

BE A BETTER JAZZ DANCE CHOREOGRAPHER

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The title of this lecture refers to choreography in jazz dance, but like with so many issues in jazz dance, developing a deep understanding of the form, its history, and its many manifestations is critical in laying the groundwork in trying to develop a plan to be a better jazz dance choreographer.

As usual, we first must define what we mean by “jazz dance.” Is it the purity of the original vernacular forms, or is it the many hybrids that have emerged during its evolutionary continuum? I prefer to see jazz dance as a variety of creations, with each creation internalizing some ratio of original jazz dance characteristics to non-jazz dance characteristics (ballet, modern, etc). Therefore I will talk about jazz dance choreography as not being only vernacular or social dance forms, but relating to the variety of creations in the continuum.

Along with this there is the place where this jazz dance choreography in question will occur. Is it musical theatre? Films? Concert dance? Commercial dance? Each of these performance outlets asks for different levels of artistry and approach in jazz dance choreography. The needs of the particular outlet often determines the level of artistry that will emerge. Of course, other aspects like rehearsal time, skill of dancers, etc, will affect the quality of jazz dance choreography that is presented.

Before talking about how to be better as a jazz dance choreographer, maybe the proper starting point is to talk about what makes jazz dance “jazz dance.”

Jazz dance has a history and an identity. It has a truth about its origin, definition, and manifestation. There IS something that is noticeably “jazz dance.” It’s hard to pin down and describe, but it is present, nevertheless. And this is a good starting point for discussing quality approaches to jazz dance choreography. What is the history and identity of jazz dance? Not only in it’s pure state of vernacular dance, but also in the established formations that came in years after. The look, style, and vocabulary of jazz dance over the ages. In this deep well of historical creation are ideas and inspirations for future jazz dance choreography. The future often grows out of the past, by pulling from the strengths of past creativity, and using ideas from current events to shape new expressions. The trick is how to use the wealth of the past in telling the story of today.

Therefore the first suggestion I would have for emerging jazz dance choreographers is to research and know the history of your genre. Know the music of jazz in its early formations – ragtime, hot jazz, swing, be bop, cool jazz....And also know the standard dances that were

created to meld with these jazz rhythmic elements. Have the music and movements solid in your mind and in your bones. And once you have that, then let this be a subliminal guide in your jazz dance creations of today. You will find that aspects of the true jazz formations of the past will emerge in your work, or the overall look/style of your jazz dance will show a reflection back to the veracity of the past. ***This is a sure fire way to know that your work is truly “jazz” and that you are honoring the past as you move into the future.***

Now this idea of truthfulness in jazz dance is a big issue in today’s jazz dance world. The term “jazz dance” is used and mis-used in so many areas. Dances that have little or no jazz dance qualities are routinely (and inaccurately) described as jazz dance. When a media outlet has great or highly influential visibility (*So You Think You Can Dance...*), the audience begins to believe the inaccurate description, and in the process the truth of jazz dance is ignored. What often is called jazz dance will have minimal jazz dance characteristics.

Which is why I am hitting hard on this point – that for a dance to be part of the continuum of jazz dance, it must actually have qualities of jazz dance in it. When you work towards improving your presentation of jazz dance, be sure that you are actually using aspects of jazz dance.

What are these aspects? It’s not an exact science, but many have offered ideas on movement characteristics that come from the pure state of jazz dance, or it’s recognized continuum forms.

- Movement in demi plie, with a forward bend in the torso
- Using steps, drags, and other flat movements of the feet
- Making movements that originate in the pelvis and flow outward through the legs and arms. The pelvic/hip region is the point of origin
- Manipulating dynamics in movement execution – sharp percussive movements, slow tense legato movements, and having the skill to temper these movements over the rhythmically challenging jazz music accompaniment. “Hit – Reverberation-Dissipation”
- Body Isolations – jazz dancers will use individual parts of the body to accent the rhythmic structure of the music and choreography – heads, shoulders, ribs, hips, even feet and flick kicks. Jazz dance is “polycentric” meaning that it can have multiple centers of movement origination. It does not always see the body as a singular “whole”
- Polyrhythmic – jazz dance movements often have multiple rhythms being executed by different body parts in a simultaneous fashion. The feet may be stepping in a 1-2-3-4 pattern, while the arms are moving in a 1&2&3&4 pattern, and with the head looking side/side with a 2/4 pattern
- Finding a “cool” expression in movement – meaning that although there is a core of strong energy from deep within the body that initiates movements, the exterior of the body and the facial expression stays calm despite the fiery energy within. It is this interplay of hot and cool within a singular body that is defined as “cool” – and one of the defining qualities of jazz dance.
- Dancing with personal feeling – the jazz dancer feels the emotion on a personal level and imbues the movement with personal emotion. Unlike ballet which can be

presentational and without overt passion, or modern dance where emotion is often removed from the dancer's execution, jazz dance allows the dancer to feel and to display this feeling. It's passion, emotion, and being alive as a human being.

- The dancer as a person – jazz rarely asks the dancer to be an abstraction in movement. It normally asks the dancer to transmit personal feelings as part of creating choreography and in performance techniques.

So these are some of the basic tenets of jazz dance, as seen in its historical and its evolutionary stages. It is up to the jazz dance choreographer to have a firm grasp of these ideas, as well as the accompanying movement vocabulary of the continuum, and to let these ideas be a subliminal influence on new jazz dance creativity.

Another very important aspect about jazz dance is the relation of the choreographed rhythmic movement to the rhythms of the accompanying music. Jazz dance either follows the rhythms of the music by imitating its hits and beats with similar body movements, or it works against the rhythms of the music by using counter rhythms created by the choreographer (or dancer) in opposition to the music's established rhythmic beat. Much in the way that a jazz musician improvises, the dancer/choreographer can invent rhythms in movement hits/steps that work against but yet are still complementary to the accompanying music.

Back to the mention of performance outlets – jazz dance choreography can take many shapes depending on where it will be presented. Musical theatre jazz dance tends to be punchy and with pizzazz, more presentational to the audience, and often adheres to well formulated styles like that of Bob Fosse or Michael Bennett. Film and video jazz dance can reflect a myriad of styles, but often the length of presentation is short and the choreography is subservient to camera angles and video editing. Commercial jazz dance tends to be grittier and to reflect street dance influences more than classic jazz dance influences. Jazz dance in concert dance has the most opportunity to demonstrate classic jazz dance values, a link to its history, and to allow for the most creativity by the choreographer. But concert jazz dance is the least visible of all of these mentioned jazz dance outlets, and is the least commercially viable. Meaning that it is the most financially challenging form of jazz dance to produce.

I'll save competition jazz dance for last. I have to admit that it's been awhile since I have been a judge at dance competitions and I'm not informed of the current situation. I can only speak of past days when jazz dance was presented in a way that did not honor the tradition, nor honor much creativity in creation. The prime reason for the choreography was to display the ability of the dancer, often resulting in a surfeit of tricks and of course the ridiculous inclusion of fouetté turns in a jazz dance routine. I would imagine that it hasn't gotten much better in recent years...but competition jazz dance has not done much to improve the quality of the form or its knowledgeable in its audience.

I'll say that all choreography, for the most part, is a representation of the imagination of the choreographer. The choreographer finds ideas, is inspired, and puts imagination on display in the physical form of choreography. Therefore, the deeper/better the level of imagination, the

more unique a created choreographic form will be. In jazz dance, though, it's a balancing act of how to inject these new ways of thinking about jazz dance, and yet still maintain a connection to the history of jazz dance. To utilize aspects of the classic elements of jazz dance, in a new way.

So far I've discussed ideas to make you jazz dance choreography a better reflection of true jazz dance elements. But there are other considerations in how to bring a unique, fresh quality to your jazz dance choreography.

This can involve choreographing to cutting edge examples of jazz music, or to re-thinking the classic jazz music of the past – paring it with new styles in choreography not normally associated with the classic jazz music/movement union. (example – Spencer Pond)

Today's jazz dance choreographers also should have a curiosity about observing today's world, thinking about current issues/ideas, and having the desire to comment on or illustrate the choreographer's particular take on the world, or expression. This is most applicable to concert jazz dance. Try to avoid rehashing themes of the past, and think about what is going on in the world and in your mind TODAY. Look for music/jazz music examples that pull from today's sounds, and have a goal of creating a work that is representative of today, while still showing influences of the movement styles of past jazz dance examples.

As a last remark I'll make a few suggestions about things to avoid in jazz dance choreography – by eliminating these things you will greatly improve your jazz dance choreography:

- No jazz hands (unless you are making a satirical jazz dance)
- No plastered smiles – instead opt for a natural expression of joy, not a fake smile (UC Irvine audition)
- No hot, sizzle jazz dances – to present jazz as “hot” is cliché
- No seduction of the audience – no overly sexy poses, eyes, interaction with the audience (unless part of a particular style like Fosse)
- No excessive use of tricks, switch splits, etc. Search for original movement that reflects feeling, not displays of ability
- NO FOUETTE TURNS!

Instead, opt for:

- A relaxed, naturalistic body look
- A natural facial expression and smile
- Finding the true range of emotions inherent in jazz music, and not focusing on “hot” expressions
- Presenting the jazz dancer as a complex emotional being, to be observed and investigated, and not as a hot sexy dancer
- Finding new movements in traditional patterns that will show creativity rather than use of established audience pleasers – drop the switch split and come up with a different,

similarly exciting leap...and a triple pirouette on a straight knee is not the only way to turn in a jazz dance – come up with something original!

- Let the rhythms of your accompanying music be your guide and/or your jumping off point. Make a marriage between the movement and the music, with both wrapped in the subliminal influences of the truthfulness and veracity of jazz dance
- KNOW YOUR HISTORY – if you don't know jazz dance/music history, you cannot honor it with your new creations
- PUSH YOUR IMAGINATION – don't always opt for the first thing that comes into your mind. Make up three different phrases for one section of your dance, and settle on the most inventive, or a unique combination of the three.
- Experiment with improvisation – your own or by your dancers. You'll find that contributions from your dancers, in whole or even in just one small part, can add freshness to the look of your work, and might even spur your choreographic thinking into a direction that you had not considered or did not know even existed.