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Undergraduate

What Press Releases Can Do for Dance

Jennifer Fisher

How do you get a major newspaper to show up to cover your dance concert? Most of us are familiar with the Press Release—the announcement that tries to get your attention and tells you where and why to come to a concert. Journalists used to receive paper “press kits” containing an information sheet, background information, and photos. Now, it’s all done electronically, but the idea is the same. You want visibility, an audience, and press coverage of your event. Very few Press Release skills are needed if you are Beyoncé or a Beatle—your followers just need to see your name, the date, and the location. For the rest of us, it’s crucial to develop a certain facility with lively language and design skills that attract attention. Yet no one teaches dancers or choreographers to write press releases. If they are lucky, they pick up the skills, or they encounter someone who has studied marketing, communications, and design. It’s a skill you might want to study more, given the small budgets of dance companies and the way choreographers and their dancer colleagues end up pitching in to publicize concerts.

At university, dance majors may learn how to write research papers, criticism, or other sorts of essays, so they master language skills, absorb how to structure an essay, and practice how to write clear and informative prose, where they cite their sources. All these are excellent, necessary skills. But writing a Press Release means learning to use language a different way. It has to be compelling, to say specifically what’s worth coming for, to hype your brand, to promise satisfaction. Not like a scholar, or a dance critic, or a respectful student who will be graded on facts. Not like a carnival barker, either, but learning to draw crowds by painting a picture is something that can’t hurt. It’s the difference between announcing that, “Three new choreographers will present premieres of their latest work on April 25,” and writing: “What’s fresh, new, and questions the meaning of life? Come see dances where ballet spins a different way, women challenge authority, and flamenco dancers dare to look as angry as you feel...” Or something like that (individual results vary).

Writing an alluring Press Release challenges choreographers to ask what, exactly, they *are* offering. Why *should* anyone want to come? Have you made a political statement? Are thought-provoking, fun, uplifting, startling? How? Can you give potential audience members a glimpse of what they will see or an idea about the effect you want your dance to have? Thought, emotion, suspense, confusion, solidarity, empathy, information.... The possibilities are endless. Choosing the right words and images, making them legible on a page, putting your best dancing foot forward....all are challenges for the Press Release writer. It’s a new assignment for me to give student dancers—I’ve never written them for a living, but I’m a professor who used to be a dance critic, who got five or six press releases a week when reviewing for a newspaper. When at first I asked local dance companies for good examples of press releases to show my students as examples, they sent a few. But mostly, artistic directors said, “I guess these are OK, but if you have anyone who can do better, let me know.” Clearly, there’s room for creativity in publicizing as well as performing.

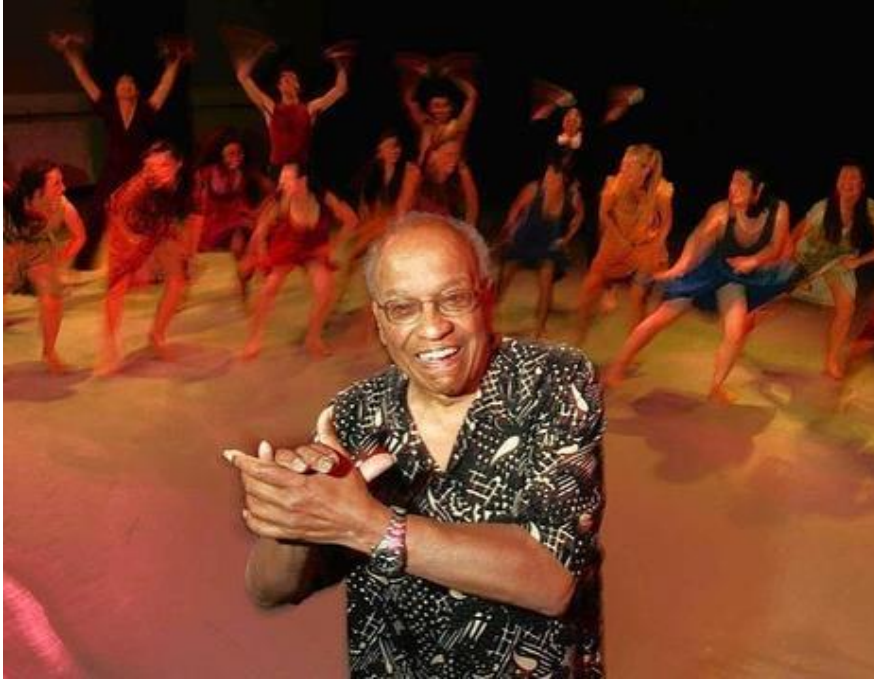
The story that comes with the press release:

This year, my assignment for dance majors to write a press release for a real upcoming dance concert worked well. The one included in *DMJ* next just happens to have had a real-life application and fits into our tribute to Donald McKayle in this first year of his loss. It's not the only way to write a press release, but it did the job of letting the press know, in style, about this important last farewell to a beloved choreographer.

Granted, it isn't hard for a dance legend like Donald McKayle to attract attention from major newspapers. Companies who do his dances, from the Ailey and Limon companies, to Cleo Parker Robinson's or Lula Washington in L.A. can attract reviewers and reporters. But McKayle made many of his dances in recent years first on his Etude Ensemble, students at University of California, Irvine. He also restaged works on campus that had not been seen for a while. The problem was that the *Los Angeles Times* has a policy not to cover "university dance" in general, even though McKayle's yearly repertory concerts provided a unique opportunity to see the work of a major dance world figure. So press coverage was practically impossible.

This year, I had determined to get the *L.A. Times* to cover the annual McKayle repertory show, which had started as an informal, studio performance years ago, but now was all dressed up in the theatre. When the editors asked for a press release to consider covering the event, the university turned out not to have one prepared. Fortunately, the one written and designed by one of his dancers, Molly Gray, was ready. It was an "A" assignment on its own merits, but now, it served a purpose in the "real world," to draw attention to McKayle's last, wonderful gift of dance. Coverage of that event can be found on the *Los Angeles Times* website by searching: "UC Irvine students offer a 'Bittersweet Farewell' to a beloved professor and dance pioneer," by dance critic Laura Bleiberg.

Here's the Press Release that the *Times* editors and Bleiberg received, by McKayle ensemble dancer Molly Gray.



One Last Dance For You, Maestro

On the evening of June 13th, 2018 the Claire Trevor Theater at UC Irvine will produce a transcendent evening of love, loss, and the end of an era in American dance history as university students perform in the final Etude repertory performance in celebration of the life and legacy of renowned choreographer Donald McKayle (July 6, 1930-April 6, 2018).

The final incarnation of McKayle's beloved Etude Ensemble will be performing three original works that he created in the last four years of his life as well as a classic piece of his repertory. Fourteen dancers will take the stage in honor of their late professor and perform *Uprooted*, *Pero Replantando* (2015), *Bittersweet Farewell* (2016), *Crossing the Rubicon: Passing the Point of No Return* (2017), and *Shaker Life* (1976). *Uprooted* delves into the plight of Mexican immigrants crossing the border, while *Crossing* depicts the journey and struggles of Syrian

Refugees. *Bittersweet* takes an abstract approach to the subject of loss and is a reflection McKayle created about his own experience with death and losing loved ones.

Where: Claire Trevor Theater,
University of California,
Irvine

When: Wednesday, June 13th,
2018 at 7pm & Thursday, June
14th, 2018 at 7pm

Who: Donald McKayle's
Etude Ensemble

*Admission will be free but
reservations are recommended*

There is no question about the influence Donald McKayle had on modern dance. McKayle began his dance training at the New Dance Group and was a former member of the Martha Graham Dance Company. He was a revolutionary figure in the dance world for almost seven decades and influenced many of America's leading choreographers such as Alvin Ailey and Lar Lubovitch. Often described as a renaissance man, McKayle found success as a dancer, choreographer, director, and costume designer. He broke through racial barriers time and time again during his career, and was the first African American man to direct and choreograph a Broadway musical, "Raisin" (1973). Be it on Broadway or the concert dance stage, Donald McKayle created sociopolitical work that did not shy away from topics such as race and slavery. McKayle gave a voice to the overlooked, under-represented members of society and he faced controversy and



prejudice with a smile. He was a kind, gracious soul and exhibited exemplary fortitude in



advocating for social justice.

Although he retired from teaching dance at UC Irvine in 2010 he remained a member of the community as a professor emeritus and continued to choreograph and restage work on the Etude Ensemble until shortly before his death. The wave of his hand could inspire more passion and hard work than most can generate in a lifetime. Whether it was through words, smiles, or songs, he instilled joy and facilitated growth in every dancer fortunate enough to work with him. Donald McKayle will be remembered by the dance community as a legend; an irreplaceable dance giant who transformed the art form. To his students, however, he will always be their Señor, their Maestro, and above all, their hero.