

Management for Re-Imagining Dance

Utilizing Production Stage Management to Liberate Dance Innovations

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ABSTRACT

The arts play a very important role in today's society, yet there is a lack of understanding how technicians play a role in that. Not only is their job often imperative to each individual project they work on, but also their work is constantly bringing new things to the industry as a whole, similarly to the work of artists. The arts, and dance in particular, are fields that are ever changing and innovating. In this article I aim to unravel where that innovation is coming from and the support that allows for it to be growing so quickly. Specifically, I am looking at how the Production Stage Manager functions alongside artists and their work, and explaining how they are a vital part to this ingenuity.

Introduction

Dance dates back so far, and is so engrained into the human practice, that the origins are still unknowable for anthropologists today. There are, however, suggestions of dance in evidence from archeological finds, so we know that in the very least dance does have an extremely far back history (Kealiinohomoku). If this is how it is with the actual art of dance, then we can understand why there is definitely no information about the first Production Stage manager. While this may be so, I would argue that there likely has always been someone to resemble this idea since the beginning of dance. Someone to assist with the dancers, whether actually someone helping to put on a performance, or someone sitting idly by as the community danced together. The point is that the two have likely always been interlaced, and they definitely are today.

As a Production Stage Manager myself, I have had ample opportunity to work closely with artists and the performing arts. As can be understood from envisioning my notion to cave-men dancers, dance has also evolved a lot. The relationship of a Production Stage Manager and this innovation of dance are inherently intertwined, and just like a dancer and a Production Stage Manager, one can hardly exist without the other. Before I get into the details of this, however, it is first imperative to get a better understanding of specifics.

Understanding Dance

What is dance? This is a question that at face value seems so obvious, as it is so integrated in many cultures and societies, but becomes tricky once you really dive deep. I asked three different individuals to get a sense of what the “average” American thinks of when dance comes to mind. The big words that pop out are “expression,” “movement,” and “art.” What I gather as a pretty blanket statement for their understanding of dance is “an intentional and expressive form of art that is closely intertwined with movement and the body.”* To compare this to what a professional dancer says I look at an educational source; defining dance by dancers for dancers. In the book, *Dance Studies*, the author refers to dance as “movement in time and space” and therefore “everyone can dance.” It is the “first level of communication before speech” (Butterworth, 1). In another text, *Studying Dance*, “dance is a multifaceted art form. It has a rich history that exists across cultures and serves various purposes. Dance exists beyond the stage and studio and is always advancing” (Schupp, xi). What I find useful in these definitions is that they broaden our image of dance, and note the fact that it is engraved into who we are from the minute we are born into this world. Dance can hold so much more in it than just being an intended movement. There is a thickness into the meaning behind it, how it’s crafted, and the list

goes on. Dance is used in many different capacities for many different reasons, so it is hard for anyone to stick a singular definition onto it.

Dance is important. All forms of dance have an extremely rich and deep history rooted in a multitude of cultures and societies. Ballet stems from the courts of France, and Jazz stems extremely far back from the lineage of African dance. Today not only can we learn more about these cultures through embodying dance and studying its history, but we can watch it evolve to hold on to things from our culture today, and explore many facets of our ever changing society.

While history remains deeply rooted in much of dance that is performed today, dance is able to stem off from that and adapt to become even broader for the part it plays in someone's life. Contemporary Dance is essentially the art form of today. African Dance, Ballet, and Modern all are codified forms from a specific time period, yet contemporary dance is where we see artists really playing within the endless definition of dance during our time. Pushing the boundaries of how we think of dance and what it looks like. SanSan Kwan discusses this as she explains the differences within the types of Contemporary dance that exist. She defines contemporary as being dance that is "together with time." In her vague understanding of it, she opens up what dance can look like in this day of age, saying that it can pretty much be anything that is "happening now" (39). Kwan dives in to look at dance's evolution by noting the trends that have been incorporated to the form that have caused it to change over time; in the 70s there was a lot of dance making about conceptualism, whereas the 80s had a stronger focus on irony and politics (Kwan).

Innovative Companies/ Performances

It is imperative then to understand how and where the boundaries of dance are being pushed. Looking at many dance companies today, particularly contemporary companies, we can

see how dancers and choreographers are taking this idea to expand their work. Orange Grove Dance is a company that has been stepping outside of the traditional dance world and works with dance on film, media, and in very specific sites. Their company explores how changing the context from which the audience views the film, and/or by changing the space the performer must dance in, can affect the complete experience of the performance (Krogol, Reeves). The Washington D.C. school American University has a dance show called “Gallery” which also greatly exemplifies the way in which this field is changing and plays with the audience’s point of view. The 2019 performance was one that I was the Production Stage Manager for. It had seven presentations of work from students that was displayed inside the school’s art museum. Every piece in the show was its own unique way of utilizing dance, as well as had to be site specific to conform to the capabilities of the spaces the museum offers. The presentations in the show varied from dance pieces that bring forth discussions of particular social issues, to choreographers that utilized dance and nature to create a toolkit for learning about the environment and communities.

This all becomes important because people are showing how dance doesn’t just stop at being a form of entertainment. The dexterity artists are finding within the form is astonishing, and it is imperative that this work has the opportunity to be continued. While the world is zipping by us, dance is one of the few things that can stay grounded with this forward momentum. People sometimes see dance as weird and unapproachable, but the truth is that often it is simply because of how forward thinking it is. To put it in perspective, just 70 years ago in many parts of America and Europe it seemed odd, and potentially even political, to dance barefoot. So, the field keeps chugging forward.

Pitfalls for Dance Innovation

Where we fall into a trap is the limited capabilities in producing dance in this manner. Dance as a commercialized form and for entertainment in itself is a platform for regaining money to keep the art sustainable, but for using dance in other capacities, this is not so. In the Journal “Passion of People,” the authors explain this dilemma and say the way it is combatted is in people’s love for this work and their careers inside of it. The journal brings up challenges of reduced funding and “staffing management issues” that all only become okay through people’s passion for the work (Richardson, Uma, Ruth, 7).

The passion brings the artists, but the artists can only do so much without proper support and resources. The idea of “the starving artist” is no new information, but the implications of it are more grand than people know. Hans Abbing is a visual artist and economist who wrote a book to tackle ideas surrounding this dilemma in all fine and performing arts professions. He starts by stating facts and numbers about how truly low-income working in the arts is. He also makes the observation on how so many artists are able to survive with un-livable wages. The fact is that most artists generally need additional sources of income, usually from a second job, and therefore despite what the total income of the individual is, art is still a low-income profession (113). My first thought with this is how busy artists quickly become with juggling these two jobs, and then on top of that still not having additional money to spend on much needed help. This is particularly a problem for performing artists in the US, as Abbing shared data that in the US and Australia, performing artists’ net earnings are the least out of all artistic professions, as opposed to Europe where it’s the creative arts: visual artists, composers, and writers (112). Dance artists are essentially running their own business, selling either themselves or their work. In a business office when your work becomes overload and it starts to seem as though you have

taken on tasks not in your job description, you go to your company or higher up and request more employees or an assistant. In the dance world there is seldom such a thing, of course with exceptions. For lack of money, most choreographers and creators cannot afford a Production Manager to assist them on those tasks, so they must assume the role for themselves (Abbing).

I spoke with two professionals in the tech world to get a sense of what it is really like out in the field during the present-day. Rhoda Cerritelli, managing director at theatre institution HartBeat Ensemble, was able to discuss the heart of all of these issues, and explain first-hand how a lack of money affects artists. She has worked with a vast range of companies, such as Dance Theatre Workshop, Urban Bush Women, Paul Taylor, and National Performance Network. Some of her favorite and hardest times were the nine years she spent with Urban Bush Women. Urban Bush Women is a non-profit dance company that “galvanizes artists, activists, audiences and communities through performances, artist development, education and community engagement” (“Mission and Core Values”). Cerritelli loves working with community engagement and companies that are driven by artists, and mission driven work; she notes that these are the hardest to work for because of their lack of resources. This is an established and well known dance company, and even they have inadequate funding for the basic company members they know they need. She explained how it becomes particularly hard because you need people to get this work done, and you want to give them a living wage, but to come up with enough money is hard. For an artistic vision to happen it often takes fundraising and working for hire to make enough money to go towards the creative work, but that still isn’t enough.

Generally, in her experience, she has noticed people needing to take on the job of multiple people to compensate for not having the capability to pay more bodies. She noted how it is not usually the norm, particular in dance, to have a production stage manager, but it then gets tricky

because you really do need a technician to help the artists figure out how to constantly re-work things to allocate for the low amount of money they do have. Urban Bush was a strong example of this from because it is such a unique and progressive company, so it's imperative that they have someone to see everything as a whole in terms of production, and to support the artistic team so that the "company manager can be the company manager, and the managing director can just be the managing director but there is someone that is oversight that is not the technical director," thought that technical director and other managers are often having to step into the PSM roll.

This can also be zoomed out to see a much wider scale of this to understand why so much money is needed in the arts. To do this I look at perhaps the biggest money sucker of all performing arts: Broadway. My other interview was with 2-time Emmy award winning director Brad Garfield about his in-the-works Broadway musical *Come On, Let's Go*. He walked me through almost every step of the process in making a Broadway show possible, and broke down the fact that at every new step along the way, there is a need for more and more money. To start you have an idea that you use to convince people to give you money so that you can then hire someone to write it into an actual story. From there you need to get more money for a lawyer to ensure that all contracts and rights for the show are in line with regulations. You also need a whole team of support with you: managing directors, producers, assistant directors, etc. Next the concept gets written and you have to start hiring people to play the parts, so then you must pay them for every miniature you have them in the room. The list goes on and on. This is the same that happens with small dance companies, thought just on a smaller scale. Every person who contributes to the work, every space needed, every prop piece, etc. requires money. Right now Garfield is still at the beginning of the process after seven years in. There is so much work,

planning, paperwork, and speaking to people just to get off the ground and get the proper rights for the show. He estimates that in the end the total budget will be between 15-20 million dollars.

Both Cerritelli and Garfield discussed the same way to go about this work and make it successful. They say it's all about the passion. You absolutely must have a team of people that are all invested in your project, because it will never be an easy ride. The work-load will always be extensive and there will never be enough money, so that cannot be the determinant for the job. It is about the people who you work with and being able to trust that you all have a love for the art.

For an artist to self-produce their own work means less time spent on making it. That is then less time in the actual act of gaining money from their art or from another job, which also means extra extended energy. The lack of having that extra board of support and resource that an additional person or people can provide makes a big dent in the artist and their project.

Production Stage Management

Some of these people that are so passionate and ready to help are those in production-primarily, Production Stage Managers (PSM). This is yet another term that can be understood and defined in so many ways, but what I am referring to here are the people who lead everything “behind the scenes.” I.e. manipulation (but not creation) of the lights and sound, setting up everything needed for the show, running/ overseeing the backstage, coordinating all emails and people, etc. As defined by Michael Vitale, the Stage Managers “are the lynchpin of any production. (...) Stage Managers are the ones who keep the trains running on time and the people on stage safe” (Vitale, 1).” This is true, it is limiting. The PSM also oversees every aspect of technical work involved in a show (i.e. everything that isn't the presented art). Like “dance,” this is a multifaceted term that functions in a particular way depending on the situation. In every

situation, however, the PSM exists in a world to help the artists and their work. If there is no art to be presented, there is no job for the PSM. Because of this, they have a very special and particular relationship.

Through the work that I have done as a PSM, I have discovered how much this relationship between PSM and the artist really matters. The PSM should become somebody for the artist to think with, not just someone to do things for the artist and their work. There is a lot of creativity involved in the work of a PSM, which means that they must be adaptable and use creative problem solving. They must essentially design the flow of the backstage, which in essence is an art project itself. It took an immense amount of creative problem solving to do the Production Management of “Gallery”. My stage management work was almost a dance itself; for me to perfectly capture the timing and movement of the show I had to figure out a design layout for the presentations and audience’s whereabouts, dress the museum to look like a performance space, and tune in during the actual show to craft a picture of all the moving parts of the show in my head in real time. In other words, all moving parts had to be precisely choreographed. This project applies to the art that are done in today’s current world. The old-school proscenium theater is still a valid way to display art, but people are stepping outside of this realm to explore tons of untouched options. Site specific pieces, use of video/ projection/ film, and many other demonstrations of dance and other art forms is incredibly exciting. By utilizing these management skills and restructuring the way people think about dance, it is possible to allow these new ideas for the arts to flourish. Had the artists been on their own for this production, there would not have been a way to organize all of the complications that the museum brought. The show would have had to be simplified quite a bit so that the artists could focus on their

works. It takes that extra collaborative mind and body to seek opportunities for making the ingenuity thrive.

Utilizing Management to its Fullest

In further explaining this relationship, I offer what exactly a PSM can do that exemplifies the impossible nature if an artist were to take all of this on for themselves. Denny Lan in “Managing Genius” suggests three ways of getting things done as a manager: do it yourself, ask willing colleagues to work with you, or delegate it. The idea is that as a manager it is more than just handing out tasks. They oversee to make sure everything gets done as efficiently and well as possible. By being observant and understanding those you are working with, you must make decisions on dividing up how things they will get done. It is an art to master how to carry out plans and make decisions that will be beneficial to the most people, making the most people happy. In particular, it is hard to make an artist with very specific ideas happy. Lang explains that speaking with a good manager “feels like conversing with a skilled cook who is able to carry on a detailed conversation while cooking a gourmet dinner. Skilled chefs have mastered the core essentials to smoothly move through a series of complex steps without pause or worry. They never seem scattered or distracted with what they are doing next” (13). I love this quote because I think it denotes so perfectly the manner in which a PSM goes about their job. In addition to doing all the logistics of making schedules, finding locations, sourcing equipment and props, etc., they are also a calm-headed asset to view everything that is going on. How could an artist do all of this while also doing the task of focusing on the art they are making? To closely watch a dancer for notes while simultaneously taking notes on things like prop movement is a challenge. It is also an extremely valuable asset to have a person designated for being calm. A person to

solve disaster ridden things before they happen and be available for emergencies. The arts are always unpredictable.

PSM at Work

We can also look at another world of thought where these methods are utilized. Looking at a show like “King Kong” we can see a mastery of this artistry on a, literally, gigantic scale. What the audience sees as the art is most likely the design of the puppet, the dancing, the scenic design, lighting, and costumes. None of these elements are the creation or artistic property of the PSM. What is, however, is the art of perfectly timing when the next light or sound cue is, the creativity in figuring out how to store, protect, and keep the massive puppets backstage, and designing every other detail to ensure people are at rehearsals when need be, and not having their time wasted. The beast of the puppet used for this show is 2,000lbs at 20ft tall, so figuring out the logistics of keeping and storing it truly would take some creativity (Zakarin).

Within this relationship between artist and PSM it is imperative to always try every idea out, in many different ways, before even thinking of rejecting it. It would have been easy to say no to a 2,000lb gorilla puppet, but the Production Manager found a way to make it work. This is how a PSM is utilized as someone to think through things with. An artist doesn’t simply tell their PSM what they need, but rather use them as a source to explain where they need help troubleshooting so that the PSM can look at what is needed for the integrity of the work, and solve the problem to the best of their capabilities.

This type of work can apply to any case where a choreographer or director has seemingly impossible and unrealistic goals. To look at a show I was on the crew of, Ronald K. Brown’s “Evidence” utilizes a “dirt drop” at the end of the piece. In Brown’s vision, he wanted a huge cloud of dirt to fall from above the stage onto his dancers. This, of course, wouldn’t be a great

thing to do in practice, but production managers (PMs) try everything in their power to let the artists vision come true. This is where our creativity really gets put to use. The PM of this show crafted a large tarp (diaper is the technical term) which she filled with tons of artificial turf dirt. This product is lighter than dirt, won't smoke up, and is much easier to clean. For the aesthetic of the work, however, this artificial plastic looked precisely like dirt from the audience's perspective. The PM built this contraption and hung it high above the stage in such a precise way that the "dirt" could be released at the exact second that she called it to.

Conclusion

In my dance studies my colleagues and I have worked with a concept about a dancing body in a moving world. It's this idea that dance allows us to embody the world around us to keep up with the fast-pace movements that are occurring in every day. Contemporary artists are expressing their understandings of this in the work they are curating. The work is just as innovative as the world around it, yet it still gets under-appreciated for the immense amount of value it brings. In utilizing the special relationships between an artist and their PSM it is more than possible to move past the blockades in the arts fields today. Even when there are not enough funds or resources to support a maker's vision, a PSM can step in to be another mind, outside of the work, to logically and creatively flow through ways to overcome and move forward. A good PSM works in a very specific way of working. They generally have extremely dexterous minds to hold on to a notion that they can do anything. Being able to expand the brain to oversee everything happening at once, and be able to find a solution to any problem- or at the very least know when something can't be solved and therefor another path must be taken- are the extremely valuable skills they yield. They are artists and logicians at the same time. Technology of today has made it seem as though everything is moving in fast forward, and because this holds

true for dance as well, it would be a shame to hold it back. The richness and importance of dance calls for a need of it to be expandable. By using these skill sets of a Production Stage Manager, and in creating these close relationships with artists, dance will be sure to continue flourishing and growing the way it has done in the past. By opening up new opportunities and always allowing new ideas to flourish, the dance world will continue to bring amazing change and understandings of life.

Notes

- Jacklyn DeVito: Dance is “Intentional movement connected to the soul”
 - Art = visual expression
 - “Visual expression that conjures up an emotional reaction, oftentimes an expression of beauty in some capacity. A soul expression through the visual”
- Jake Garfield: “Dance is the expression of oneself through a means of art”
 - “Art is the way in which a person can display anything they imagine by any kind of form that insights joy” “the art of...”
- Colleen McCreanor: Dance is an “Artistic and athletic movement of the body that is an expression”
 - “Artistic is an individualistic expression of identity, feelings, or one’s opinions”

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