts in New York City. Richardson further explains that prior to his formal classical training his base in dance was gymnastics, hip-hop, and popping and locking. He said, “Because as I was learning classical dance and modern and Horton and all of those other things...jazz...and Jack Cole steps I...I was like... I actually want to go house dancing.” A mentor of Richardson’s told him not to forget the part of himself that connected to his “roots.” Richardson’s “roots” is a reference to his connection to vernacular forms of dance like hip-hop, and popping and locking.

Richardson’s teacher’s advice resonates with him and is the reason he currently feels dancers should stay attuned to vernacular dances like voguing. Richardson explains, that there is a “naturalness” and fluidity that come from performing vernacular forms of dance that is necessary for a dancer. For example, I observe this “naturalness” in many Latin dance forms when dancers incorporate fluid hip movements indicative of the style. Richardson discusses that there are key forms of dance that can create a well-rounded commercial dancer. He feels hip-hop is a good foundation to begin training a dancer because it is the root of many forms of dance (vernacular). I agree that hip-hop is the root of various forms of vernacular dance like popping and locking, house dancing, and b-boying (Oliver xv).

Staying with the trend of the other interviewees, Desmond feels that ballet is a necessity for commercial dance training as well as Classic jazz. He adds that the muscles of a dancer need ballet technique to “pull-up” and counter-balance the grounded nature of hip-hop. Richardson is

the first to mention contact improvisation as a form of dance that is necessary for a commercial career. He explains that it is important to know how to shift the weight of a partner in a manner that is not as erect and upright as classical ballet partnering. This recommendation is an interesting addition that none of the other professionals has mentioned, thus creating even more versatility in a commercial dancer.

Richardson stresses the fact that dance is a visceral, visual art form that requires a dancer to remain physically fit; in other words to have actual muscles to flex. Richardson feels that the regimen required to maintain a fit appearance has been neglected and should be attended to. Because of this perception, Richardson feels that dancers should be actively taking a pilates class or a floor barre class. Richardson seems to echo Jamal Story's assertion that dancers need some form of strength training. He stresses floor barre because in his opinion it creates a very strong abdominal core. Richardson also mentions the importance of some form of cross training program, which involves participation in two or more sports.

Ultimately, it appears that Richardson's recipe for commercial dance success is the combination of floor barre or pilates, cross training, ballet, hip-hop, contact improvisation, Classic jazz, and an embodied understanding of vernacular forms such as voguing, popping and locking.

Concluding Thoughts

The breadth of study for a commercial dancer does seem vast. The data gathered from the interviews makes it quite clear that a commercial dancer must be versatile and have an embodied understanding of various forms of dance. It is important to list the key forms of dance for a successful commercial career as identified by the dance professionals. The list will begin with the concert forms. Ballet and modern are mentioned across the board. There is no denying the

importance of ballet and modern training as evidenced by their inclusion in most college level dance programs. It is noted that ballet and modern are important because they offer classical technique that provides, strength, body alignment and flexibility. It is generally accepted that ballet and modern create a strong framework through which other forms and styles of dance can be built upon. Contact improvisation is included in the list because it teaches a dancer to shift the weight of a partner in a manner that is grounded and less vertical than traditional partnering. Pilates, floor barre, gyrotomics, and cross training were mentioned for strength building, creating a physically fit appearance and to accommodate “extra risks” or “special skills.” The classic dance forms and strength building classes lead us into the list of dance forms from the jazz dance continuum.

The commercial dance professionals identify specific forms of dance within the jazz dance continuum that aid a career. Skills in tap are deemed necessary for their performance value and assistance in aiding a dancer with syncopation, rhythm, and musicality required across other dance forms. Hip-hop is mentioned across the board because of its importance and presence in U.S culture, various forms of jazz, and its strong presence in the music and entertainment industry. It is deemed necessary to learn various forms of vernacular dance. Specifically voguing, krumping, and house dancing are mentioned. These forms of dance are widely used within commercial choreography and also help to maintain a natural feel and flow to popular music. Lastly, various forms of jazz styles are mentioned but specifically Latin jazz, Jazz Funk, Pop, Classic jazz, and Broadway style jazz. All of the styles mentioned by the industry professionals echo the idea that a commercial dancers need to have a diverse embodied experience in dance to become versatile and thus employable.

It is important to acknowledge that the predominant form of dance in the commercial field is jazz dance. The relationship between the various forms of jazz dance can be linked together with the understanding that the roots of jazz are West African dance (Oliver xv). These African roots branched out to develop into the various vernacular forms of dance that created tap, Classic Jazz, hip-hop, and all of the forms of dance previously mentioned by the industry professionals with the exception of ballet. It must be pointed out that modern dance and contact improvisation have been linked to an African dance lineage as well. Dance scholar Cynthia Novack argues in her book *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation*, that contact improvisation shares roots with African American vernacular dance, Lindy Hop and other social forms stemming from African dance. In addition, dance scholar Susan Manning's book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, discusses the links between modern dance choreographers and African American dance makers. With the exception of ballet, modern and contact improvisation the commercial realm is predominantly comprised of jazz dance in its many forms, or the "jazz tree" as discussed by Wendy Oliver in *Jazz Dance: The History of The Roots and Branches* (Oliver xvi).

Understanding the relationship of the different forms of jazz makes it logical and necessary for a commercial dancer to embody the jazz principles of complex coordination, weight shifts, and isolations. Although not identified by the interviewees I think it is necessary to expand on these ideas by including the elements of jazz as defined by dance educator at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, Patricia Cohen. Cohen defines the kinetic elements of jazz as the use of improvisation, an articulated inclined torso, a flat foot, bent knees, ankle and hip joints, body isolations, embellishments, polyrhythms and syncopation, polycentrism, angularity, symmetry and personal expression

(Cohen 5-6). Cohen identifies these elements by analyzing West African, African American vernacular dance and authentic jazz (Cohen). Authentic jazz is a form that developed around the 1920s with big band swing jazz music (Guarino and Oliver 24). These kinetic elements expound on the principles of jazz referred to by Gaul, and I propose should be consciously included in the technical training of commercial dancers.

The African/West African roots of jazz are strong. The majority of commercial dance is derived from the jazz continuum that finds its roots in African dance. For this reason, I propose an emphasis on teaching the Africanist Principles (polycentrism, ephibism, polyrhythms, high effect juxtaposition, Aesthetic of the cool) as outlined by Robert Ferris Thompson (Gottschild 103-109). From a pedagogical standpoint it would seem that if the roots of the “jazz tree” are derived from African dance, then West African dance should be added to that list of important forms to teach in a college level program. It also is in alignment with the reference to the importance of world forms like Bollywood, Indian, African and Afro-Cuban dance by the interviewees. Understanding the roots, elements and principles of jazz as well as the Africanist aesthetic shows the relationship between the various African, derived dance forms. This is the beginning of a framework of dance forms that will aid in the success of a commercial dance career.

Chapter 2

Specialty Skills and Supplemental Classes for the Commercial_Dancer

The purpose of this chapter is to define the supplemental dance and performance skills that can make a commercial dancer more employable. Some of these supplemental skills are referred to by the commercial dance community as “special skills.” The professionals I interviewed helped identify some of the more marketable “special skills” in the commercial dance realm.

Jamal Story

Jamal Story was the first of the interviewees to discuss the focus on extraordinary abilities in the commercial dance industry. He articulates that at the bottom of most commercial dancers’ resumes is a section that lists a dancer’s special skills. Story states that the small special skills section on a resume is actually very important to choreographers, casting directors and all those hiring dancers. Story feels that his strong technical dance training was the foundation of his success, but he attributes much of his commercial success to his extraordinary gymnastics ability. Story and I danced together in Madonna’s *Drowned World Tour* in 2001. His dancing ability is excellent, however, it was quite evident that he was hired to create dynamism onstage with his tumbling ability.

Story asserts that in today’s commercial dance market it is mandatory to be able to do “tricks” and extraordinary things. He attributes the popularity of grand feats in commercial dance to the prevalence of *So You Think You Can Dance* in the American consciousness. *So You Think You Can Dance* is a television show that started in the United States in 2005. Each episode showcases dancers competing in various genres of dance to become America’s favorite dancer.

In my opinion, the television show presents many exceptional dancers and some of them can execute skills that are almost in the realm of acrobatics, or what I refer to as “extreme dance.”

Story feels that dancers today need to have something extra or a “wow factor” that extends beyond good dance training. Story mentions that many dancers are being hired solely for having a “wowing” trick or tricks, and not for being an overall good dancer. Story explains that dancers are not being hired for possessing a wonderful passé, a great développé, a beautiful battement or a good flap ball change.” Story mentions that if he had received more training in forms of dance like b-boying or voguing or House dancing, he would get more work than he already has in the commercial dance sphere. b-boying, breaking or b-girling is a style of dance that is informed by martial arts, West Coast Funk, Russian folk dance, Latin styles and Afro-Brazilian dance. B-girling or b-boying was coined in the 1970s because dancers would save their best moves for the “break” in a song (Hubela 64).

As discussed in Chapter 1, Story would like to see university dance divisions implement strength building programs that would support “extra risks ” like gymnastics and aerial work. In addition, Story feels that dance departments should incorporate aerial work into their curricula. He has performed as an aerialist for various commercial jobs, and specifically on tour with Cher. Story laughs when he recounts that he had learned to do aerial work on the job. Story learned how to do Lyra or Hoop, which is a steel ring hung vertically by one or two ropes, and Hammock or Sling, which is a piece of fabric with the two tails connected to the ceiling at the same point to create a trapeze-like apparatus (Aerial Arts NYC). He feels that aerial work can be taught in dance programs at the rudimentary level without needing to have students high up in the air, so that they could eventually put it at the bottom of their resumes as a special skill.

Rhonda Miller

Rhonda Miller has implemented aerial classes into the commercial dance curriculum at Pace University, so that her students do not have to learn the skill on the job like Story had to. Miller did this because of her experience directing shows on cruise ships. While choreographing on a ship, Miller noted that dancers would have a full day of dance rehearsal from nine to five, and would later attend aerial training to master new aerial skills. Miller, like Story, believes a basic knowledge of aerial work makes commercial dancers more equipped for and valuable on commercial dance jobs. Miller states,

And if you look, aerial is everywhere. It's all over Las Vegas. Its transitions into the Broadway shows. . .ahh. . .it's everywhere. So, it's very important to at least have the basics. And when I wrote this program, I thought the school was completely behind students making money. And that's what we should do. We should...we should have our art form, yes absolutely, but dancers need to be paid for what they do. And I wanted to make sure that they knew how to have the longevity in their career and how to navigate and make a living.

Miller also mentions the importance of dancers taking acting classes. Acting can be looked at as a special skill, or simply in my opinion, a necessary skill for a commercial dancer. Miller mentions that a lot of dance jobs in New York, especially Broadway, involve storytelling and are story driven. Miller feels that dancers are not only required to draw from their dance technique, but they have to be able to tell a story which, is aided by acting experience.

JoAnn Hunter

It seems a logical deduction to surmise that a dancer who is a triple threat, meaning that he or she can sing, dance and act is more marketable, especially in musical theatre and on Broadway. JoAnn Hunter feels that studying voice and acting are useful if for nothing else, to help a commercial dancer's dance performance. Hunter seems to back up Miller's assertion that

dance is storytelling and narrative. From my experience New York and Broadway dance are generally more story driven than Los Angeles commercial dance employment.

Hunter mentions that a dancer may not speak, but their performance is still narrative. As a choreographer, Hunter creates with a story in mind and encourages dancers to have acting training. She feels that dancers have a heightened bodily awareness that can be helpful in an acting scene, and that reciprocally, acting skills can help a dancer tell a story through dance. I know that acting classes have taught me to have a motivating thought to create an inner experience that can initiate a movement. Hunter mentions that there are times in a dancer's career when he or she is unsure of a choreographer's intent, and it is up to the dancer to give him or herself a reason to do a movement or to create a character informed by his or her acting training.

Hunter feels equally strong about a commercial dancer studying voice. The objective of vocal lessons is commonly to increase a dancer's vocal performance, but Hunter also feels that vocal warm ups allow a dancer to learn to warm up a different part of the body (the vocal chords), using different muscles than dance requires. Why is this important? Overall, Hunter feels that acting and vocal training helps a dancer use his or her entire body, creating a better performer and "fuller instrument" for the arts and/or commercial dance. The term "triple threat" usually refers to a performer who is proficient in acting, singing and dancing. Hunter is not making this reference but I feel that becoming a "fuller instrument" can result in becoming a triple threat. Most Broadway or musical theater auditions require a dancer to sing at least sixteen bars of a prepared song. Any Broadway or off Broadway show I ever auditioned for required a vocal audition. Therefore, in my opinion, singing is a must for any dancer trying to perform on Broadway.

Desmond Richardson

Richardson doesn't specifically mention being a specialist, however his training in special areas such as breaking, popping and locking, and gymnastics seems to have greatly informed his movement quality and dance facility to make him arguably one of the most significant and unique dancers of our time.

Terry And Lisa Lindholm

Agents Terry and Lisa Lindholm are a husband and wife team and the owners of Go 2 Talent (GTA). GTA is one of the most prestigious dance and choreography agencies in Los Angeles, representing dancers and choreographers in all fields of the entertainment industry. Terry emphasizes that versatility is key for a commercial dancer. Lisa states, "It's almost not good enough to be a good dancer. It's what else do you bring to the table?" Lisa refers to the dancers with a special skill as "specialists." Lisa lists the skills that are most frequently requested by casting directors, and choreographers. They are aerial arts (trapeze, harness), contortion, rhythmic gymnastics, ballroom (is considered a special skill), salsa dancing, parkour (wall jumping), martial arts, and capoeira (Brazilian marital art that includes dance). Parkour, originated in France, and is developed from military obstacle training. Dancers move from one point in space to the next using their surroundings to propel them (Parkour, *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*). It usually involves an artistic expression while jumping on, up and over walls in urban inner city environments.

Lisa asserts that individuals hiring dancers seek to maximize their dollar, hire specialists who can also learn choreography in other styles of dance. She is seeing that more b-boys who can pick up choreography are being hired, rather than b-boys who simply "freestyle." "Freestyling" is another term used for improvising. From my experience, it is the assumption by

those in the commercial dance community (dancers, agents, choreographers), and some of the dance professionals I interviewed, that most b-boys or b-girls typically freestyle and are not trained to learn choreographed movement. This is why those who can learn choreography in various forms of dance are commodities and very marketable.

Terry articulates that there are specialty forms within the hip-hop genre of dance. According to Terry, the specialty forms that are presently most marketable are popping, which is indicated by fluid hips, torso, knees, body rolls of the neck and sharp leg snaps and muscle contractions of the biceps, triceps, pectorals and sternomastoid; breaking; locking, which incorporates pauses and held positions with a combination of dips, splits, kicks, points and drops (Durden 184-185); and bone breaking, which Terry and Lisa describe as a form of rhythmic contortion.

I asked Terry how much improvisation is now part of the commercial industry. Terry responds that improvisation is incredibly important and that it is predominantly referred to as free styling in the commercial market. Freestyling is an ever-important specialty skill that is almost a prerequisite in commercial dance. In my professional experience, I find that almost every audition I have been sent on incorporates a freestyle component. Terry approximates that about ninety-five percent of the auditions he sends his clients to have freestyle incorporated into the audition, or that many auditions are solely based on a dancers' freestyle abilities. Terry explains that freestyling in the commercial realm is not about improvising around a concept, but that it is based on a dancer's movement quality and is music-driven. This means that commercial dancers must have the capacity to move rhythmically to music using syncopation and polyrhythms. Reinforcing music by mimicking the rhythms, timbre and other elements exactly is considered a vital skill in freestyling. Those dancers that can do this while still remaining

creative in their movement choices and artistry are highly sought after. This does not mean that a dancer has to continuously mimic the music but that a dancer can do so effectively if necessary. In Terry's opinion, freestyling can tell a choreographer much more about a dancer from the inside out. I also feel that a dancer's freestyle can show a choreographer a dancer's range and limitations. While touring with artists like Gloria Estefan and Madonna, I found that a lot of the creative process was based around the dancers' freestyling abilities and special skills. When the choreographer wanted the scene to appear more organic, the dancers were asked to freestyle. Dancers that can freestyle will make a choreographer's job easier because not every movement has to be set and arranged by the choreographer.

Terry and Lisa's positions as agents give a clearer understanding of the dollars and cents of specialty skills. According to the Lindholm's, a dancer is more marketable in the commercial realm if he or she is versatile from knowing various forms of dance; can effectively freestyle in a manner that is music and rhythm driven; is a specialist in some form of aerial art, marital art, capoeira, contortion, ballroom, and/or in any one of the specialty forms of hip-hop.

Brian Friedman and Jamal Sims

Both Brian Friedman and Jamal Sims work with many of the most prominent musical artists today. Brian Friedman is a trendsetter in the commercial dance world as a dancer, choreographer and director. Some of Friedman's many credits are dancing with Janet Jackson, choreographing for Britney Spears, and artistic direction for the US and UK versions of the X-Factor. Jamal Sims is one of the leading hip-hop choreographers in Los Angeles. He is best known for choreographing the *Step Up* (2006-2014) series of films. Both choreographers stress the importance of dancers having a strong ability to freestyle. Friedman specifically mentions that the special skills he witnesses when auditioning dancers are breaking (break dancing) and

ballroom, which he attributes to the popularity of *Dancing With The Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance*.

Sims bluntly states that a dancer's freestyle can make or break his or her possibility of booking a job. He calls the present auditioning environment a battlefield, because the dancers in LA have to, metaphorically speaking, "fight" for the same jobs. From my observation, and from my discussions with peers, it is a predominant perception that there are more dancers seeking commercial dance employment in Los Angeles and New York because of reality, competitive dance shows on television. Agent Terry Lindholm mentions that there are also fewer open auditions because many choreographers are not holding them. Instead, choreographers are "direct booking" dancers they have already worked with or have some knowledge of. Fewer auditions mean fewer opportunities for new dancers to meet established choreographers, so their first auditions need to leave definite positive impression.

Sims sees many dancers attempt to do tricks that they have seen other dancers perform. Sims gives some advice about how to be a more successful freestyler. Sims recommends that a dancer perform a unique freestyle that sets him or her apart from the status quo. He mentions that many commercial dance jobs have no choreographed movement and solely entail freestyling. When choreographing the various installments of the *Step Up* series of films, Sims has had to showcase more dynamic forms of hip-hop that are unique and have an ever increasing "wow factor." Therefore, Sims has been hiring more dancers who are specialists for the jobs he choreographs. He states that he has been hiring dancers who have a skill called "tricking." Sims defines tricking as a mixture of martial arts, gymnastics, parkour and dance. Tricking practitioners are also referred to as "tricksters" or "trickers."

Concluding Thoughts

The industry professionals stress the importance of specific training outside of traditional dance classes to aid a commercial dance career. Acting and singing are important, not only to create a “triple threat,” but also to create a dancer who can better utilize his or her entire body to become a fuller instrument.

It is quite apparent that the list of special skills at the bottom of a dancer’s resume can enhance the marketability of a commercial dancer. It is more cost effective for choreographers, producers and casting agents to hire dancers who are adept at learning and executing choreography in various forms of dance, who have also attained a special skill in the form of the aerial arts, martial arts, ballroom dance, or a specialty form of hip-hop (breaking, bone breaking) salsa dance, capoeira, contortion, parkour, tricking, and/or gymnastics. Special skills are usually introduced during the freestyle portion of a commercial dance audition. It is paramount that a dancer’s freestyle be unique.

The interviewees did not go into depth about how a dancer could improve a freestyle, so I thought it important to propose a few ideas about how to do so in this conclusion. Jen Jones, an author who routinely writes children’s books and as well as for *Dance Spirit magazine* wrote “Freestyle Philosophy” for *Dance Spirit magazine* in 2004. Jones interviewed various commercial dancers, teachers and choreographers in the Los Angeles dance scene to discover how a dancer could improve their freestyle abilities. Within the article she delineates ten steps for a dancer to improve her or his freestyle, that I find are good for giving dancers beginning freestyle guidelines. Jones includes taking classes that incorporate free styling, improvising in a manner that manipulates steps already within the dancer’s vocabulary, frequenting nightclubs to stay abreast of current vernacular dance trends, studying the masters or watching dancers adept

at free styling, listening to a song continuously to understand the “vibe” or style of the music, videotaping personal freestyle movements to retain and use later, creating a “look” or movement style that shows individuality, practicing alone until the freestyle is comfortable, putting personality behind the movement, and remembering that there is no wrong way to freestyle (Jones 2004).

I find that these ideas are in line with the ideals of an *Embodiology*™ class I took at the University of California, Irvine taught by Assistant Professor Sheron Wray. *Embodiology*™ is a course developed by Wray and is defined as the total “Africological” concept of Improvisation that enhances dancer’s improvisational performance through West African performance strategies. *Embodiology*™ explores the dynamism of rhythm and its relationship to spoken language. It is a six-step method that makes clear intention in bringing about the ability to improvise skillfully. In addition, it has an emphasis on West African aesthetics that have found their way into vernacular forms of dance like hip-hop (Wray, “The Association of Dance”). It is discussed in Chapter One of this paper how the roots of most forms of jazz, vernacular dance, and essentially, commercial dance, are found in West African dance forms. In the *Embodiology*™ course, I found that its key ideas were useful for creating better improvisational/freestyle skills for the commercial market. *Embodiology*™ places an emphasis on understanding rhythm. Terry Lindholm also mentions musicality as an important component of free styling, but the study of rhythm in dance is often only associated with tap dance training. In *Embodiology*™ there is an emphasis on rhythm through the use of repetition. Repetition occurs by repeating a movement phrase over and over again. There is also an emphasis on pattern making through the creation of various movement phrases to the same rhythm. The dancer has a musical framework to stay

within, but continuously creates different movements in a rhythmic manner, stretching his or her creative boundaries.

In my sum, these are excellent methods for creating the groundwork for rhythmic and unique freestyle abilities. However, in order to create and repeat a phrase, and create patterns, a dancer needs a vocabulary to draw from. Professor Wray referred to the personal history or dance vocabulary from which a dancer draws as the “epic memory.” In the case of commercial freestyle, a dancer should have a vocabulary or epic memory that is diverse and rooted in vernacular dance, since they will be performing to various forms of popular music (pop, swing, hip-hop, dance). This vernacular epic memory can be rearranged and transposed to create a unique and individual freestyle, that with the aid of a special skill and/or, acting and singing, will create the “wow factor” necessary to book more commercial dance jobs.

CHAPTER 3

FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY IN COMMERCIAL DANCE

Through data collection it has become quite evident that the depictions of clearly delineated masculine images and feminine images are paramount to success in the commercial dance sphere. It is important for dancers to know how to portray these personas and where they are derived from. I will first review the data presented by the dance professionals with regard to depictions of masculinity and femininity in dance. Furthermore, I will look at representations of men and women in media to get an understanding of where collective definitions of masculine and feminine come from with respect to dance. When discussing the media I am referring to television, film, magazines, newspapers, adverts, the internet, and music. The representation of men and women has changed over the years. However certain ideas of masculinity and femininity have remained constant.

Interviewees Discuss Feminine and Masculine Dancing

The interviews with the dance professionals yield some pertinent information with regard to the representation of masculinity and femininity in commercial dance. Broadway professional JoAnn Hunter had strong opinions on how women should translate femininity into dance. Hunter wanted to see female dancers be strong but also to have a feminine quality while performing. Hunter states, “You know how to ‘work it.’ You know how to make it look good and it still has strength but it has a feminine quality to it.” Hunter is adamant about a female knowing how to “dance like a guy” but then knowing how to point her foot. Hunter’s definition of dancing like a guy will be addressed shortly. Hunter bevels her foot as she mentions the necessity of a female dancer needing to point her feet to look feminine. A beveled foot is achieved when the heel of

one foot is rested against the other but not at right angles. A beveled foot appears as if the toe is winged outward and not sickled inward, and also gives even more length to a dancer's leg line.

While discussing feminine dancing, Hunter also lifts her body in a very upright posture with her chest held high, emphasizing her breasts. This change in her body position indicates that posturing can play a large role in creating a feminine persona in commercial dance. Hunter's verbal and physical demonstrations indicate to me that her body language was an indicator of what constitutes feminine dancing. It is interesting to discover how Hunter feels masculinity could be conveyed in dance.

Hunter's definition of "dancing like a guy" is simple. She declared that she liked to see male dancers appear strong and dance more expansively than female dancers. Hunter equates a wide-legged stance, a feeling of having weights on one's shoes (groundedness) and the engagement of every muscle in the body as denoting masculinity in dance. Hunter asserts that, if a male dancer was standing in second position with every muscle engaged, she should not be able to push him over. Hunter finishes discussing this topic by stating, "I love strength. No matter whether it's female or male. Strength is appealing to me. And knowing how to have strength and make it look so easy."

From this conversation, it can be understood that both masculine and feminine dancers should embody strength. Hunter likes women who can jump and turn with the strength associated with men (virtuosity). Conversely, according to Hunter, femininity is denoted by "feminine postures" and the personification of certain parts of the anatomy, like a beveled foot or emphasized breasts. Masculinity is signified by a grounded, weighted stature that appears immovable when at rest. The masculine dancer should also be able to move his arms and legs more expansively than the female dancer denoting, more power. This is but one commercial

dance professional's opinion on denoting masculinity and femininity. Jamal Story also had some very interesting information to add on the topic of gender roles in commercial dance.

Story feels that gender roles in commercial dance and the training required of a dancer to personify masculinity and femininity is "tricky." Story articulates that, "There is certainly expectation in most jobs that men represent "uber" masculinity and that women represent "uber" sexuality. He further explains that this was a very limited way to view the world in which we live in and I agree with him. It was not until I developed my body to appear more muscular that I began to book more commercial dance jobs. The more "uber" masculine I became, with rippling muscles that I could reveal when asked to remove my shirt at auditions, the more marketable I became. It was not only my musculature that helped me book dance jobs, but also my ability to translate masculinity into movement.

Story seems to reiterate Hunter's assertion that the best way to translate masculinity onstage is to present a sturdy, grounded body. Similar to Hunter, Story feels that audience members, casting people or spectators in general desire to see a higher level of strength in a male dancer relative to a female dancer. This idea is not based on the physical size of the man but on his ability to create the idea that the male dancer is able to conquer or, for lack of better word dominate the female dancer. Story's construct of the feminine female dancer is quite different from his idea of the masculine male dancer.

The female commercial dancer seems to be charged with the responsibility of presenting 'extreme sexuality' as Story refers to it. Story views the depiction of femininity as a result of accenting certain female attributes such as the hips, breasts, waist, buttocks and legs. This is reminiscent of Hunter repositioning herself to accent her feminine attributes by beveling her foot and presenting her breasts. Story has worked with many female dancers who are quite aware of

the angles that looked best on them, what parts of their body they are presenting and the appearance of their silhouette. Attention to these details results in what Story refers to as “uber” womanhood.

Story sees masculinity in male dancers as represented through a sturdy, grounded body and the capacity to convey the appearance of dominance. Conversely, femininity in female dancers is depicted through the ability to emphasize specific body parts and knowing how to best present them to create a feminine persona.

I asked dance educator and choreographer Rhonda Miller what the phrases “dancing like a man” and “dancing like a woman,” means to her. Miller, like Story, associates femininity with the emphasis of specific body parts, but unlike Story she also adds the notion of using softer body lines and sustained movements to denote a feminine sensuality. Miller feels that femininity and sensuality comes from the use of the shoulders and hips. This is the first reference to femininity being associated with sensuality. She also mentions that the use of the eyes is paramount for female dancers to denote femininity and for male dancers to depict masculinity. With reference to the eyes, Miller states, “They are the window into the soul and they just...they’re just so expressive.” But this statement begs the question of how the eyes are used to denote femininity or masculinity. From personal experience, I would say that the use of the eyes is achieved through the use of direct focus and intent. Having a clear inner thought and directing the focus of the eyes during a performance helps engage the viewer. The eyes are used as an invitation, or for seduction and to denote domination or submission.

In Miller’s view, male dancers’ depictions of masculinity are derived from the use of their shoulders, chest and legs. Echoing JoAnn Hunter, Miller explains that men should ground themselves through the use of *plié*, and Miller added that male dancers should expand their

chests to give a broader appearance. Miller's ideal feminine dancer emphasizes specific body parts, but most importantly the hips to denote sensuality. On the flip side, she felt men should emphasize the broadness of their chests and shoulders, and remain grounded to give a masculine dance persona. According to Miller, both sexes should know how to focus their eyes to engage the viewer. Miller did say that she was not sure how to teach sensuality since it is a consequence of a lived experience in relationships that emerges with maturity.

I often use a direct eye focus to create a sense of dominance and flirtatiousness when performing. I also embody a few movement codes to denote masculinity. I remain grounded, I maintain a slightly rigid torso and often perform strong, quick movements that have a bound flow. "Flow" is the effort exerted to control movement and the term "flow" comes from Laban Movement Analysis (Moore 151). Bound flow entails a movement being stopped, paused, or restrained at any point in time. I also try to perform movements that are reminiscent of sports actions or gestures. Performing virtuosic feats is also part of my repertoire to create a danced masculinity. Dance icon Gene Kelly (1912-1966), is a male dancer that I try to model myself after to appear more masculine when performing Classic jazz dance. Kelly emphasized the more culturally "acceptable" terms for American masculinity in his art (Gerstner 59). It would appear that Kelly figured out how to balance between the clumsy everyday guy that could joke around with his buddies and the elegant gentleman embracing a beautiful woman (Trachtenberg 2002). For me, masculine dance is achieved through bound flow, eye focus, direct space efforts, and pedestrian movement. These are some of my tricks of the trade. Desmond Richardson also had a few ideas to share on both topics of masculine dancing and feminine dancing.

Desmond Richardson references Alvin Ailey when discussing the depiction of masculinity and femininity in dance. Desmond remembered Alvin Ailey saying, " Listen I want

you to look at all of these guys here. Now what you do in your personal life is your business but I hired... I've hired men and women and I need to see that onstage." Richardson understands this to mean that men have a certain virtuosity that they can bring to the stage that Ailey liked to see, in contrast to the feminine quality of a female dancer's prowess.

Richardson's previous reference came from the concert world of dance, but he did admit that a male dancer can "get away" with being more androgynous, lyrical, long and refined in concert dance. Richardson likes the fact that he was once told to "butch up" his movement. Personally, I have often heard choreographers tell male dancers to "butch it up," or in other words, make their movement and their demeanor appear more masculine. Richardson makes reference to a contrast between depicting a masculine male dancer and a feminine female dancer. However, the only qualities he identified as signifiers of masculinity were virtuosity and strength. Richardson articulates that strength has a beauty that is inherent in masculine male dancers and is also present in the movement of a feminine female dancer. Richardson's description of masculinity and femininity in dance is more about contrast, while Lauren Gaul's description seems to find little differences between the sexes.

I asked Lauren Gaul, "What is dancing like a man and what is dancing like a woman in your opinion?" While laughing she responds that dancing like a man is masculine. However, she admits that her response is redundant. Gaul finally comes to the conclusion that she associates masculine dancing with intensity, strength, being grounded, dancing hard and powerfully, and being full of resistance. She then realizes that she associates all of these qualities with feminine dancing as well. As a Rockette, she embodied many of these movement characteristics. Gaul then decides to represent masculinity in dance with regard to a style. In her mind, hip-hop dance embodies the quintessential movement qualities to depict masculinity. Gaul does not have a clear

distinction between masculine and feminine dancing. Gaul does, however, feel that the movement affinities of hip-hop such as strength, intensity, power, being grounded, showing resistance, and dancing hard are very representative of masculine dancing. Unlike Gaul, Scott Jovavich is very clear about the distinction between masculine and feminine dancing.

Scott Jovavich is a dancer, choreographer, and lecturer in the commercial dance department at Pace University in New York City. Scott has had a strong career in musical theater, having worked with dance icons like Broadway choreographers Jerome Robbins (1918-1988) and Bob Fosse (1927-1987). Scott's summation of a male dancer depicting masculinity includes being grounded and athletic, but does not end there. His perception of embodied masculinity is based on the work he has done with specific choreographers. Jovavich references Bob Fosse. Jovavich mentions that Bob Fosse hired men that were naturally comfortable, powerful, "not overdoing" their masculinity or putting it on, more rugged looking in appearance and had an air of being cool. The idea of being cool directly leads to art historian Robert Ferris Thompson's idea of the aesthetic of the cool. The "aesthetic of the cool" is an attitude or persona that involves having a face or mask of composure while the body is aesthetically clear, lively, and brilliant while dancing (Gottschild 109).

Jovavich does not like using the word feminine but rather chooses to use the word dancing womanly. Jovavich feels a female dancer should have the ability to be flirtatious, grounded, strong, comfortable in her own skin, and sensual. Jovavich also agrees that the emphasis on specific body parts and postures can make a dancer appear more masculine or feminine.

With reference to teaching how to embody masculinity, femininity and sensuality in dance, Jovavich thinks it could best be learned through imagery. Jovavich references famed

dancer and actress Gwen Verdon (1925-2000) on this topic. According to Jovavich, Gwen Verdon would tell the dancers not to go after an effect but asked the dancers to filter an idea or image through the body to give an authentic representation. Jovavich states that Verdon often said that she was not going after a specific look, but rather the individual dancer's specific take on an idea or image.

Jovavich feels both men and women should possess the strength, groundedness, and sensuality to denote masculinity or femininity. Jovavich stresses the idea of dancers being authentic in their depictions of masculinity or femininity regardless of sexual preference. This authenticity might derive from a lived experience or acting class. He further adds that depictions of masculinity, femininity, and sensuality are achieved through the use of imagery that is filtered through the body to create an authentic result. Jovavich is adamant about male dancers being authentically masculine, while in my conversations with him, Broadway performer Charlie Sutton discussed the marketability of male dancers accentuating their feminine attributes.

Dancing Like the Opposite

During the time of this interview, dancer Charlie Sutton was finishing his run in the Tony Award-Winning musical *Kinky Boots* and was soon to begin rehearsals for the musical *An American in Paris*. In *Kinky Boots*, Sutton performed high-energy dances in drag. A drag queen is a man that dresses up as a woman predominantly for entertainment purposes. It appears that there is an emerging trend within commercial dance requiring male dancers to appropriate feminine characteristics to book certain jobs. "Feminine dancing" for men is now a marketable skill, as illustrated by shows like *Kinky Boots*, *La Cage Aux Folles* and Madonna's 2012 music video "Girl Gone Wild."

Sutton discusses how he as a male dancer approaches feminine dancing in *Kinky Boots*. Sutton states, “ We were really trying to pull the umm...true femininity out, like being ‘fishy’.” The term “fishy” is usually used to describe a drag queen that convincingly resembles a biological woman. Although this term is not a compliment to women, it is considered a compliment amongst drag queens. Sutton makes a candid distinction between masculine and feminine dancing. He feels that masculine dancing involves appearing as the sexual aggressor, while feminine dancing involves acting as the sexual submissive. In my career, I have heard similar descriptions. I have also heard that men should make female viewers want to dance with them while also directing their attention towards the female dancer.

It is important to understand how a male dancer can change his movement quality to appear more feminine. Sutton states that a male dancer wanting to appear more feminine can start by softening his lines as opposed to executing rigid, hard bodylines. Sutton further asserts that women are generally softer in their lines and attack. This is reminiscent of Miller’s idea that femininity is depicted through the use of softer bodylines. This is a generalization however; it is an idea that makes a plausible distinction between the representation of masculine dancing and feminine dancing. Sutton feels that in order to appear more feminine, male dancers have to soften the attack of their movements so that their muscles don’t bulge and pop, creating a more masculine look.

Overall, Sutton states that male dancers can give the appearance of danced masculinity by acting as a dominant persona (sexual aggressor) and using strong hard lines. He also detailed how female dancers and male dancers wanting to appear feminine can achieve this by being flirtatious, appearing sexually submissive, utilizing soft bodylines, and attacking movement in a lighter manner.

Agents Terry and Lisa Lindholm, agree that jobs asking for feminine male dancers are limited. From their dealings with casting agents and choreographers, they have observed that there are very few requests for feminine male dancers. Terry did mention that some of the artistic button pushers like pop artist Ke\$ha, want male dancers that look androgynous. Terry further asserts that the music business has more latitude with respect to representations of masculinity and femininity as opposed to commercials that are geared toward the Midwestern audiences. Terry concludes by saying that seventy-five percent of the time, the roles of traditionally masculine men and traditionally feminine women is still at play in commercial dance.

The industry professionals have given their interpretations of danced masculinity and femininity but it is also important to understand how the media influences these representations in commercial dance. Commercial dance, as stated earlier, is often about selling a product or presenting a specific image to the viewer. The representation of gender in the media is complex, and has changed over the years. There have been key representations in film, television, and advertisements throughout the years and up to the present day, that influence how dancers “sell” the idea of danced masculinity and danced femininity. These representations have created a kind of model of how masculinity and femininity are ingrained into the public’s psyche.

Representation of Gender in American Popular Media

Professor of media studies, David Gauntlett gives some key insight into the representation of men and women in the media from the 1950s to the early 2000s in his book *Media, Gender and Identity*. Gauntlett analyzes various television shows, films and advertisements to come up with his data. According to Gauntlett, male characters in television shows during the 1950s were assertive, confident and dominant, while female characters were usually in need of protection and direction, and constantly offering love to male heroes

(Gauntlett 46). In the 1970s men were still more likely to give orders, be aggressive, and be assertive. Women were presented as passive, weak, and victimized. The majority of roles for women were concerned with romance and family problems (Gauntlett 43) and revolved around their physical attractions to and mating games with male characters (Gauntlett 48). Of course, there were deviations from these stereotypes, like the TV show *Charlie's Angels*, which depicted tough, but also sexy, career women. Gauntlett's research identifies prevalent gender themes in television that both understand and reaffirm danced representations of masculinity and femininity.

The idea of the masculine male dancer showing dominance and appearing to have the ability to conquer his female counterpart is mentioned by the dance professionals. This is in alignment with Gauntlett's assertion that males in television from the 1950s to the 1970s gave orders and showed assertiveness while women appeared weaker and/or more passive (Gauntlett 43). Rhonda Miller, Jamal Story and Scott Jovovich specifically identify the need for a feminine female dancer to demonstrate flirtatiousness and sexiness to be effectively feminine. This danced representation of femininity parallels the predominant television standard from the 1950s to the 1970s, that demanded that female characters lives revolved around their sexual attractiveness and mating games (Gauntlett 48). Images of women as sex objects has been constant throughout the years (Gauntlett 47), but the stereotypical depiction of the passive, bedroom and kitchen woman has come under great fire and changed with feminist attitudes.

Magazines and advertisements have often dictated to the masses how people should be in the world. Janice Winship, the author of *Inside Women's Magazines*, published in 1987, makes a great statement about women's images that rings true for all women in entertainment. Winship states, "Firstly that being a woman involves constantly adjusting one's own image to fit time and

place in an ever-changing game of images; and secondly, that real life is constantly thought through ‘dream images’” (qtd in Gauntlett 54). This statement seems to ring true in that many of the images of dancers in the commercial realm are “dream” or idealized versions of people. The roles of men and women in media in the past were somewhat stereotypical and the commercial dance world has maintained some of these ideals in our interpretations of presenting masculinity and femininity. The role of the feminine female dancer in much commercial dance is to fit a dream image of the perfect, sexy woman. Conversely, the role of the male dancer is to fit the dream image of the perfect, strong, dominant figure in comparison to the woman. However, these images are changing slightly with the times.

Representations of gender in the media today have evolved and have affected our danced representations of masculinity and femininity to some degree. The media of 1980s maintained many stereotypical depictions of men and women, but during the 1990s gender roles became less rigid. Shows like *Sex and the City* depicted women less as sexual victims and more as sexually assertive or dominant figures (Gauntlett 60). In 1997, audiences saw the lead character in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a physically powerful heroine. Both JoAnn Hunter and Lauren Gaul were adamant about female dancers exhibiting strength to express femininity. It seems that in the present day, femininity does include an emphasis on the exhibition of physical power and muscular strength for female dancers as well.

While modern advertisers are conscious not to offend consumers with social stereotypes, in a book called *Provocateur*, author Anthony Cortese asserts that women are often shown as the “perfect provocateur.” Women are displayed in adverts as young, good looking, sexually seductive, and perfect with no scars or blemishes. Cortese further asserts that the female provocateur’s only accepted attribute is her ability to attract. The clean-cut, handsome young

man can also be a “perfect provocateur,” with pumped up pecks and well-defined abs, making him a perfected and sexually alluring being. Conversely, some ad campaigns such as CK One, deviate from this look through the introduction of the waif-like man (Gauntlett 80). Male and female dancers often embody this idea of being the perfect provocateur. Rhonda Miller and Scott Jovavich mention a flirtatiousness that both sexes should know how to activate and cultivate. Miller also mentions the idea of the eyes being important and having a focus. Physically speaking, a masculine male dancer and feminine female dancer seem to embody these perfected ideals of the perfect provocateur, based on the industry professionals’ descriptions of danced masculinity and danced femininity.

From personal experience, a vast majority of my work as a commercial dancer has involved me taking off my shirt at auditions prior to dancing. This gives those hiring me an idea of how physically alluring I would be with less clothing. In this case, I was sometimes hired because I fit the image of the perfect provocateur. The media can be quite sexist but it seems that both men and women today are sexualized and objectified in commercial dance. I must interject that agents Terry and Lisa Lindholm did mention that not every dancer has to be a perfect provocateur. The agents made it clear that there are many jobs for “character type” dancers that do not fit the ideals of the perfect provocateur.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual characters have become more prevalent in mainstream media. In recent years the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community has gained more visibility in the media than it has in the past. There have been many shows that have aided in the greater visibility of alternative sexualities in television, film and advertisements. What is prevalent in the media seems to affect commercial dance. In the 1990s, Ellen Degeneres came out as a lesbian and shows like *Will and Grace (1998-2006)* boosted LGBT visibility (Gauntlett

82). During the early 1990s, Madonna hired many gay male dancers and seemed to exploit the gay market through the use of voguing and pushing the boundaries of sexuality in her book entitled *Sex* (1992) and her film *Truth or Dare* (1991). Presently there are various shows on television that include LGBT characters like HBO's *Looking*, films like *The Birdcage* with dancers in drag, and artists like Lady Gaga who use androgynous looking dancers. Gauntlett states that gender today is less stereotyped and more diverse than in the past, and images in the media are reflective of this fact (Gauntlett 90).

Since the media has embraced, to a limited extent, the representations of alternative sexualities, commercial dance has followed suit in its representation of feminine men and masculine women. Charlie Sutton's performance in *Kinky Boots* is the classic example of a man representing femininity in commercial dance as opposed to masculinity. Lauren Gaul mentions that hip-hop dancing is the epitome of masculine dancing in her eyes. I concur with Gaul on this point. Presently, many female dancers embody the masculine model by performing hip-hop dance in baggy clothing, baseball caps and tennis shoes while grabbing at their crotches in the same way that their male counterparts do. While the LGBT community is being more readily embraced in the media, the representation of masculinity and femininity has become like a shirt that male and female dancers can take on and off like a piece of clothing.

Concluding Thoughts

Masculinity and femininity in commercial dance are embodied through movement qualities, posturing, and focus. The depiction of masculinity and femininity in commercial dance has changed over the years with the representations of men and women in the media. With this said, it is evident that some gender stereotypes still exist in the media and commercial dance. There are those that feel these stereotypical depictions are degrading or reductive to both men

and women because they are hyper-sexualized and objectifying. Men and women are reduced to emphasizing specific parts of the body that are associated with sex. This can happen on certain commercial jobs. For these reasons, commercial dance may not be a focus in many dance departments in higher education.

I asked dancer and choreographer Liz Ramos how she felt being objectified as a female dancer. Ramos has danced for musical artists like Gloria Estefan and Jennifer Lopez and danced on Broadway in the show *The Addams Family*. She states that she stays away from any jobs that would objectify or stereotype her. I asked her if she felt emphasizing her breasts or hips was reductive or objectifying and her response was no. She feels that if movement is done with class and proper execution then it is not objectification. Ramos adds that accentuation of the hips when dancing is part of certain cultures. Ramos is of Latin descent and is currently rehearsing for Gloria Estefan's Broadway musical where all of the dancing is about sensuality and there is an emphasis on hip motion. Ramos did mention that there are jobs that require classless movement and that she stays away from them. In her opinion, feminine dancing in the commercial realm can be empowering.

This also brings up the idea that there are men and young boys who are objectified in dance. I personally walked off a job where I felt uncomfortable and was going to be presented in a less than ideal light. There are also male dancers that do not want to dance masculine or be told that they must be more masculine fit an ideal. I interject this idea to make the point that there are many topics to discuss when dealing with masculinity and femininity in dance.

Objectification is not only in commercial dance.

Dance writer and critic Ann Daly wrote an article entitled, *Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers*. The article analyzes legendary ballet choreographer George Ballanchine's

model for a ballerina. The article indicates that the “Balanchine Ballerina” is a powerful yet regressive female paradigm, and that ballet is a cultural institution that represents and dictates gender behavior in everyday life. The article points out that there are dominant and submissive patterns with privileges to men in ballet, as exhibited by the female always being supported by the man. Daly mentions that there is an emphasis on the female always being manipulated or “controlled” by the male dancer (Daly 40). Daly also asserts that the ballerina is seen as the passive figure that is exhibited for her beauty and performs erotic movements. The erotic movement in question occurred in Balanchine’s work *The Four Temperaments* when the female dancer’s *arabesque* shoots directly through the male dancer’s legs (Daly 45). There were numerous arguments that indicated that the ballerina is an objectified, regressive role model for society. I point this example out to say that even though there are those that think ballet is objectifying to women, it still has its place in most universities dance programs. In my opinion, it is best to ask the ballet dancer or the commercial dancer what their embodied experience in the work is to really understand it.

Theater departments do not shy away from seductive roles in plays, and Opera’s still perform “Carmen” with a leading role that embodies many stereotypical characteristics. I don’t believe dance departments should completely shy away from teaching skills necessary to work in the commercial realm due to some instances of unfortunate objectification.

Chapter 4

The Use of Hair, Heels and the Face in Commercial Dance

The term “hairgraphy” and the phrase “giving face” are often used in commercial dance. According to the Urban Dictionary, “hairgraphy” describes choreography that uses a lot of head movements that cause a dancer’s hair to thrash around (“Hairgraphy”). From my research, I understand “giving face” in dance terms to mean the utilization of facial expressions to enhance a performance. These two performance skills can sound silly to some people, however this chapter will investigate the importance of these skills in commercial dance. This chapter will also delve into the importance of dancing in high heels in the commercial dance sphere.

Heels For Women

Pace University professors, Rhonda Miller and Scott Jovavich, LA based choreographer Brian Friedman, and talent agent Lisa Lindholm, make it definitively clear that female dancers in the commercial realm must be able to dance in high heels. Based on the casting calls Lisa Lindholm receives, she estimates that ninety percent of the jobs for female commercial dancers require that they perform in high heels. Lindholm mentions that she rarely sees female dancers perform barefoot or with flat shoes during commercial jobs. From my experience teaching young dancers across the country, they are most comfortable dancing in socks or bare feet, but have little to no training dancing in high heels.

Broadway choreographer JoAnn Hunter recalls that she started her tap training in heeled tap shoes and her jazz training at the age of twelve in character shoes with a two and a half inch heel. At that time, flat shoes were not an option according to Hunter. The only time she recalls dancing with bare feet or in flat shoes was when a piece of choreography specifically called for it; however it was not common place. Hunter stated that she would even perform rigorous jumps

like *chainès, coupé, jeté* around the perimeter of the dance studio in her character shoes. Brian Friedman also recalls that his mother used to teach women jazz dance in heels (character shoes), and that this “old school” type of training is not as common today. In my personal experience teaching dance to instructors across the country at dance conventions, I have encountered the admission that most of them do not teach their dancers how to perform in high heels.

Friedman feels that dance heels and other more pedestrian foot wear like tennis shoes and combat boots are more common in commercial dance because commercial dancers rarely, if ever, attend auditions in a leotard and tights. Everyday clothing is worn to auditions and dance shoes are not fashionable enough, nor do they seem congruent with more fashion forward modes of dress. Friedman stated, “ It’s a different era that we are living in now and dance wear is for the studio and the classroom and not the gig.” Lisa Lindholm attributes the use of high heels as a direct reflection of how the media/entertainment industry views femininity. The stereotypical notion seems to be that high heels increase women’s attractiveness.

Psychologist Nicolas Guéguen performed a series of experiments that tested a man’s willingness to help or approach a woman based on the height of her heels. This experiment is described in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. In summation, the findings were that men helped or approached women with higher heels faster than they did women with flatter heeled shoes. It appeared that a woman wearing a higher heel garnered a quicker response from men. Guéguen’s experiment suggests that men felt women wearing high heels would be more receptive to their sexual advances. High heels accentuate a woman’s hip motion, which according to this study makes women appear more receptive to advances by a man (Downey 21). This seems like a somewhat plausible explanation for the use of high heels in commercial dance. The media

creates images that are marketed to the general public, and commercial dance follows the trends. Therefore, a high heel creates the appearance of physical attractiveness and sexual receptivity to some onlookers. Basically, high heels stereotypically create a sexier image of women.

Rhonda Miller and Go 2 Talent agent Terry Lindolm seem to echo one another in saying that female commercial dancers have to wear heels for varying styles of dance. In my opinion, it seems commonplace to use high heels or character shoes in varying forms of jazz dance, especially on the Broadway stage and in Vegas shows. However, Lindolm remarks that heels are worn for various forms of urban or vernacular dance like hip hop as well. He went on further to identify pop artist Beyoncé as one entertainer who hires female dancers to perform hip-hop “like boys” while also being sexy in heels. Lindholm makes a reference to a remark that Ginger Rogers made about dancing in heels. Lindolm states, “It’s that old thing that Ginger Rogers used to say about working with Fred Astaire... I do everything that he does but backwards and in heels. So it’s always going to be much more difficult.” It is apparent from Rhonda Miller’s and Terry and Lisa Lindolm’s statements that wearing high heels is a necessity for female dancers on most commercial dance jobs. In addition, many dance educators do not emphasize training in heels. Wearing high heels or character shoes can change the motion of a woman’s hips, creating an image of sexiness and femininity that can seem inviting and appeal to some viewers. The necessity and appeal of heels in commercial dance seems apparent, however it is important to discuss how to prepare to dance in high heels.

Rhonda Miller, like Nicolas Guéguen mentions the fact that heels change a woman’s movement and also her center of gravity. With this idea in mind, it seems logical to think about what type of training a dancer needs to dance effectively in high heels. Lisa Lindholm and Brian Friedman agree that young female dancers should start learning to dance in heels at an early age

and practice continuously. Friedman recommends that adult female dancers who are not accustomed to dancing in heels should “live in heels.” He elaborates by saying that wearing high heels should be a part of a female dancer’s daily activity in order to become more accustomed to the feel. He recommends that wearing heels should not only happen at performance time but should be a common practice. Starting with a shorter character shoe and working up to a stiletto is Friedman’s logical progression for a dancer.

Friedman feels that a strong technical foundation in classic jazz or ballet is a very important to dancing in heels. I agree with Friedman, in that this kind of training can help with attaining the poise and strength necessary to give a nice line and aesthetic to dancing in high heels. Dancing in heels can be equated with dancing on pointe for a ballerina, as it requires a certain strength and technical proficiency. Friedman recommends that a dancer should not move on to wearing a stiletto (long thin heel) until that dancer has the technical (ballet or classic jazz) proficiency to do so. The high heel (above 2 and a half inches) shouldn’t be worn until the dancer is in an advanced jazz class. He added that dancing in heels is a practice that should be part of every dance curriculum in every dance studio or college.

Training in heels seems to be a skill that should start at a young age for female dancers, and should be implemented in most dance programs. The key strategies for improving a dancer’s skills in this area are walking in heels on a regular basis, taking jazz classes in heels, and starting with shorter heels and eventually graduating to higher heels as her technical ability in ballet and jazz dance increases.

Heels For Men

Brian Friedman has a lot to contribute to the topic of dancing in heels because he dances in heels and teaches a “heels class.” He first called men dancing in heels a fad but then corrected

it by calling it a niche market. Friedman doesn't think men dancing in heels is mainstream, but attributes much of the visibility of this "niche market" to the pop group Kazaky and to the YouTube sensation dancer Yanis Marshall.

Agents Terry and Lisa Lindholm do not feel that there is a great deal of work for men dancing in heels, however there are female artists like Madonna who employ men with that skill. They have seen more jobs for men dancing in heels on television shows as well, but this is a small percentage.

Charlie Sutton has been able to make a living dancing in high heels in the Broadway show *Kinky Boots*. He actually learned how to do so while rehearsing for the show. Sutton mentions that he started off wearing tiny heels and then, after gaining more experience, graduated to "six inchers." Sutton does not feel that men need to make it a priority to train in heels because the demand in the commercial market is not high. His feeling is that a "good dancer" will learn how to dance in heels with ease. The term "good dancer" can mean many things, but I interpret it to mean a dancer with some form of classic jazz or ballet technique in this case.

Men dancing in heels can be viewed as niche in commercial dance, however there are some jobs that require the skill. Given the medias tendency to push the boundaries of gender as discussed in Chapter 3, it seems that men dancing in heels goes is in line with this trend. None of the industry professionals recommend that men start training in heels at an early age as females are encouraged to do. In my opinion, this testifies to the fact that men dancing in heels is not so mainstream a practice, however there is a small market for this practice in commercial dance. It seems to be true for men as well as women that classic jazz or ballet training helps create a "good dancer" in heels.

The Face

“Facial dancing,” “giving face,” or “facial choreography” is another crucial skill within the commercial dance world. According to Brian Friedman, “facial dancing” can “sell” a dancer in the entertainment industry. Friedman feels more interested in a dancer if he or she is conveying something behind his or her eyes, that makes Friedman want to learn more. He refers to this thing as having a secret. Friedman made this interesting statement:

You can be a horrible dancer from the neck down and you could book non-stop just because of what you do with your face. I myself have hired dancers before that are definitely lacking in the choreography department, technical department, but the way that they are when they are either with a client or on camera is undeniable. And you know you want that dancer on the project. And you will sacrifice a step, just to have that look in there. And I would say twenty/twenty-five percent of dancers that are working, are not working based on their talent, they are working based on their look. And it’s how they’re selling themselves with their face, their facial expressions.

I asked if thoughts spawn his facial expressions when dancing and Friedman said yes. Friedman feels that dancing is somewhat like method acting, in that a dancer should use personal experience to inform their emotion when dancing. He and Liz Ramos emphasize being in the moment and connecting to the music to inform the face. Ramos mentions that she always thinks of performing to somebody she knows in the audience like her mother, which will give one type of emotion or facial expression, or her lover, which will create a more flirtatious expression. Ramos also mentions creating facial expressions like raising an eyebrow or pursing her lips, which she discovered through practice.

Both Friedman and Desmond Richardson think that a dancer should know every angle of his or her face like a model, and practice facial expressions in the mirror. Richardson and Friedman echo the importance of knowing which muscles to tighten in the face to create the right effect for the camera. Richardson adds that he had to tone down his facial expressions for film, since he was coming from the stage where facial expressions are typically much larger.

Richardson feels that taking acting classes is the best way to make facial dancing more authentic and storytelling.

Dancer Jamal Story finds the use of facial expressions in commercial dance somewhat problematic because a lot of facial dancing does not originate from an emotional place but is artificial. Story articulated that some competitive dance studios have an actual vowel template to teach dancers facial expressions, which ultimately resonate as artificial. I have seen and still see young dancers in competitive dance create somewhat odd facial expressions while forming their mouths in the shape of the letter O or appearing to say “ooh.” Story feels that the use of imagery can help create more authentic facial expressions. If a dancer fully knows a choreographer’s vision and intent, it allows a dancer to create a story for him or herself. Even though commercial facial dancing disturbs Story, he did admit to understanding the importance of the skill.

Sherill Dodd is an expert on dance on screen, popular dance and cultural theory approaches to dance. According to her article, *The Choreographic Interface: Dancing Facial Expression In Hip-Hop And Neo- Burlesque Striptease*, the face expresses a broad range of meanings, that include physical states, psychological states, personality traits, physical dispositions, communication systems, spatial orientations and social standing. The face is the location through which people communicate and signify a unique identity (Dodd 39). This is important to dance because the face is the key signifier of a person’s inner self or of what people want others to believe is their inner self. Dodd makes a great comparison of different facial modalities in dance. She references the smile of a Broadway chorus girl (happiness), the solemn disposition of a Graham performer (depth), and the sexualized facial expressions of a Latin American competition dancer (sexuality or sensuality). She explains that all of these are either improvised

or set forms of choreography that are in line with the performance norms of a particular genre (Dodd 39). Each dancer listed above puts forth a representation that appeals to certain viewers.

The dance professionals I interviewed identified that facial dancing informed by music, acting training, imagery, and practice in the mirror will create a better commercial dance performer. Dodd's writing gives a better understanding of how and what the face can signify and how it can translate many meanings to a viewer. I assert that "facial choreography" in commercial dance can be used as a strategy to create an image or representation that can come from an inner experience but, more importantly for commercial dance, it creates a more marketable outer image for the viewing audience. The image is easily translatable to goods and services being sold and promoted.

Hair

"Hairography" is a term that has always seemed somewhat comical to me, however this skill can enhance a commercial dancer's performance. Professor at Pace University, and former Rockette, Lauren Gaul admits that she really has not considered "hairography" in-depth. Gaul does recognize that it is a definite performance skill in commercial dance. She recounted The Radio City Rockettes swinging their ponytails in a recent performance on the television show *America's Got Talent*.

Brian Friedman thinks that "hair dancing" can add more dynamism and emphasis to dance steps. When he had long hair, he would flick his hair in particular ways to add a "punch" to his dancing and an extra emphasis to particular movements. Friedman feels that both women and men who have long hair need to know how to use it as a performance tool. He warns that if a dancer does not know how to manipulate the flow of his or her hair, it can hinder the dancer's career. This may seem like a far-fetched statement but I believe it to be true. I have seen dancer's

who have long hair that covers their faces when they dance, thus inhibiting their performance. The easy answer would be to pull the hair back away from the face, however a dancer never knows how his or her hair will be styled on a commercial dance job. According to Friedman, sometimes hair extensions are added on a job for a look, and a dancer needs to know how to move their head to manipulate their hair in an aesthetically pleasing way.

Dancer and choreographer Elizabeth (Liz) Ramos has full, thick, curly hair that she says she has used to her benefit to book commercial dance jobs. Ramos feels that a woman's ability to manipulate long hair in particular makes her appear sexier. This idea is in line with the idea that hair and hairstyles can affect what one thinks about oneself (Peters 56). It is important to understand some basic connotations of hair throughout history.

The article "Hair+Choreography Hairography!" by Jen Peterson gives some insight into hair movement history. Sexuality is often associated with a person touching their hair or wearing their hair down; hair pulled back is a sign of formality and respect; longer hair often differentiates men from women; and shinier fuller hair is usually considered more attractive (Peterson 56). According to Peterson, hairography can reflect states of emotion as it has in many ballets and in modern dance as well. For example during, a point of distress in the ballet Giselle, when Giselle goes mad, her hair comes down.

Ramos said she learned how to "use her hair" by watching female dancers in music videos and practically applying what she saw. Her recommendations to getting better at hairography (if one has the type of hair to thrash around) are to let the hair down, practice head rolls, do head flicks and finish them out. With respect to finishing the hair flick out, Ramos is referring to making sure that the hair falls back into place so that the face is visible. In Peterson's article it is mentioned that dancers should wear their hair pulled back off the face while working

on dance technique (ballet, modern, jazz), however their hair should be let down in modern and jazz from time to time to allow the dancer to see how the feeling of loose hair will affect their movement and style (Peterson 57).

Hairography is a vital skill in commercial dance and the way a dancer wears his or her hair can affect how he or she is viewed and how views he or she views him or herself. The use of strong head movements with free flowing hair can create more dynamism that emphasizes steps. Hairography is a skill that must be practiced in the classroom to help inform a dancer's style and to help reflect different emotional states.

Concluding Thoughts

The topics in this chapter at first glance would appear to be of little consequence to a dancer's career, however they help to create an image that will achieve commercial success. Having the skills to dance in heels, create dynamism and excitement through head movements that thrash one's hair, and creating outer expressions of the face that are a reflection of a desired inner life equate to marketability. I am not suggesting that universities have classes solely devoted to dancing in heels, "hairography" or "giving face," however dancers should be informed that these skills are key performative factors in commercial dance. They are skills that could be addressed in jazz classes, and young females dancers especially should be aware that heels are the dance shoe of choice in the commercial realm.

Even if a male dancer never performs in heels, he may want to be familiar with the skill so that he can teach a heels class if required. Gender roles in society are evolving, as is dance, so the profession it is now a more open playing field where all things dance are fair game for multiple sexes.

Conclusion

The past two years in graduate school has enriched my dance life. Researching this topic, bridging the gap between commercial dance and dance in higher education started during my time in graduate school, however my entire career can be viewed as research as well. My versatile dance training in classic and vernacular dance forms has allowed me to see many of my dance dreams come true. My dance education at the university level has greatly contributed to my success. My passion for this topic comes from my desire to help young dancers see their dreams come to fruition in whatever area of dance they gravitate toward. This research is the beginning of what can create a pedagogical framework for teaching the necessary skills required for a commercial dance career. This framework, once refined with more research, could be integrated into university level dance programs seeking a more commercial dance focus.

Due to time constraints I did not discuss some very important topics in commercial dance. The creation of a “look” for a dancer was mentioned often by the dance professionals. A dancer’s appearance in commercial dance is often what books the job and creating a look that is authentic and specific or authentic and versatile results in marketability. In addition, networking and branding are two elements that are crucial for a commercial dancer to incorporate. Due to social media, dancers are creating their own brand, flooding social media with their dance persona, and getting booked on jobs from having a large social media following. These are topics that offer more opportunities for further research.

Researching the gap between commercial dance and dance in higher education has given rise to various realizations that were not discussed earlier in the paper. I discovered that many of the industry professionals had never been asked questions on the topics discussed in this paper. The dance professionals had the answers to the questions, but some had a difficult time

articulating them because most skills or truths in commercial dance realm are “just known” and not articulated clearly in dance education or on jobs. I realized that the prejudice toward commercial dance and disdain for dance that is not considered concert dance or artistic dance is very real in higher education. Conversely, there are many parents, young dancers, dance teachers and dance professionals outside of higher education that do not see any value in getting a degree in dance for these reasons; the programs are predominantly ballet and modern, dancers seeking a serious dance career feel that they must do so right out of high school, and that there is no practical use for a degree in dance. From experience I know the value of commercial dance as well as the value of a dance education. In my opinion, the experience in both realms creates a very well rounded dance professional.

My research also involved an artistic component in which I choreographed a concert that revolved around the topics discussed in this paper. The dancers performed West African influenced dance, tap dance, classic jazz, Latin jazz, pop jazz, hip-hop, breaking, freestyling, voguing, house dancing, ballet, contemporary, and some dancers performed in heels. Dancers from the University of California, Irvine dance department, the surrounding Los Angeles, area and a few students from the dance convention on which I currently teach, took part in the performance.

Working with many students in university programs I notice that there is a strong rootedness in classical forms, dance history, and a great understanding of the mechanics of movement, however there is a lack of versatility in vernacular forms of dance and a limited capacity to emulate various styles of dance. Speaking in generalized terms, I would say that their approaches are correct and “academic” but lacks the flavor and nuances necessary to be strong performers. On the other hand, I notice that many students from commercial dance studios have

“the fire,” style, and versatility to accomplish “the look” of various forms of dance but lack the rootedness in classical forms to execute the technical elements properly. In addition, there is usually no context of where the movement they are doing comes from. For example they perform “contemporary” dance with no strong ballet or modern training.

Currently some colleges and universities are incorporating more jazz or commercial dance in their programs, like Pace University in New York City, Columbia College in Chicago, Illinois, and Relativity School in Los Angeles California, thus bridging the gap between commercial dance and dance in higher education. The multifaceted, world-renowned choreographer Donald McKayle has a thoughtful and balanced way of looking at jazz dance. It is a perspective that I believe could be applied to dance as a whole. McKayle feels the future of jazz dance depends on absorbing the old and preserving the new (Boross 129). I believe that at the university level, we can maintain the classic forms of dance while evolving and incorporating new forms and styles to prepare dancers for the ever-changing landscape of dance employment.

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