

THE CULTURE OF DANCE COMPETITIONS

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Abstract

Dance competitions have increased in size and visibility steadily since the 1980s. This is a unique dance culture with specific values that has not yet been explored as such. For many Americans, this culture composes the majority of their exposure to dance (either directly through competitions or through watching related dance movement either in recitals, on cruise ships, in TV commercials, etc., usually performed by current or former competitive dancers). In order to understand the current status of dance in America we need to examine this specific culture.

I will be observing the culture of dance competitions from both the emic and etic points of views. As a child and adolescent, I was a participating member of this specific culture and feel that my experiences in dance competitions have shaped my current views on dance. I will also use etic methods in gathering data about the socio-economic aspects of the culture and interviewing active participants. In essence, I will reflect on my own insider experiences as a young competitive studio dancer and on my current outsider status to define and describe the who, what, where, when, and why of the competitive dance culture.

Furthermore, I will attempt to answer less tangible questions about this culture. For example, how do competitive dancers define the purpose of dance? How is gender constructed? What movement attributes are valued and why? What is the role of family members who although are not dancers are still active participants in the dance competition culture?

Introduction

Dance competitions have increased in scope and visibility steadily since the 1980s. For many Americans, this culture composes the majority of their exposure to dance, either directly through participating in and watching dance competitions or recitals or indirectly through various forms of entertainment. Although there is no statistical information, it seems that the majority of the dancers who perform in commercial venues such as musical theatre, amusement parks, cruise ships, industrial entertainment, commercials, and music videos were competition dancers. Currently, "So You Think You Can Dance" is a successful television show, bringing the experience of a dance competition directly into American homes. More so than ever, Americans are coming into contact with the culture of dance competitions.

The scholarly study of dance competitions is relatively non-existent. The idea that American jazz and tap competitions, such as Showstoppers and Starpower, form their own subculture of dance has not been explored. I argue that considering dance competitions as a unique culture will provide valuable research about the expectations and knowledge base of incoming dance major students, the cross-fertilization of commercial and artistic dance forms, and a broader view of the perception of dance in America.

For this paper, the term "dance competition" refers to any dance competition where the primary dance forms presented are jazz, tap, and lyrical. The terms "routine" and "number" are used interchangeably throughout the paper and refer to the dance being performed. The average routine in a dance competition is two to three minutes in length. Although there are some differences in categories from competition to competition, in general there are solos, duets and trios, small groups, large groups, lines, and productions, which are then broken down into age divisions. Lastly, most competitions have a series of regional competitions that lead to national competition. The bulk of the dancers participating are female and most competitors are pre-teens or teenagers. According to my review of the advertisements in the September 2006 issue of *Dance Teacher*, there will be over 700 regional dance competitions this coming 2006-2007 season.

Personal Background

My perspectives on the world of dance competitions come from multiple viewpoints. The first half of my life as a dancer was spent as an active member in this culture on multiple levels. I entered my first dance competition at the age of seven and my last at the age of eighteen. I taught in five different dance studios where I was responsible for choreographing routines for competitions. Lastly, I have adjudicated dance competitions throughout Western New York State and Ontario, Canada. The second half of my life as a dancer began when I entered college and was

introduced to modern dance. There was not a clear break between my participation in competitions and my entrance into the modern dance world.

I began dancing at the age of three and entered my first dance competition at the age of seven. This was at the Kiwanis Music Festival in Niagara Falls, ONT, a competition that I continued to participate in yearly until I was seventeen. This dance competition was similar and different to the competitions that are popular today. At Kiwanis, there was one adjudicator, who at the end of each category gave verbal feedback to all of the contestants. I performed my first solo in this competition when I was eight. When the adjudicator came on stage at the end of the category, she critiqued the winner before she announced who won. She mentioned that the little girl who was receiving first place had a lot of potential, and obviously worked very hard. However, she was not convinced that this little girl was having any fun. That little girl was me. At this competition I learned that hard work and technique were not enough, you also had to entertain the audience through the illusion of personal enjoyment.

When I was involved in competitions, I had a specific idea about the purpose of dance, as well as a relatively narrow view of how the dancing body was supposed to look and how technique was defined. Also, because of the high number of female participants versus male participants, I was lead to believe that in dance the expectations for boys and girls were different. Each of these will be expanded upon in relationship to my own personal experiences and stories, as well as through current participating members' perspectives.

I am currently on faculty in the Department of Dance at Arizona State University where many of our First Year Dance Majors come from a studio-centered, competitive background. Through informal discussions, I have found that there are many similarities still between what I was taught to value and what they value as members of this community. At the same time, like any culture, the culture of dance competitions is not static and is always changing, so there are differences between my experiences over ten years ago in dance competitions and the current experience of participating in this culture. The combination of my own history with those of current participants allows me a unique perspective to examine the evolution of this culture.

Dance Competition Messages

As my first solo competition experience illustrates, the primary purpose of dance in dance competitions is to entertain the judges and audience. Entertaining the audience and the judges is the driving factor behind the choreography, and is reflected in the initial aspirations of young competition dancers. The entertainment value is derived from multiple factors including the dancers and their technique, the music and costume choices, and the execution of the routine.

During high school, I defined myself primarily as a jazz dancer. I defined technique through three key movements and all of their variations: extensions, turns, and leaps. A dancer wins dance competitions by having high extensions, the ability to do multiple pirouettes and high, boundless leaps. In most cases, quantity surpasses quality. Although my teachers stressed the importance of not "turning on your heel" in a pirouette, when competition time came, everyone in our group routine needed to do a triple turn, regardless of technical sacrifices. To solve this problem, dancers who could "turn three times" albeit on their heels with no sense of spotting were placed in the upstage corners, whereas those of us who were consist in our technique were placed downstage. This viewpoint concerning technique is still true in competitions today. The majority of students surveyed said that high extensions, strong leaps, and good turns defined good technique. When asked, "What is good technique, according to dance competition standards," one student responded:

Pointed feet, proper turning ability, straight legs in jumps. I think the technique is focused on making anything and everything look pretty, so if that means you have to cheat your arabesque or even your toe-rise, as long as the movement flows, and the lines are long, a dancer will be fine (especially with a good attitude/smile). (Jones)

No one mentions the ability to efficiently execute these movements with a true intellectual and kinesthetic understanding. I see this as the "super sizing" of dance technique – it is better to have mediocre technique and be able to do tricks than it is to be sound in your understanding of muscular efficiency and bodily mechanics while dancing.

Body Image

In dance competitions, the preferred dancing body is long and lean, which is also feminine for girls and masculine for boys. I have always had an athletic build, which served me in executing those high extensions, strong leaps, and

good turns, but I was still subject to feedback both written and verbal regarding my body shape and type. When I was a junior in high school, I entered the regional chapter of Dance Masters of America's "Miss Dance Competition." The procedure of this competition has changed, but at this point, all contestants were required to model a 3/4 sleeve black leotard, flesh colored tights and 1 1/2 inch character shoes. In my opinion, this part of the competition was for the sole purpose of examining each dancer's body in relationship to a pre-established ideal. I did not do well in this portion of the contest – not so much because of how my body was shaped but because I hated this part, and I am sure that it showed. Even at this time in my training, I thought that the value of the dancing body should be determined by what it could do instead of how it looks.

Unfortunately, reaching an established ideal body is still directly and indirectly important in dance competitions. Now many competitions have an optional modeling and photogenic portion and many of the costumes for girls and young women feature half-tops, high cut leotards, short-shorts, low cut necks lines and backs. Furthermore, in group routines, it is normal (and somewhat expected) that all of the dancers will wear identical costumes, shoes, and hair styles/wigs while performing. This does not leave much of room for different body types and negates the importance of individual expression. I remember in my own experiences of dancing with a group in which there were dancers who were very thin and some who could be considered overweight. It was extremely difficult to order costumes that flattered everyone. Placing those who were closest to the ideal dancing body prominently in the front, and hiding others upstage, or off stage in some cases, was the way that my dance teachers chose to solve this dilemma. After interviewing dancers who are still in competitions, they feel that this has changed some, in that they feel anyone can dance; yet at the same time they indirectly support the idea of a long and lean feminized body through comments regarding their own bodies and weight loss/weight gain concerns.

Dance Competitions and Popular Culture

The role of music in dance competitions cannot be understated. In dance competitions, movement follows the music when creating the choreography and execution of a dance routine. A friend of mine, who now owns his own studio and was and still is highly successful in competitions on multiple levels, said it best when he said in his opinion, a good dancer is "married to her music" in terms of rhythm and interpretation (Vacarro). This is perhaps related to the advent of MTV and music videos. MTV debuted in the early 1980s, just as dance competitions were starting to become more of a business and began to appear across the country. Dance on MTV in the early 1980s was used primarily as a means to help tell the story of the lyrics, as evidenced by videos such Michael Jackson's *Beat It*. As such, music becomes a key role in figuring out what is entertaining. For example, I was never allowed to perform a solo to pop music because that is what everyone else did and I needed to do something different. So, instead I performed the majority of my high school jazz solos to show-tunes. Even though it was never articulated to me, I think this was a clever strategy in creating an entertaining number. First, there were lyrics, which then dictated what the dance was "about" and helped relay that to the audience. Secondly, even though show-tunes were not as popular as pop music, they are still familiar in content and format and therefore made the number accessible to the audience. Lastly, jazz dance reached maturity through Broadway dancing, so performing to a show-tune allows for more vernacular movements to be incorporated. This is still the case in dance routines today, as many of the current participants felt that music with "high energy" is an important factor in determining the success of a routine.

The audience is also taken into consideration when analyzing the execution of dance routines, which is externally focused. The emphasis is placed on how the dance movements look from an external perspective rather than how they feel from an internal perspective. Kinesthetic sensations take a backseat to meeting the audience's expectations. Many participants feel that the dancers' expressions, or "facials" are an important factor in determining the success of a piece. Again, the primary purpose of dance in dance competitions is to entertain. That means that you need to smile and look exuberant even if that is not the way you feel. Some dance routines take this one step further and choreograph the facials into group choreography, meaning that everyone on stage has the same emotional response at the exact same moment in the movement and music. Individual expression within a group routine is not expected.

Gender

The majority of the competitors in dance competitions are girls and young women, which creates inequality between male and female performers. Because male dancers are rare they are immediately viewed as special. Both in terms of choreography and technique, the expectations for male and female performers are different. Usually, if there is a boy in a group routine, he is the only one. One participant clearly summarizes how this works by saying:

Most of the time, if there is only one boy in a piece, [he] will be in the center of the formation the entire time – the dance begins to revolve around the boy, so he better have good energy. Males can probably also get away with having better performing quality over technique, whereas females must have both. (Jones)

A male friend of mine, who I grew up with in dance competitions, agrees stating:
Being a male dancer myself I say this [without bias]. Male dancers stand out since we still are the minority in the dance world. A decent male dancer can get away with a lot more than a female on stage in most circumstances. (Vacarro)

This inequality between male and female dancers in dance competitions cuts both ways. In some instances, having a boy in a group number provides a choreographic gimmick of sorts that gives a routine a choreographic edge over its all female group competitors. In my own experience, our male ballet teacher performed in one of our jazz routines for the sole purpose that we needed a male dancer to fulfill a specific role. He was not asked to join us because we would learn through dancing alongside a professional dancer (which I did) but because we needed a male dancer to make our dance uniquely entertaining, thereby negating the individual, human aspects of this dancer. At the same time, because there are comparatively so few male dancers in dance competitions, the standards are not the same, meaning that a female competitor needs to be exceptionally talented to outscore a somewhat talented male dancer. Taking the television show “So You Think You Can Dance” as an example, the top ten female contestants were much more skilled than the top ten male contestants. Because one male and one female dancer were voted off each week, the male dancers of mediocre talent had an advantage in succeeding to the end of the show. As a result, it is easier for male dancers than female dancers to succeed in dance competitions and in related fields as they progress.

The Economics of Dance Competitions

Aside from what happens onstage, there are shared values that are revealed behind the scenes in terms of the economics of dance competitions and dance studios. Participating in dance competitions on both the regional and national levels is not inexpensive. For example, when I was competing in dance competitions I would on average do fifteen routines. Today this would cost an average of \$500 in entry fees alone for one regional competition. Keeping in mind that the average length of a dance competition routine is two and one-half minutes, this works out to \$13.30 a minute for to perform. Current participants surveyed said that on average, the costume cost per routine was about \$100 dollars. That means if I entered a one competition today, it would cost about \$2000 on costumes and entry fees. This total does not include the lessons that are needed on a weekly basis, travel costs, and extra costs such as stage make-up, food, and souvenirs. While growing up near the Canadian border, many dance competitions would come through Niagara Falls, NY to draw Canadian costumers. Now that the economy of that area is on the decline, very few dance competitions come through Niagara Falls, NY. At the same time, many of the dance competitions advertising in the September 2006 issue of *Dance Teacher* come through the metro-Phoenix area, an area where the economy is growing. Because of the economics of dance competitions, certain populations are not part of this culture. The economics of dance competitions are decidedly middle and upper-middle class.

Furthermore, participating in dance competitions can help local dance studios succeed. Many dance studios require a minimum amount of classes per week for the student to be considered for competition classes, thereby increasing the income for the studio. Dance competitions have a way of “rallying” the parents behind the studio, which supports the business both explicitly and implicitly. Lastly, winning dance competitions at a regional competition is perhaps the best advertising a studio can get. When I asked a Buffalo, NY area studio owner about how participating in dance competitions influences the business aspect of his studio he said he does not “think participating in competitions influences the way we run our business. I do know that we have increased our enrollment through performing at these events” (Vacarro). His students are required to spend at least nine hours per week in class in order to be afforded the opportunity to compete and the average cost per month per competition student in his studio is between \$105 and \$115. So, by participating in dance competitions he is increasing his customer base and is increasing the income he can generate per student.

The reason that dancers give for participating in dance competitions are varied, but most partake because they like to perform and/or to see what else is out there. But, at the same time, they like to win and be recognized for their accomplishments. When I first started competing at the local Kiwanis Music Festival in 1981, the only awards given per category were first, second, and third. In the early 1990s, the majority of dance competitions began giving an award to every entry based on a point system. If there are sixteen entries in a category each entry receives an award. At first this sounds like a great idea because everyone is really only competing against themselves. In

reality this is profit motivated. At competitions where everyone receives an award, anyone who receives a certain award or higher (usually the equivalent of a silver medal) is eligible for the national competition. Needless to say, giving everyone an award makes more people eligible for nationals, where the entry fees are higher. I remember adjudicating a regional competition in Toronto, Ontario, and felt that I was judging the dancers fairly and honestly. After the first day, the director of the competition pulled me and one other judge aside and encouraged us to award higher scores to the participants so that more dancers would be eligible for the next level of competition. I was not surprised, but I was somewhat offended. My guess is that this is the case in many competitions today. A survey of competitions advertising in the September 2006 issue of *Dance Teacher* shows that on average, competitions have 22.4 regional competitions per year and 1.6 national competitions per year. The better the competitors do, the more likely they are to want to go to nationals and return next year.

Conclusion

Analyzing dance competitions as its own subculture of American dance presents many areas for more investigation. For example, how do dancers from this culture transition into modern dancers during their studies at university dance programs? Taking myself as an example, somewhere along the line I transitioned my thinking and moving into that of a postmodern dancer, just as many university students are currently transitioning. It would be valuable to curriculum development to look to see how and when this happens. Another area for examination is analyzing the link between trends in postmodern, contemporary choreography and commercial choreography trends. I recently watched some of our First Year Majors working on a jazz dance they had learned, and there were many inversions and much floor-work that I recognized from various postmodern techniques. How does this information transfer from the more artistically based modern dance world into the more commercially based jazz dance world? Or, does it work in the opposite direction? Lastly, what are the boundaries between commercial/competition dance forms and concert dance forms such as ballet and modern? Are there clear boundaries? If not, how does each subculture infiltrate and influence the others?

This is a unique culture that has not been analyzed as such and is rapidly growing. Looking at the nuts and bolts of how and why this culture operates will provide for a greater understanding of the American dance culture at large. The dance competition culture is an area that warrants further study and exploration.

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