

Directing a Dance Troupe and How to Choreograph

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This paper discusses many of the decisions used to direct a dance troupe, the selection of music, and choice of choreography. It is based on years of experience and choreographic theory.

Many of the examples are based upon the development of *Out Dancing Ballroom*.

Defining the Purpose of the Dance Troupe

Every organization, business, or dance troupe has a mission. *Out Dancing Ballroom* (here within referred to as ODB) has as its mission to bring the delights of same-sex couple dancing to the attention of the lesbian and gay community. The medium is public performances.

The ballroom repertoire includes many forms of dance—Latin (Cha Cha, Salsa, Tango, Meringue, Samba, Paso Doubles, and more), Swing (East Coast, West Coast, and more), Waltz (American, Viennese, and others), Country (2-Step, Shadow, Shuffle, Waltz), and other dances (Hustle, Quick Step, and more).

Since our vehicle is public performances, we strive to make our performance entertaining and enjoyable. Thus, much consideration is given to the needs of the audience. We go to great length to decide what music is chosen to exemplify the dance we present.

Choreographic Setting and General Rules

Setting actual dance steps is the last effort in the choreographic process.

First, we must be aware of the performance setting. With ODB, the setting is a stage area with the audience typically being 15 feet or more away. This influences how the dance is choreographed. Small nuances are not seen by people at this distance. Choreographing for TV or movies is different than for live cabaret with is different than for large stage.

Similarly, the steps used in performance are different than those used for dancers. For example, choreographing a line dance has the focus on the needs and desires of the dancers, not the audience. It needs to flow and feel good to the dancer in order for it to have staying power. However, for the stage, the choreography is designed to convey a story, feeling, or context, not necessarily feel good to the dancer.

Here are some rules of good choreography and company management:

1. The larger the audience or venue, the larger and simpler the steps need to be.
2. If an intricate pattern is desired, use fewer dancers on stage. Solo work is the best place for intricate dance steps.
3. Be sure to use the stage, i.e., the dance must move about and use the stage. Standing in place is the antithesis of dance—which is movement.
4. Audiences mostly watch arms, chests, and faces. They often ignore feet.
5. If you want the audience to look at something in particular, you must indicate it directly. For example, in ODB west coast swing number, we use a fall at the end. We hold position before and after the event. This frames the event and gives the audience time to process what they just saw. Likewise, when we are holding our partner down, the leaders are instructed to look at the follower instead of the audience. This way, the audience is directed to look at the followers who perform high kicks.
6. Plan the order of dances like a good plot. Also take into consideration time for costume changes.
7. Some dances should have more or fewer people in them than other dances.
8. Give yourself some flexibility in casts. You will not be able to count on every dancer for every show (especially in all volunteer groups). Have back ups.
9. In a company, have more than one choreographer. In ODB, Chuck choreographed two numbers, Jeremy choreographed two numbers, Arley choreographed one number, and we all collaborated on another number. We all have strengths and weaknesses. Chuck knows how to plot dances and use the stage but he is not an expert on many of the dance forms. Jeremy was a ballroom teacher for 25 years and performed around the world. He is inventive yet recognizes the skill

limitations of many of the dancers. Arley is an ex-jazz Vegas dancer who has great style. Together we support each other's effort. Chuck makes the count sheet and plots the dance. Then the three of us put together the steps. The best dance companies in the world use multiple choreographers and collaborative efforts.

There are many basic rules. You are welcome to take a college class on choreography.

Choice of Program

ODB is not just dancing particular dances. Instead, each number is chosen for how it fits into an overall performance program. A basic rule is to begin the show with a bang and end with a bang, i.e., big production numbers. In between, there is a definite pace of numbers.

For a half-hour show, we begin with our West Coast Swing number because it is hard hitting with many over-the-top steps. Then we quiet down with our Waltz, going to our medium speed but flashy Cha Cha, then our quiet and cerebral Tango and ending with a full stage of East Swing enthusiasm.

Choice of Dance Content

Each dance must have a reason to exist. Otherwise, it is just a series of steps and the audience will know this and treat it accordingly— forgettable and expendable. For each number, ODB is careful about portraying a particular emotional content or simple story. Here was our reasoning for some of our choices:

1. West Coast Swing— Hard hitting; as though guys came into the bar after a long day at work and wanted to dance something sexy, suggestive, and pushing.
2. Waltz— Smooth and debonair. Audiences have great expectation about the waltz. They have seen them in hundreds of movies. We chose to wear long-tail tux jackets, top hats, canes, and music that captured the era. Dancers are playful and flirtatious. The steps are not difficult and designed to flow. Audiences want to see us spin. We have followers change partners and flirt with a kiss at the end.
3. Cha Cha— Very stylized. Costuming included calypso jackets— again, meeting the expectations of our audience.

4. Hustle— Homage to Disco. This is our comedy routine. We have a Drag Queen who is over-accessorized by men dressed as Village People characters.

Choice of Music

The choice of music is limitless. But, to narrow our choice and convey our message, we follow a couple of guidelines.

1. Is the music identifiable to this particular dance? For example, Waltz seems to go hand-in-hand with big band sounds of the 30s and 40s. The music we chose is by Mandy Patinkin and has a scratchy, old record sound at the beginning that changes into a grand waltz.
2. Is the music identifiable by our audience and/or has particular meaning to them? For example, in our Hustle number, we chose “*I Will Survive*” because it has been the national anthem of the gay community since the disco period. Our West Coast number uses “*Man I Feel Like a Woman.*” The lyrics are a tongue-in-cheek recognition of gender roles. Our upcoming Meringue number will use the most popular pro-gay song currently played in the Latin gay clubs — “*A quien le importa.*”
3. Does the music have staying power? For our Cha Cha, we use Ricky Martin’s “*Jezebel.*” We wanted a contemporary feeling yet not a big hit that may seem over-used and age poorly. This particular piece of music begins like a tango that switches into cha cha. We did not want a cha cha that audiences may associate with their grand parents.

So, the choice of music is not just what the director or choreographer likes. It has to meld well with the over-all performance. ODB holds quarterly meetings where these issues are presented and voted on.

Choreography

So, the dance content and music are set. Now is the time to choreograph the piece.

Again, setting particular steps is the last process.

Here is the basic outline.

1. Make a count sheet.
2. On the count sheet, certain musical passages will suggest particular movement to reflect the content, i.e., the choreographer will see a line of dancers, a particular fall or lift, a series of arm movements, a particular movement, a circle of dancers, and more. This is where the content is outlined to the music. A plot arch helps guide this effort.
3. Decide on entrances and exits and the overall movement on the stage.
4. Decide how many dancers are needed.
5. Finally, finally, steps are conceived to connect the pieces mentioned in the previous steps. Some choreographers write these down while others work directly on the dancers. Most professionals write it down before teaching it to the dancers because it saves time (and money) rather than have dancers stand around while the choreographer creates on the spot.
6. Adjustments are made to the choreography once it is placed on the bodies.

Choreography is 90% craft and 10% inspiration. The craft can be learned. Learning how to approach and execute choreography will raise the level of any performance group above the majority of dance troupes.

Thank you for your time.

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