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Dance: Music, Movement, and Performance

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Dance: Music, Movement, and Performance

University Honors Program Thesis/Capstone/Creative Project

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Submitted by

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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

HONORS THESIS/PROJECT/CREATIVE ACTIVITY ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS:

Dance is an art form that incorporates many different mediums. Music is selected to determine the quality of movement that is visualized. Movement becomes realized through repetition of listening to music and outside influences. All dances require collaboration between choreographer and dancers to construct the piece and prepare for performance. The process of development, refinement, and completion is known as the choreographic process. The methods for the process include determining the style of movement and choosing music to satisfy the inspiration. Once music is selected, movement and steps can be determined with influences from previous pieces or other choreographers. The rehearsal process is the time that choreographer and dancers collaborate to prepare the piece for performance. With these steps, a cleaned piece will be presented for audiences to consume. The aim of this thesis project was to implement these processes to prepare a ballet piece for a show. By following the steps, non-dancers will gain insight into an artistic endeavor that is rarely displayed.

Introduction

Dance is an art form that requires a unique blend of human intellect, creativity, and physicality. Without the three components, the medium would not be successful. Choreographers must bring these components together to set a piece. Inspiration is a key component for choreographers to convey a story, theme, or concept. Some choreographers start with the story and build the dance around it. Many make the musical selection to highlight a particular component in their dance. Once the music is chosen, the steps must be developed to prepare for the rehearsal process. The quality of movement evolves from the artistic vision and music. Throughout the rehearsal process, adjustments are made to the choreography to suit the dancers. Performances give opportunities to dancers to showcase the choreographer's vision. The aim of my thesis project is to work through the choreographic, rehearsal, and performance processes to stage a neoclassical ballet for six dancers to display their ballet technique.

A dance begins with concepts inspired by outside sources. I was interested in setting a neoclassical ballet piece because of the influence of George Balanchine. He is one of the most revered figures in dance, due to his contributions to the art form. He started dancing in Russia and quickly became a sought after choreographer because of his unique style. This brought the attention of Lincoln Kirsten, who wanted to bring a dance company to America. The two men started the New York City Ballet, which is one of the most prestigious dance companies in the world. Once Balanchine found his home for ballet in New York, he began a prolific career as the artistic director for the ballet.

Of all the pieces George Balanchine set for the company, *Agon* and *Symphony in C* are two of the most popular pieces. *Agon* is a neoclassical ballet with a dubious plot. The ballet is a classic leotard ballet by Balanchine with the dancers only wearing minimal leotards and tights.

The movement quality is distinct due to the style of dance. According to New York City Ballet, “Balanchine's style has been described as neoclassic, a reaction to the Romantic anti-classicism, (which had turned into exaggerated theatricality) that was the prevailing style in Russian and European ballet when he had begun to dance” (“George Balanchine,” n.d). This caused Balanchine to focus more on the steps and musicality than the story for many of his ballets. *Agon* is a staple Balanchine work that highlights his unique movement.

When I saw the piece, the sharp, angular lines of the dancers was breathtaking. Many of the moments in the ballet relate to the score from Stravinsky. Megan LeCrone, soloist with the New York City Ballet, stated, “The choreography shows the score very clearly, and you could see it very well because *Agon* is one of Balanchine’s leotard ballets. It’s just the raw elements: the music, the dancers, the choreography” (Nycballet, 2018). Dances that unite the movement to music help the audience make connections between the audio and visual stimulations. By having the quality of ballet highlight the notes in the score, harmony is felt in the piece.

Symphony in C is another piece choreographed by Balanchine that uses polyphony to its advantage. The ballet is more traditional in form with tutus and pristine technical skill. The technique of how movement is performed is essential to ballet. For example, turnout, which refers to external rotation of the hips, is the default position throughout any ballet class. *Symphony in C* uses technique as its foundation to highlight movements that typically would go unnoticed. The tendu is a basic step performed in every ballet class. It is meant to warm the feet and prepare the ankles and metatarsals for turns and jumps. Balanchine put this mundane step at the forefront and placed rows of dancers performing tendus throughout the ballet. The visual effect is powerful and forces the audience member to reevaluate how certain movements can look on stage.

A contemporary choreographer, who constantly challenges the dancers and patrons of dance to step outside the box, is Justin Peck. As resident choreographer for the New York City Ballet, Mr. Peck creates new works each season for the company. Praised for his distinctive aptitude to work with large groups of dancers, Justin constantly pushes the boundaries of dance. Many of his pieces utilize dancers to create patterns that reoccur throughout the piece. The movement created through ever-changing shapes helps direct the attention of the audience to particular dancers.

One piece Justin created for the New York City Ballet was *Paz de la Jolla*, which featured a central couple. Along with the lead dancers, the corps de ballet had many featured moments. The ability to seamlessly weave dancers on and off the stage is a skill many choreographers strive to develop. Justin uses a number of dancers to his advantage in structuring movement through placing dancers in groupings. He choreographs the sections to integrate the dancers with dynamic movements while creating various patterns.

Both choreographers heavily influenced the development of my piece through neoclassicism and dancer structure. I have danced for fourteen years. Throughout my dance career, the most intriguing ballet pieces I have seen performed have been neoclassical ballets. The style appeals to my dance aesthetic of pure technique and bold movements. I want the piece to have different patterns and use various numbers of dancers. The inspiration I called upon for my piece centered on *Agon*, *Symphony in C*, and *Paz de la Jolla*. Each piece has unique qualities, and as a choreographer, I want to create a piece that engages audience members from the beginning to end. By incorporating the movement of basic steps and changing orientations for the dancers, I strive to create a piece that nods to George Balanchine and Justin Peck.

Choreographic Process

My vision for the piece centered on music that had varying tempos and accents. The music I chose for my piece was *Music for Weather Elements: Thunder and Lightning* by Ezio Bosso, Giacomo Agazzini, and Relja Lukic. The six-minute string quartet piece with high energy and intensity balances classical and modern elements. I began my music search by having the vision of dancers moving about the stage in different patterns and shapes. I wanted to have classical music to highlight the technique of the dancers and provide opportunities for various combinations. When I was listening to the music, I was cognizant of choosing a piece of music that would engage the audience. Classical music can be billed as unexciting, but for the performance I wanted audience members to focus on the connection between the movement and musical notes. After a two-month search, I found the piece of music that blended the classical and contemporary aspects I was looking for.

Once my music was selected, I listened to the music regularly to guide the movement that I wanted to see. Many choreographers talk about seeing the dance in their mind or feeling certain emotions from the music. In talking about dances from George Balanchine, Justin Peck stated, “It was the first exposure to work that was purely about the interrelation between music and movement” (Ferraro & Breeden, 2018). I took that sentiment to shape the construction of my piece. As I listened to the music more frequently, I found moments and shifts in the music set the evolution of the project.

To start, I knew I wanted all the dancers on stage facing the back of the stage. Throughout the score, I wanted moments where dancers were moving into lines or circles from other patterns. I wanted to utilize the dancers in duets, trios, and quartets throughout the piece instead of having them dance all together for the entire duration of the piece. In deciding on the

style of movement, I wanted to create a neoclassical ballet piece inspired by the dancers around me. Since I wanted to still incorporate strong technical elements, I wanted dancers that could handle the difficulty of ballet technique.

In developing the movement quality for my piece, I looked toward *Agon* and *Symphony in C* as creative works that appealed to my aesthetic. I wanted the sharp, angular lines and focus from *Agon* with the strong, technical movements abundant in *Symphony in C*. I watched videos of both ballets to study what elements comprise a successful work. Quality of dancers is paramount to make any piece shine. Choosing the right dancers to portray the movement allows a choreographer the opportunity to focus solely on the movement. I chose six dancers to work with based on their ballet acumen. I have seen these dancers perform and watched their ballet technique in advanced ballet classes. Each dancer can move expansively and quickly. With a neoclassical style, the ability for a dancer to be versatile is essential. The movement is ballet with modern touches, such as heads facing front and straight arms with pirouettes. I wanted it to show the dancers at their best with music that allowed sweeping movements.

Once the dancers were cast for the piece, the process of developing the steps started. I counted the music out in eight-count intervals which is how ballet is measured. Within sections of the music, I counted the eight-count intervals for a duet, trio, and quartet of dancers. I started the process of making phrases which eight-count intervals of movement set to the music. Phrases are the base of the piece because they provide structure and a leaping off point for new movement. I developed several phrases for my piece to keep continuity throughout the piece. Movement is often repeated throughout a ballet to recall certain aspects and link sections of movement. I made my phrases from the beginning of the music to linearly build the movement

quality. I wanted audience members to recognize certain steps throughout the piece. When the phrasing was set, it was time to get into the studio with the dancers.

Rehearsal Process

Creating a piece requires hours in the studio from dancers and choreographer. Without the dedication from both parties, a piece will not come to fruition. Some pieces require more time spent in the studio and have to be reworked to fit. There is only so much planning that can occur before the rehearsal process begins. The idealized movement the choreographer prepares sometimes does not fit dancers or time and space parameters. The ability of a choreographer to adapt in the studio is crucial. Margaret Tracey, Director of Boston Ballet School, stated “I think that’s the beauty of this art form; it’s passed on from one person to another, we don’t go study it in a book. It’s a real human to human art form: teacher to student, ballet master to dancer, partner to partner” (Ferraro & Breeden, 2018) Dance must be prepared by integrating the dancers with the choreographer’s steps. In working with an ever-changing medium, the choreographer must use the strengths of the dancers to the advantage of the piece.

To start my rehearsals, I taught the beginning of the piece to the dancers. When a choreographer sets movement on me, I prefer learning the piece in a linear fashion. I believe teaching from the beginning is easier for a dancer to remember than starting from the middle or end of a piece. By working from the beginning of the piece, dancers see the evolution of the piece and can make connections between the different sections within the piece. I had certain phrases prepared to start, but once I used those movements, I experimented on the dancers. The improv process can be tedious for dancers since it asks them to try different movements that are constantly being refined. The inspiration the dancers provide cannot go overlooked which is why I capitalized on the dancers I chose for the piece. Each of them brought unique prowess to the

movement. I wanted to have the piece be on flat ballet shoes to allow the dancers to move quickly.

Molding the choreography to the dancers took several rehearsals. For the six-minute piece, it took three rehearsals to teach all the steps. Each rehearsal had a review portion to remind the dancers of the movement set in previous rehearsals and answer questions. Providing time to mentally work through the movement is key to comprehension. Dancers must internalize many different stimuli to perform a dance. Coordinating neuromuscular firing is needed to create muscle memory. Research shows, “Practicing a motor task can induce neuroplastic changes in the human primary motor cortex (M1) that are subsequently consolidated, leading to a stable memory trace” (Zang, et al., 2011). Repetition helps dancers recall steps on stage. The mental work required to learn a dance is an understudied area of dance. The ability to see and do a movement allows dancers to adapt in rehearsals. I tried to be as clear as possible in rehearsal to have counts to fit with the movement and music.

Once the dance is learned, the cleaning process begins. Dancers refer to the tweaking of the dance as cleaning since the process is meant to prepare the dance for the stage. Cleaning depends on the dancers and the complexity of the choreography. Examples of cleaning include clarifications of arms for an arabesque or the specific counts for a duet. With ballet, many movements have an exact count. The choreographer has the ultimate power to decide and give direction to the dancers on the artistic vision. The piece must be cleaned to help the dancers better cement the steps for the dance. Without several cleaning rehearsals, a piece may not be ready for performance.

As I started the cleaning process, I did not realize how prepared choreographers must be to make decisions. Dancers would ask me questions about what count a move was on or how to

do a certain step. Choreographers must be clear with their expectations for a piece to present the dancers with a leading vision. The rehearsals I had focused on making the dancers move bigger during the entire piece. If the dance does not have energy, the movement will not read to the audience. Through cleaning the piece, I learned the difficulty choreographers experience in preparing their piece for the stage.

The time spent preparing and teaching the piece included over fifteen hours with more hours upcoming to rehearse onstage. I did not anticipate the preparation the choreographer must do to be ready in rehearsals. Written time cues and steps notated helped me lead my dancers and clarify their questions. Records of the steps and timing allow the studio experience to be more productive. Choreographers must properly prepare for their rehearsals to clearly convey the movement to the dancers. I wrote the steps with the accompanying counts to organize my content. The ability to make movement easier for the dancers to remember is essential for choreographers. I have spent two months with my dancers reviewing and building to prepare the piece for the show. By taking the time in composition and teaching, a choreographer will put forth a dance that includes thought and dedication to the art.

Performance Process

Once a dance is ready for the stage, blocking rehearsals are conducted to orient the dancers to their surroundings. The greatest difference on stage is the lack of a mirror which is typically used in studio rehearsals. Walking through the dance with the choreographer on stage helps set the piece to have proper spacing. Depending on the choreographer, dancers will run the piece straight through without discussing the alignment of the formations. When the choreographer does this, the natural instinct of the dancer takes over and usually figures out where to go on stage. Other choreographers will ask the dancers to mark through the piece. In

marking, dancers are not doing the movement full out but, rather, have an opportunity to become accustomed to moving without the mirror. I plan to have the dancers mark the movement to properly perform the piece full out.

After the dancers are ready to run the piece, a choreographer watches and takes notes on corrections to give them. These notes help sharpen the piece to polish the end result. Usually, these critiques are small adjustments that remind dancers of previously set choreography. Dress rehearsal includes the use of costumes to visually put the piece together. Occasionally, notes can be given about the costumes which aid in enhancing the movement. In the piece I have choreographed, the dress rehearsal is still upcoming. Costumes are not finalized, but the vision for my piece incorporates long tulle skirts. With the movement I choreographed of strong lines from the dancers, the juxtaposition from the flowing skirts will balance the piece. I would prefer the costumes include a bold color. Royal blue or red are the two colors that strike me to fit with the piece since they add impact.

With all the elements in place for the performance, dancers have to prepare themselves to take the stage. Warm up class is an essential routine for any dancer to prepare their body to move. Most classes begin an hour and a half before the call to the stage. The class consists of barre and light center work. Barre is where specific movements are done to prepare for center work which includes jumps and turns. The combinations are easy for the dancers to remember and increase the blood flow to warm the body. Depending on the production, some classes are harder to prepare dancers to perform technical feats. Since technique drives my piece, the dancers will need to be prepared for the stage.

I have rehearsed my piece for two months, and it will be performed Sunday, May 5th at 2 P.M. on the Mainstage Theatre in Creighton's Lied Education Center for the Arts. I have

performed in the theater for five years; I enjoy the layout. In constructing my piece, I thought of sitting in the audience and watching the piece. I prefer dances where dancers are weaving through each other to create patterns. Structures are visualized by movement created from the patterns of dancers. Repeating steps are patterns generating continuity throughout the piece. Theme steps help orient audience members by seeing the dancers performing familiar movement.

I brought back thematic steps several times in the piece to connect different sections. There are several moments where two, three, or four dancers will merge to join the entire group. One of the most difficult aspects of constructing the piece related to choosing the movement to repeat. The balance of introducing new movement and reintroducing theme steps was precarious throughout the entire process. In seeing my piece, I am pleased with the juxtaposition between new and old steps.

Conclusion

Dances require thought from the choreographer, who balances the responsibilities of evolving and teaching a piece of movement. Without people who undertake creative endeavors, new work would not be created. Developing my own neoclassical ballet piece taught me the procedure choreographers must work through to create a dance: choreographing, rehearsing, and performing. Improvisations occur along the journey and lead to a unique piece. The ability to share a new piece of work excites the choreographer and dancers alike. Music drives the movement selected to guide the choreography. With the choice in music made, the choreographer must create the phrases to build the base of the piece. Rehearsing helps dancers remember and commit the movement to muscle memory. As the performance nears, dancers take

to the stage to learn how the piece will flow. The performance concludes the efforts of the choreographer in creating a new art form.

In working through each of these areas, I developed my six-minute neoclassical ballet inspired by George Balanchine and Justin Peck. The sharp movement related to *Agon*, while basic steps were elevated similarly to *Symphony in C*. Patterns of dancers drove my structuring of the piece. The dancers inspired me to showcase their talent. Dancers with strong technique allowed me to experiment with their piece. The six dancers I chose can perform any ballet step and use their instincts to adapt to changes. Being familiar with their style, I chose steps built on the strengths seen in their dancing. With upcoming dress rehearsals, I will continue to clean my piece and prepare it for the audience.

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