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A Pedagogical Perspective on  
Storytelling through Movement and Dance

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth  
University.

By

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## Abstract

A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON STORYTELLING THROUGH MOVEMENT AND DANCE

By Penny Ayn Maas, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012

Major Director: Patti D'Beck, Assistant Professor, Theatre

Dance in most musical theatre is an assumed visual element and something that is often taken for granted in production. What is its purpose is the question being pondered in this paper. Since Agnes de Mille first presented her legendary dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* in 1943, theatrical dance has never been the same. She revolutionized the function of dance in theatre forever. No longer would dance merely be used as interludes or divertissements. Though a seemingly simple theatrical concept, to use movement and choreography to either further the plot or

to communicate a character's journey, it is not only much easier said than done, it is also less commonly occurring than one would imagine. Dance for dance's sake is still prevalent and the theatre suffers because of it.

My thesis will be a journey paper reflecting on my teaching perspective as it has developed and changed based on my two years at Virginia Commonwealth University. I will look at the specific productions and classes I have been involved in and how they have all contributed to and shaped my emerging pedagogical philosophy regarding dance, choreography, direction and teaching. I will explore and prove the importance and necessity of "storytelling through movement" as well as explore the need for a clearly communicated goal and unifying element in all theatrical productions.

- **Introduction:** Proposal of thesis: The necessity for storytelling and clear communication of guiding themes in all theatrical productions.
- **Evolution of Musical Theatre Dance:** First, I present a brief history of musical theatre dance: its origins, growth, developments, and the effect of the "modern" era on movement. It is an exploration of how dance helps and/or hinders theatrical experience.
- **Audience Reception Theory:** Next, I explore the goals of theatre and why storytelling is important to us as humans and as audience members.

- ***Story-telling Stories:*** In this section I explore professional and educational productions that prove my theory about the importance of story-telling through movement and dance. Also included are experiences and lessons learned from taking and teaching classes at Virginia Commonwealth University.
- ***Contrary Evidence:*** Here I present a counter theory, looking at some successful productions that lack clear storytelling in dance and I offer suggestions of how these shows might be improved.
- ***The Importance of a Central Theme:*** This section explores the other tenant of my thesis, that all classes and productions should contain a strong, guiding theme that is clearly communicated. This is proved again by personal experiences both in the professional and educational systems.
- ***Conclusion:*** What is my new pedagogy? Through all my experiences, my point of view and approach to dance, acting, movement and teaching has been altered. I offer tips for aspiring choreographers and for those who also might want to teach and prepare students for a successful theatrical career. This paper is a thorough look at where I began and where I have ended, in theory, in teaching and in practice.



PRODUCTIONS OF DISCUSSION

1. *White Christmas*  
Fall 2010, Barksdale Theatre, Richmond
2. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*  
Fall 2010, Raymond Hodges Theatre, VCU
3. *Trojan Women*  
Spring 2011, Shafer Street Playhouse
4. *Grease!*  
Fall 2011, Raymond Hodges Theatre, VCU
5. *Cabaret*  
Spring 2012, Riverside Dinner Theatre,  
Fredericksburg
6. *The Elephant Man*  
Spring 2012, Raymond Hodges Theatre
7. *Anything Goes*  
Summer 2012, Riverside Dinner Theatre,

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

I often wonder if my personal expectations of theatre are different or more stringent than the average audience member. Does my advanced education in theater history, text and criticism, paired with the vast and varied quantity of theatre that I have seen, make me an overly tough critic? I actually think I am the exact opposite. I can easily recognize and applaud effort and forgive a lack of talent, especially in university theatre situations. I can also unequivocally say that I enjoy spectacle and pageantry as much as anyone and consider it a worthy entertainment if and when that is what I am looking for. Therefore, I was an attentive and expectant audience member back in February waiting for the Virginia Commonwealth University dance concert to begin at the Grace Street Theatre. I was there to support an undergraduate dance student who studied voice with me.

Without a doubt, she and the other dancers were finely trained and thoroughly skilled performers, gracefully filling the stage with modern lifts and fluid, effortless dancing. Yet despite the immense talent and obvious effort, I can honestly

say that not once did I feel anything! I was never moved emotionally, inspired mentally, reminded of myself as part of our modern mythology or even remotely transported - which I believe are all worthy and crucial goals of live performance. This brought me to ponder at intermission what the goal of this concert was, beyond showing what they had worked on in class for the past few months. On a grander scale it made me ponder what the goal of performance and theatre is in general?

I realize that it is quite likely that none of the choreographers for the dance concert, whose credits were impressive, were intending to touch me emotionally or necessarily tell a story of any kind. The Modern dance world often seems to be creating dance purely for the purpose of the demonstration of technique, beauty, shape, rhythm and use of space. Perhaps these choreographers were simply responding to musical impulses and expressing them. It all came across to me as variations on a theme, albeit exquisite ones. Was I entertained - absolutely! Yet I think I was hoping for more; more connection to the dancers and the work, more of a message and more of them reaching out to me. I wanted my being there, my participation as an audience member, to be considered and important. Yet I felt as if I was witnessing a private moment of art/theatre/dance done purely for its own sake and I felt excluded both emotionally and mentally. I admittedly might have

been the only one there with this opinion though.

Perhaps my visually-experienced-performance needs are off base? Does the average dance concert audience member know they will be on the outside of the event and feel fine about that? What I am getting to is that as someone who uses dance and movement theatrically, I often feel like a poser and a fraud. This is especially true when I compare myself to people in the dance world who are creating in a way so completely foreign to me and so often devoid of story. Is it really so different for those of us who create dance in the world of Musical Theatre? I believe that it is not different, or shouldn't be anyway, and that audiences generally want to feel included and connected. Does story-telling belong in dance? I believe it certainly does in theatrical dance and intend to prove it here!

For the two months following that VCU dance concert I traveled all around the country endeavoring for a full-time faculty position. The most common question asked of me in the various interviews was "what have you learned from your time at VCU and in particular, about theatre pedagogy?" It is an excellent question and the heart of this thesis. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, pedagogy is the art, science or profession of teaching. So, the questions to be pondered are: have I become a better teacher of theatre and if so, in what ways; and further, how have I been influenced as a creative

artist? I propose that there are two key lessons that have emerged that will be further investigated here, lessons of such importance that I will now carry them in to my future professional work. The first conclusion drawn and to be examined is that story-telling is the key to the successful creation of theatre and in particular, stage movement and dance. The second conclusion is that clear communication of a central theme or goal, having a defined yet flexible theatrical "spine" in place, is a crucial and necessary element within all theatrical production. Further, in those cases where one is not the voice dictating or presenting that unifying element, then a dialogue that questions the motivation and justification of all dance numbers must be initiated and maintained. Though both of these ideas are seemingly simple and obvious, after twenty years of working professionally as an actress, choreographer and director in all levels of theatre - from non-union dinner-theatre to Broadway - I have found that these two elements are quite often lacking and can create a theatrical void that gets filled with mediocre offerings and conflicting techniques that are not only confusing to an audience but could also potentially damage the reputation and appeal of live theatre in our future.

Though I am always in favor of theatre happening at any level, there is a well-known pattern of Golden Age musicals getting produced by small town community theatres and high

schools where the directors are struggling just to get the show up, often with much enthusiasm but little skill. Between the edits and additions they inevitably do, paired with very little time to communicate subtle nuances about character and relationships to their actors, and often staged by choreographers with little experience, the result is that the audiences end up thinking that the shows themselves are lacking. Creating quality theatre that is truthfully expressing the themes and story of a musical as it was intended, when looked at in the above light, becomes of crucial importance.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Development of Theatrical Dance

We begin by looking at where theatrical dance began and more importantly, when did it begin to tell story and why? As with most new forms of art, it evolved and grew from other forms that came before it. For a long time dance divertissements were the norm in between acts of plays or were simply novelty numbers in vaudeville and burlesque. Our contemporary idea of "musical theatre dance" is a comparatively newly formed one. It is paralleled by the development of the American "book musical" which can be traced as far back as the mid 1800s. Broadway shows like Charles Hoyt's popular *A Trip to Chinatown*, *The Black Crook*, and the African American musicals *A Trip to Coontown*, *Clorindy: Or the Origin of the Cakewalk* and the Bert Williams's hit *In Dahomey* were early precursors to musical theatre as we know it in that their popular songs and dances were interspersed throughout a unifying play. Yet, the full integration of dance as an integral component in telling the story would take about 100 years to fully develop and seems to have begun as a slow collective gathering of popular forms around it.

Musical theatre dance has now become its own entity. Aspiring dancers in New York City can take a "theatre dance" class at Steps or at Broadway Dance Center. These classes tend to be jazz based and often teach routines from past theatrical productions. Though the stylistic influence of dance in theatre today can run the gamut from ballet to hip-hop, what seems to have emerged and to be consistent across the board is that musical theatre dance usually serves the story of the play. Let us look at the various influences that helped to create this fairly new and unique form.

Musical Theatre dance roots begin with minstrelsy, in the mid 1800s, which brought to the stage the signifying and subversive dances of the shuffle and the cakewalk. The scandalous showing of ladies legs in ballet tights was introduced by a Parisian troupe in the 1866 show *The Black Crook*. At the turn of the century vaudeville gave us the precursors to tap with the hardshoe and the Irish clog, in great thanks to George M. Cohan. He is often said to be the man who invented musical comedy. Along with his dances that had pre-De Mille plot advancement elements, he gave musical comedy "its tempo, its attitude, its fierceness, its sheer, aggressive American-ness" (Miller 10).

Ballroom dance and partnering was introduced and popularized in Irving Berlin's *Watch Your Step* in 1914. Written



for the husband and wife ballroom dance team Vernon and Irene Castle, this was one of the first Broadway musicals with a score written entirely in the style of syncopated dance music, and in particular, the foxtrot. This became the standard model for show tunes for decades to come. With the help of their black musical director, James Reese Europe, they would, through the theatrical stage, initiate such dances as the Grizzly Bear and the Bunny Hug.

The American dances spawned in the craze of 1912-1914 had been too sensual, too African to gain universal acceptance...The Castles slowed the tempos, simplified the rhythms, restrained the gestures, and made the movements seem altogether healthy...But the Castles' appeal didn't pretend to be utilitarian - it was purely emotional. Americans wanted to be swanky, and the Castles proved it was possible. (Kenrick 7)

In the 1920s, following World War I, an affluent and socially active America started seeing the incorporation, and sometimes invention, of major dance crazes like the Charleston, the shimmy, the one-step, the two-step, the Boston, the tango and more in musical theatre. Certain performers of this time also contributed heavily to the shaping of theatre dance. According to Noreen Barnes, Marilyn Miller, one of the most popular Broadway musical stars of the 1920s, gave "the gift of

ballet to Broadway" (Robinson, Roberts and Barranger 649). She was apparently unequaled in her ability to combine all of her talents - dancing (of various styles), singing, acting and mimicking. This strong combination of talents and skills and the ability to use them all at the same time on stage is precisely what defines musical theatre performers today!

Around this same time in London John Tiller began the idea of training and unifying chorus girls and their dance skills. Stemming from that success, Busby Berkeley would codify the "show girl" and be inspired to create stage pictures and movement of epic and cinematic beauty. Also notable in the 1920s and early 1930s were the choreographers Ned Wayburn, who gave us the Ziegfeld Walk and early forms of dance notation, and Albertina Rasch, who was one of the first female choreographers of note and one of the first to treat dance as a serious element in musicals. Her ability to adapt her classical training and techniques for the Broadway theatre would lay the foundation for further integration of story by classically trained choreographers in the years to come.

What we see above, in the early formative years of musical theatre, is a trend of popular dance forms being created or appropriated for the stage to appeal to audiences on a social level. The use of these dances promoted the theatre experience as something accessible, current, trend-setting and familiar for

the audience. This is a perfect example of life imitating art and vice versa. Once appropriated, the original dances and styles, through their imitation, began morphing into something new - musical theatre dance: a dance that connected to a plot or a theme.

But when did story really start to enter dance? To trace that, we must jump back to the turn of the century again. A choreographer worth noting who greatly influenced theatrical story-telling in dance in America was John D'Auban from London. In the British theatre world he began designing dances that fit characters and plot in the famous Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas. The eventual popularity of those operas here would serve as an introduction to story-telling choreography for audiences in America.

The crowning achievement though, combining popular entertainment with continuity between its book and its songs, was the legendary *Show Boat* in 1927. It was a show that changed musical theatre forever, taking on dramatic themes and synthesizing all the theatrical elements into one fluid story. Choreographer Sammy Lee's work on this show as well as in other Ziegfeld shows in the 1920s would open the door for some of the biggest story-telling influences to come in theatre dance. With every theatrical production that raised the bar of expectation for the audience, like *Showboat* did, it would make it difficult

to go back. A new road of theatrical expectation was being paved.

One of the most revolutionary influences in theatre dance came from the ballet world with George Balanchine's involvement in *On Your Toes* in 1936. It would serve as one of the biggest transitions to story-telling with dance. "Into a choreographic world that was a mélange of decorative movement, legs and taps, Balanchine opened the door and ballet leapt on to the popular musical stage, directed by a supreme artist" (Kenrick 3). The ballet world had always included some story-telling as part of its aesthetic, since the dancing itself is the primary visual element within a performance that as a whole was often meant to tell a story. Classic examples of this are the ballets *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*. Balanchine had this kind of history and training informing his theatrical work. His ballet "Slaughter on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue" in *On Your Toes* brilliantly helped to develop both plot and characterization in the musical which had rarely been done before. He too was setting the theatrical bar a bit higher.

This emphasis on story telling in dance would eventually mature in the 1940s leading to the complete integration of story and plot advancement within a musical. This was infamously demonstrated by the great choreographic innovations in *Oklahoma!* in 1943. Agnes De Mille is often said to be the choreographer who, though from a modern dance world, changed the language and

purpose of theatrical dance forever. Her modern dance based dream-ballet in *Oklahoma!* furthered the story by reflecting the inner struggle of a character, Laurie, having to choose between two men, Judd and Curly. As the New York Times Theater critic Lewis Nichols wrote in 1943, "There is more comedy in one of Miss de Mille's gay little passages than in many of the other Broadway tom-tom beats together." Her innovations would take very little time to influence other emerging choreographers and change the nature of theatre dance forever.

Interestingly, due to the skill and training needed when dancing at the level of George Balanchine and Agnes De Mille, musical comedies for many years were often composed of two choruses, a ballet/dance chorus and a second singing chorus. This was true in the opera world as well, where the complexity of the score required a singing skill that was beyond many dancers' ability and a separation was needed between the choruses. Even in the 1950s, dancing and singing were separate skill sets and that affected how dance was used theatrically. Graciela Daniele recalls that "When I came here, except for *West Side Story*, dance was the bridge in a song. The beautiful well-trained dancers couldn't sing very well, so you'd have this number that would become a dance extension" (Grody 157). Eventually though, most likely stemming from financial pressures, producers of theatre would need to hire only one

chorus. After that the training of musical theatre performers would begin to shift to the "triple-threat" focus we know today: the ability to sing, dance and act at the same time.

Returning to story-telling influences in dance, Jerome Robbins was the next major influence. Building on all that had come before him and inspired by Balanchine, he was able to choreograph both extraordinary ballets as well as craft incredible story-telling pieces in such musicals as *West Side Story* and *On the Town*. In the New York Daily News on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1957, the review of *West Side Story* and in particular, Jerome Robbins, noted that the show and his choreography had a "manner of telling the story [which] is a provocative and artful blend of music, dance and plot." Both the prologue/ballet and the "Dance at the Gym" are visually thrilling dances that simultaneously informs the audience of the story of the tensions between the two gangs. The most powerful moment is when we see Tony and Maria fall in love, with no words at all, just dance!

Robbins' effective story-telling would further influence the history of musical theatre dance for future generations as well. Regarding *West Side Story* the choreographer Graciela Daniele once said, "Still for me today that show was what the glory of musical theatre could be - where you put all these arts together and dance becomes not only entertainment but part of telling the story" (Grody and Lister 156). We see his influences

throughout her work, yet with the addition of her own unique style based on her cultural history and training. We as artists tend to steal from the best and then add our own flavors in. This cycle of appropriation of popular or previous forms, transforming the form to fit the music and plot, and then that newly created form influencing the up and coming creative artists, continues to be the pattern that shapes the continually evolving dance form of "theatre dance."

Both Balanchine and Robbins serve as proof that there are creative artists who understand that dance can serve dual purposes - entertainment/aesthetic pleasure and story. Their work went on to influence other brilliant choreographers in the 1950s and 1960s such as Bob Fosse, Michael Bennett and Tommy Tune, all who effectively used dance to define an environment and define character. When interviewed on his theory of choreographing, Michael Bennett said, "...a dance number has to get you from what happened before to what happens next. So, it has to contribute to the book of the show, the way a song or a scene would. The dances are never arbitrary" (Grody and Lister 97). In fact of the sixteen choreographers interviewed in the *Conversations with Choreographers* book, well over half of them talked about the necessity and importance of story-telling as being crucial to the creation of their art.

Tying back in to my introduction, we have just seen that

many choreographers believed and still believe today that dance can be about more than just pretty shapes and entertainment. For the purposes of theatre in particular, story-telling and character development has become the standard. I am in no way devaluing dance for its own sake by any means, as technique and skill are often awesome and powerful to witness. The Radio City Rockettes and the hugely successful variations of Cirque de Soleil prove the long-standing admiration of audiences for skill and entertainment alone. Dance for its own sake, without story, can actually be useful theatrically too. Indeed anyone can use the power of a kick-line to enthuse an audience. Often, as choreographer Bob Avian notes, it is necessary. "Sometimes an arbitrary dance has value because of dynamics alone...to give a lift, in terms of entertainment..." (Grody 97). This was best exemplified by the famous and amusing "Turkey Lurkey" number that he and Michael Bennett created for *Promises, Promises*.

What I propose is that for our current American sensibility, based on the way that musical theatre has developed over time, as just demonstrated, audiences expect dance to tell story now. There are only a handful of musicals that aren't tied to a "book" and story any more. The few that are not "book musicals", such as the delightful revues and juke box musicals like *Smokey Joes Café* and *Ain't Misbehavin'*, still have contemporary choreographers who make use of character



development or small stories within each individual song.

Perhaps it is that in this day and age there is so little that is shocking or taboo any more. A song and dance done to make a scandalous or subversive statement, as the Cakewalk or the Shimmy did in its time, doesn't exist. Dance alone is rarely making commentary on something forbidden or pushing boundaries the way it did when the strictures of the Victorian era loomed large and the showing of a "glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking." Just as realism took root and became the theatrical performance norm, dance, theatrically, has grown to be an essential story-telling and plot advancing element. So, though there will always be some value in dance designed purely for entertainment, as Jaques-Dalcroze reminds us, back in 1912, "Amusement, an excitement which stimulates the nerves instead of uplifting the spirit, is not necessary in the life of an artist" (21). There is a differentiation that must be made between true "theatre" and all other entertainment.

With so many respected choreographers supporting storytelling through dance, whether motivated by their own artistic satisfaction or by the desire for the elevation and advancement of plot and character for the audience, we may safely conclude that it is now a given for any theatrical production. And now that storytelling and character advancement is accepted and expected, the lack of it is noticeable,

unwelcome and awkward. When people want pure spectacle, they can easily find that elsewhere. Based on the success and longevity of such book musicals as *Oklahoma!*, *West Side Story* and even the dance show *A Chorus Line*, where Cassie's solo dance reveals her inner struggle for work over fame, I again conclude that the audience, in regards to modern day musical theatre, does expect story-telling in their theatrical dance. Expectation does not necessarily equate with appreciation though. Let us now look at the audience and their response.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Audience Reception Theory

There is a critical relationship between the audience and the performance, a co-dependency even. Musical Theatre in particular is one of the few indigenous American art forms geared towards the audience and its needs. The question I propose to further address is this: do today's audiences really care about story-telling and character development through the movement presented on stage in theatre? What we do know is that after watching a musical they will either leave feeling moved or conversely uninspired about what they have seen. I believe that when dance is being used effectively to further story or character, though the average audience may not know why, I propose that they will positively respond to it. Let us dig deeper.

What is important to focus on here pertaining to the evolution of the Modern American Musical as we think of it was that it really was a form that was intended to serve its audiences. As we saw above with the evolution of theatrical dance, the use of material that the audience was familiar with

would ultimately draw them in and serve their needs. For example, during the dark times of World War I, the theatre-going public needed escapist entertainment, and they flocked to the theatre. Harry Tierney and Joseph McCarthy's 1919 hit musical *Irene* ran for 670 performances, which was a very long run for this time. Historically, in America, nothing is better able to soothe the spirit than a little departure from reality, being transported through entertainment. Then after World War II, with the country in sound financial shape, producers and composers could once again begin to create challenging and thought-provoking work. It is clear that throughout musical theatre's infancy, as it struggled to define itself, it has attempted to fill the void the audience needed in whatever ways that it could.

Another given is that most art exists to be viewed or experienced. The great Russian acting theorist Vsevolod Meyerhold strived in theory and in practice for a creation of feeling in the audience, giving their experience far more importance than that which might be felt by the actor (Barton 151). So, if indeed the audience is an essential element in the equation, then we should go back and ask ourselves what the average audience member expects when watching a musical today. Do they go in search of a good story or simply to be entertained? I propose that it is a little bit of both! Do they

know the difference between good and bad theatre? Is there a universal truth that can be arrived at about what makes theatre good or bad or is it all merely subjective? That is debatable. More importantly, can audience members differentiate between inventive, innovative and plot furthering songs and choreography versus those theatrical presentations that don't endeavor for such lofty goals? Whether the audience knows the why of it, I postulate that they are indeed able to be discerning and demanding in regards to their theatre.

For our purposes, the main question is: does the average audience notice if there is no story-telling in their dance and are they affected by it when it is there? Some directors and choreographers would say definitively yes. When the famous choreographer Michael Bennett was asked how he knew if he had achieved the right road, choreographically, he replied, "The audience tells you" (Grody and Lister 105). The audience knows when its story is being told or not. Certainly we can say that we usually expect our theatre critics to be discerning about such things, as they are often the only voice or opinion taken in to consideration, historically recorded and remembered. I know when I am putting forth creative work as an artist I hope the critics will be aware of my efforts and report to the public accordingly.

I believe that many choreographers, at least those who

have had a certain level of exposure and fame anyway, would say that story-telling through dance is a vital, effective and noticeable element. Choreographer Graciela Daniele affirms my idea when she said, "I think...the most important thing in the theatre, (is) telling the story" (Grody and Lister 156). Musical Theatre is unique in that its story and emotional content, which ranges from humor to anger and from hatred to love, is communicated through multiple mediums as an integrated whole, using the words, music, movement and the technical aspects of the entertainment, or *mise-en-scène*, to achieve its purpose. In short, musical theatre offers many facets of the same thing - story! Thus every element, including the choreography, must work towards the same end for the audience.

A larger question, and fuel for continued research at another time, is whether the desires of the audience regarding what it wants from its theatre, which can vary based on socio-political standings and societal climate, are getting enough scholarly attention and research focus. As Tracy C. Davis says in her essay "A Feminist Methodology in Theatre History," the "interrelatedness of repertoire and the class and gender of spectators is a promising field" (Postlewait and McConachie 76). An emerging field of study, audience reception is based on the British Sociologist Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of the relationship between text and audience, where the text or

performance is encoded with meaning by the producer or the artist, and then decoded by the reader or the audience. His studies have revealed that there may be major differences between two different readings of the same event. Therefore, who is watching musical theatre and why they are watching should be ascertained and addressed not only for proper historical analysis but also for guidance for those presenting the creative offerings. Shouldn't we be giving the audience what they want? Or do we as the artists, producers and directors tell them what they want? I believe the answer to that is that both are true, fluctuating back and forth over time as needed.

How a show is received - whether an audience likes it or not - can also tell us much about the social norms and theatrical trends of an era. Theatre mirrors our culture - art reflects life and vice versa. One of the goals of theatre producers then must be to ensure the telling of universal stories or relatable current stories for its audience. How do we know if we are achieving this? Today many theatres use audience response cards inserted in the program to get feedback and guidance from their audiences as to what worked and what didn't. This allows a theatre to cater its choice of material to best serve the largest demographic of its audience. Audience analysis of this nature tries to isolate variables like region, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and income in an effort to see how

different social groups tend to construct different meanings for the same text or performance.

A fairly new field, reception theory emphasizes the reader's reception of a literary text or for our purposes, a performance. This approach to performance analysis focuses on the wide range of acceptance and opposition on the part of the audience. This means that a "text" – be it a book, movie, or other creative work – is not simply passively accepted by the audience, but that the reader or viewer interprets the meanings of the text based on their individual cultural background and life experiences. "In essence, the meaning of a text is not inherent within the text itself, but is created within the relationship between the text and the reader" ("Audience Reception"). The audience plays a crucial role in how and why theatre is created!

Audiences are comprised of all ages too. Today's youth, and young theatre audiences, are obsessed with technology. It is an inherent part of their era. So, theaters also might do well to take the lead from what many classrooms are doing. Several universities have begun to use audience response system (ARS), or personal response system (PRS), such as iRespond and other audience polling keypads. These hand-held units allow large groups of people to vote on a topic or answer a question and actively participate in the event or class. With many theatres



such as the Theatre Royal Stratford East reserving seats for patrons who would like to tweet about what they are watching, perhaps interactive theatre is our future. "This scheme aims to give a power and a voice to the community watching the action on stage that usually sits in silence" (Twite). Front line avant-garde theatre troupes have found brilliantly creative ways to interweave modern networking into their practice. The British theatre company Coney is a good example: "they build their moving and quirky productions through texts, phone calls and emails with their 'audience'. Famously shrouded in mystery, they use the anonymity of cyber space to subversively create real-life connections" (Twite). Once again, this is an example of theatre appropriating modern trends to attract and serve the audience and its needs.

I think that today's audiences within most commercial theatre venues are always being carefully considered. What has developed over time is that today's model audience member gets embodied by the modern day director, who watches the development of a performance from the seat of a presumed spectator and orchestrates the effects primarily for spectator reception. As Robert McKee states, creating a watch-able story is "about respect, not disdain, for the audience" (McKee 7). I would venture to say that often avant-garde theatre is not as concerned with who their audience is and what they want or

expect. In fact, often the avant-garde world is hoping to shock and alienate or estrange their audience, as Antonin Artaud did in France in the 1920s. Sadly they are usually either unconcerned with ticket sales or performing for people who are already thinking as they do. For the sake of focus then, most of my attention will be on commercial theatre and mainstream musical theatre.

Additional influences on audiences can include word of mouth, reviews read before-hand, social pressures and expectations. All of these factors can shape the opinion and reception of theatre. For example, people come to Broadway to see the best of the best theatrically, especially in light of how much they must pay for a ticket. They then put those expectations and pre-supposed critiques on to the performance, whether deserved or not. By drawing upon audience expectations relating to aspects such as genre and use of stars, the producers can position the audience and thus create a certain amount of agreement on how the audience will respond. This is known as a preferred reading. Similarly, people will laugh and enjoy a performance more if others around them are laughing, informing them on how it "should" be viewed, and thus the common usage of "plants" within an audience during previews to incite the proper, desired response is illuminated.

Going back in time, looking at the evolution of musical

comedy, one wonders if the audiences in the early 1900s appreciated these newly emerging forms of entertainment. As theatre was veering away from the prevalent forms - the burlesque "shimmy", vaudeville black-face minstrel shows, operas, operettas and melodramas - and moving towards plot based, story-telling theatre, did they care? Historically there are almost always two camps of opposing opinions, the old guard conservatives who like things to stay the way they are, and the progressive, forward thinking artists. In February 1918, Dorothy Parker wrote a theatre review in "Vanity Fair" regarding the new musical comedies unifying story and song being written by Jerome Kern, Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse that were being presented at the Princess Theatre. She at least seemed to be in support of this new form. "I like the way they go about a musical comedy...I like the way the action slides casually into the songs..." ("Princess Theatre" 2). From this we see that there was a noticeable change occurring in theatrical productions, a transition to the more methodical modern musical comedy as we think of it, and that it was welcomed, at least from one critic's perspective.

Not everyone so easily accepts new trends and ideas though. Departure from the norm can be scary, even in theatre. As Dr. Aaron Anderson taught us in Modern Drama, all theatre is political, either reinforcing the status quo or challenging it.

"The theatre's cultural role as image-relayer and image-definer in shaping society's outlook is particularly tied to the dominant culture's ideology..." (Postlewait and McConachie 71). Dr. Anderson calls the slowly moving audience/consumer acceptance level "the blob." Not referring to the 1950's movie monster, the idea is that all new art forms begin outside of societal norms. They are cutting edge concepts, pushing the boundaries, resisting and challenging the status quo. This is true even within the emergence of Musical Theatre.

Political trends have been present in almost all musical theatre storytelling over the years. Casts became integrated as America became integrated. Female characters became overtly sexual when American women became overtly sexual. Musical comedy morality became more ambiguous as mainstream American culture moved away from the certainties of traditional organized religion. Every choice made by writers, directors, and designers was political, and each choice either reinforced or challenged prevailing social and political values. (Miller 5)

Eventually though, the new, radical ideas become assimilated by our culture, accepted as the norm and part of the ever-expanding "blob". Therefore, whether our theatre is challenging or reinforcing norms then, it is always a reflection of society and

our lives. This creates a certain amount of obligation, pressure and responsibility for the creators of theatre.

Based on what I have just presented, we can safely say that audiences look to their theatre for either confirmation of their beliefs or for theatre that expands their thinking. What I theorize is that what makes something good for us as an audience is a compelling story that does those things. It must be relevant and a story that we can relate to! Artists have a responsibility: "What we create for the world, what it demands of us, is story. Now and forever" (McKee 19). Commedia troupes have known and capitalized on this with their audiences, creating familiar stereotypes, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century! When the audience saw characters on stage that represented themselves and their stories, they were able to connect and appreciate the story told more fully. Audiences want to see themselves on stage!

Theatre can serve many purposes, one of them being to help us as a society "to increase our perspective so that we can identify with and have empathy for all human beings" (Crawford xii). Theatre should always be effectively telling our stories. "Story is a metaphor for life" (McKee 25). Theatre should be the reflective medium that mirrors us back to ourselves. Theatrical themes must then either be epic in nature, mythic stories that have lessons unaffected by time and social norms, or be themes

that are relatable to by an audience. When this does not happen, though we may have been amused or entertained, we may not have been moved or felt anything. Theatrical audience are looking to identify with the "hero" and to go on that journey, ultimately in search of feeling and release, in search of catharsis. Audiences ultimately want affirmation of their feelings and to know they are not alone in their journey, their experiences and their continually changing story. Theatre that achieves this then will always be more powerful and life-altering than any mere skill-based production or purely-for-entertainment show and is the ideal.

All of this information proves my theory that audiences do notice and care whether story is in their dance. Therefore we must keep them in mind with all that we create. Ultimately, it is a combination of creative artists and the audience that determines the future shape and trajectory of theatre, and particularly Musical Theatre. If audiences are adventurous enough to embrace the experiments of such recent shows as *Bat Boy: The Musical*, *Urinetown* or *Avenue Q*, buying tickets and encouraging producers to keep trying new things, then who knows what kind of theatre lies in our future! What is certain is that these shows will be telling our legends, our hopes, our dreams and our stories.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Story-telling Stories

So we know that the theatrical use of dance to convey story and develop character has become the norm over time. We also know that there is an obligation to our audiences to tell their stories, to give them what they need emotionally and socially and further to sometimes open their minds to new ideas as well. So lets again return to the question at hand; does the addition of story-telling and character development in theatrical dance really have an impact on the audience? And when it does, how does it go about it? Let us dig deeper in to my personal experiences to find the answers!

To begin with, I personally needed to learn how to effectively tell a story! The epitome of that learning came from my Mime class with David Leong. The class was less about technique, for none of us will go on to be Marcel Marceau, but more about how to truly communicate action and narrative with no words at all. Mime is the perfect example of what we call in the theatre, "full body expression." As we spent the semester creating pieces, stories that in theory have a beginning, middle

and end, there were certain truths that began to emerge. First and foremost, the characters must be ones we can connect and relate to. When creating the story, our first goal is to ask why the audience cares? Ah-ha! The audience again! As the receptive half of the theatrical relationship dynamic we must keep an audience's attention by presenting familiar characters that go on a transformative journey. Beyond that, good storytelling seemed to be about having discovery, specificity, focus, clear obstacles, extremes of highs and lows, gravitas, bringing in the unexpected to keep the audience engaged and yet providing a satisfying ending, and above all, remembering that playable action is the only thing that reads!

Specifically relating to movement, we learned that each character has their own rhythm and tempo and that those must vary based on circumstances and acting beats. When I performed a solo piece about auditioning for a Broadway show, much of what I was criticized for concerned by inability to create different bodies and tempos for each character I was portraying. To quote David Leong, "story and shape first, technique and timing second." As soon as I clearly created visibly different characters, the story came through loud and clear, despite my lack of mime technique. Story wins over technique every time!

Another class that completely reinforced the importance of story-telling and finding the best way to tell it was our



Musicalized Movement graduate class. Not only did I thoroughly enjoy getting a chance to create numbers/stories using undergraduate theatre students, it was also the perfect synthesis of the many lessons I was encountering from my time at VCU. Without worrying about steps and dancing, we learned that music can be approached as an acting partner and that it can be viewed as the text itself, to be interpreted. The rhythm of the acting is determined by the rhythm and the tempo of the music. The expressive pitch pattern of the melody can reflect what the character is living through emotionally. Taking away the words and letting the score itself dictate rhythm and accents, one can create all sorts of amazing theatre without having to speak a single line! The power of movement in its purest form - physically expressed story! The most successful number I created in that class was to a musical excerpt from the animated film *The Incredibles*. The highly dramatic changes musically lent itself naturally to the story we told of two young ladies who were drugged and taken away by car, with a subsequent struggle over a piece of microfilm that resulted in an unexpected double-crossing ending. This was my first real experience with choreography that wasn't dance but was instead staging for story-telling.

The pièce de résistance though, the synthesis of all of my classes, has been the Musical Theatre class with Patti D'Beck.

Here the elements of singing and acting must work together to create a believable story told through song. I wish, back when I had been an undergraduate student so many years ago, that I had been given such wise guidance about approaching songs in Musical Theatre. To sing well is just a skill, but to act while singing is something that can make a career. Looking back at my professional work, this idea is reinforced by the late Natasha Richardson who won the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical for her work in *Cabaret* in 1998 but could barely sing. What she did was act the songs and it was more powerful than any vocal technique! Again we see story-telling triumphing over skill.

Story is not always told outright either. Up through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, for example, the "aside" was a theatrical convention that playwrights found useful and audiences easily accepted. It was a great way to tell the audience what the characters real feelings were and progress ideas and opinions. My theory is that eventually, particularly with the popularity of proscenium theatres and through the efforts of brave men like George M. Cohan who broke the fourth wall consistently, songs and dances began to replace the function of the aside. As Graciela Daniele, who is one of the best and most influential choreographer and directors of our time, says it best, "Dance is a language to communicate a thought or a feeling" (Grody and Lister 158). When thought of this way, as smart directors and

choreographers, we can use our musical numbers not only as a wonderful way to communicate subtext and inner thought but also as asides that can be utilized to convey those things that cannot be said aloud character to character.

These three classes have changed my entire teaching philosophy. Now all of my coaching and much of what I focus on while giving private voice lessons is about acting the song; knowing what that character wants and feels and making sure the audience knows that as well. Each song is a story unto itself and often provides the valuable subtext and inner monologue that helps the audience relate to the character. That is always the goal!

Beyond the classroom, the majority of my learning about how to effectively tell story and why has come through the productions I have worked on. When I arrived in the fall of 2010 I was thrust immediately into pre-production on Barksdale's *White Christmas*. Having previously worked with the legendary Patti D'Beck in New York City in a couple of benefits, I had equal parts fear and awe of this great director/choreographer. She, like all of the top dance captains and assistant choreographers on Broadway, had a reputation for a mind like a steel trap when it comes to blocking, steps and choreography. I was expecting a dance diva. What a delight then to have one of the first questions out of her mouth be "what story are we

telling with this number!" It has become my new mantra! Steps can be added in any time and tweaked or improved upon to increase the technical difficulty or visual impressiveness. But no choreography or dance can happen at all until we know where we are going and what story we are telling. Though I had choreographed several productions prior to arriving at VCU, I admittedly mostly thought about the "feel" of a number or an era and often got hung up on the steps themselves. In truth, by focusing on story, one can free oneself completely on a creative level.

A commonly occurring problem faced in university theatre is what to do when choreographing a show where not everyone is at the same level? You can have very simple steps if what you do with them is engaging for the audience. If the audience is guided to follow a character or to learn something new then complicated dance steps can be added for beauty but aren't necessary! The current Broadway production of *Anything Goes* is a great example of this. Though none of the choreography is very complex, the acting that it allows Sutton Foster to do over the top of it is very effective. So, whether one is faced with a lack of technique, as is sometimes the case in university settings, or working with seasoned professionals, having story as the goal instead of technique opens up so many possibilities for effective communication that isn't bogged down in steps.

Getting back to story, while working on *White Christmas*, a number that we struggled with the most was "Snow." This simple little song, extolling the expectation of a winter wonderland once the characters arrive at their Vermont winter destination, did not present a clear story to tell. With repetitive lyrics and no indication in the script of anything needing to happen, we were not sure what to make of it. When I had worked with Susan Stroman on *Crazy for You* back in 1991-1992, I was introduced to her trick of adding in props to develop story and to lend interest to a repetitive number that was devoid of obvious clues on how to further plot or character. Following that lead, Patti D'Beck began with a "decorating for the holidays" idea. That of course tells us physically of a building excitement and expectation that these characters are feeling as they prepare for their winter wonderland and how fun it might be. We discussed several ways of creating this winter wonderland: ice-skaters, snow-ball fights, sleigh rides, making paper snow-flakes etc.. In the end, we used them all! Patti wisely reminded us that obstacle is the key for dramatic tension. If one character is not in the winter spirit or if there are other forces that keep the characters from fully realizing their goals, it is a much more engaging story for our audience. We chose to make it the character of Bob, who gave some small indication of reluctance in lines prior. Once we had

the basic acting structure in place, with a goal of winterizing and decorating the train, while having fun, and the obstacle being one person who is resisting and poo-pooing the festivities, then it was simply about communicating that story with the characters and props we had in place!

"Snow" ended up being a very cute and energetic number that most audience members probably gave no more than a second thought to. Yet as a choreographer, it was a HUGE lesson in remembering the basics of goal and obstacle and then letting the story develop without ever having to actually create more than a few basic steps! *White Christmas* ended up being one of Barksdale's biggest selling shows of all time and though one might chalk it up to the holidays, I think it was really that every number in the show worked from this same premise of storytelling and the audiences were both thoroughly engaged AND entertained.

Failures, as unwelcome as they usually are, can also be great learning tools. This realization occurred when working on *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* on VCU's Mainstage in the fall of 2010. My failure had to do with my lack of storytelling with the dances I created, based on a lack of communication. I found that "the Period play is, perhaps, the most difficult in which to create the illusion of reality because the details which are correct historically are, in many cases, not effective

theatrically" (Oxenford 2). Despite thoroughly researching the period and dance and replicating them with historical accuracy, since those dances neither served the play by telling story or revealing character, they were just boring, albeit beautiful, dances, for dance's sake. I was guilty of the very thing that I accused the modern dancers of in the Introduction of this paper! As Nira Pullin talks of in her chapter in the "Movement for Actors" book, it is often better to break rules of the era, if by choice, "because it helps to tell the dramatic story today" (Potter 120). I should have begun with asking the director what story she wanted to tell with these dances and created from there. I will definitely do so in the future!

Riding on that knowledge, the next project I took on was choreographing a couple of numbers for the Henley Street Theatre's production of *A Winter's Tale*. This time I asked the director what he was looking for. I was sadly not told of the overall theme or super-objective of the play as he saw it. (The importance of this I will get to in a later chapter.) I was told story-wise that it was to be a common shepherd's dance. I of course immediately went to the text, having never read that Shakespeare play before. Sadly, there is little given there either about who is involved and why and what they might want beyond to "celebrate." My research of dance in this time revealed that there is often a bit of a power play between men

and women that is revealed in their dances. Since these were common folk, I imagined they would be imitating their higher-ups and throwing in a few free-spirited moves of their own. Using a similar hook to what we had used in *White Christmas*, I began by establishing a goal for the men to impress and dominate the women and by having the women resist. Through the dance that I created the audience got a very engaging number that revealed the class tension and flirtation between these people. The production itself got wonderful reviews and though my dance was never mentioned specifically, I did have the director say to me how pleased he was with what I did. His one suggestion for altering the choreography, prior to opening, was that he wanted more levels. Once we got the men actually pounding the ground a bit, the whole number came alive. That taught me that I must still learn to expand my vision and choices and think beyond traditional period dance.

My next venture was to help stage the Greek chorus of women for a Shafer Street production of *Troy Women*. This time, I had several meetings with the director and talked through every moment that I might be staging, asking what the vision was and what she was hoping to make happen, story wise. Once again, somewhat out of my comfort zone, I did research on how Greek choruses move and work. This was really my first attempt at staging movement that wasn't musically based but rather text



based. I began with some exercises designed to get the group working and thinking as one, giving them action verbs and phrases that they could respond to individually and eventually moving them towards moving and responding in unison. I wish that I had known then the "flocking" exercise that I eventually learned from Casey Biggs while working on *The Elephant Man*. This improvised follow-the-leader exercise within a small clump is the perfect way to enhance group awareness, movement and flow. The director, Sarah Provencal, was encouraging of exploration time for this movement, which allowed time and freedom for me with this new form.

There are two lessons I take away from that production. First, there is some theatre, particularly Greek and Roman drama, that is so epic in form and in its nature it can be a real challenge for young actors. As the character Sally Bowles says in *Cabaret*, "I believe a woman can't be a truly great actress until she has had several passionate affairs and had her heart broken" (Kander and Masteroff). There is a level of deep sorrow and pain and life knowledge that I think would be challenging to portray for any actress under 21 years old living in contemporary society, where we rarely face anything as heavy as the women of Troy faced! I tried to work from the outside-in, versus inside out, as is often delineated in theatrical worlds. Giving the young actresses the shape and rhythm and breath of

sorrow is the best one can do, and hope that some emotion will follow. There were some moments that succeeded but many that didn't. I am still unsure of how I would be able to alter their chorus work, but will continue to research and read and learn as I move forward.

The second lesson I learned was that I have a particular knack for dance that is passionate and sensual. As with *Liaisons*, the director asked for a little dance before the play began. This time I was smart and asked why this dance needed to happen and how it would help tell the story. Her vision was for the audience to see Helen's seduction of Paris, which came a while before the first scene, but lays nice ground-work for the women's anger at her. It turned out to be one of the best pieces of choreography that I have even done. There were steps and lyrical dance movements, but all I thought about was how to build the sexual teasing and tension between them. I actually made Paris the aggressor, as was most likely appropriate in this era, but played up both of their culpability in what turned out to be a very sexy dance that gave a wonderful prequel to the story they were about to see in *Troy Women*. The feedback I received from the director, Sarah Provencal, was that I had told an amazing story in that three minute song! At last, I had done something that could be considered at least a partial success.

Following my first year at VCU, on the tail of some

success and some failure, I went back to one of my theatrical homes in New York City, The National Yiddish Theatre. I have worked for them, in many capacities, over the years. They were remounting a production of *Hershele Ostropolyer*, which I had been the associate choreographer for the previous year. With this theatre company I have learned many things about running and working in non-profit theatre. As a creative artist, I also learned a lot about ethnic-based dancing. The Yiddish theatrical world is heavily intertwined with Jewish tradition. Yiddish theatre is often based in story-telling, preserving the past and honoring their culture. Their mission statement is focused on keeping a dying language alive. The real hey-day of the Yiddish Theatre was when dozens of theatres thrived on Second Avenue on the East side of Manhattan from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until just before World War II. At that time they did everything from vaudeville to Shakespeare, just in a different language.

Despite their penchant for story, it is ironic that most of their theatrical "dances" are less about telling story with movement than about celebration and ritual. So, as we set about reworking a production that we had already created, both the director and I welcomed the opportunity to rethink the numbers when possible. I was of course in the "VCU mindset" now, of trying to find the hook and the story of each song. This director, the Tony-nominated Eleanor Reissa, who I respect so

very much for her wisdom and staging skills, was not at all interested in anything I had to contribute about the story of these numbers. Though celebration in a story is a worthy basis for a dance, there was so much more that could have been done with some of the songs. Instead, the more I tried to put forward my ideas, the more she resisted and I ended up being excluded from all choreographic decisions. I still got paid and still got the credit, but was very disheartened by the lack of willingness to collaborate. The total lack of regard for anything beyond traditional Jewish dance steps and familiar movement patterns, easily recognizable by any Yiddish speaking patron, was a disappointment. Yet I also knew that my job was to be of service to the production and the director and if that meant stepping away and doing nothing, then that was what I would do, regretfully.

This story does have a happy ending though. In August, Patti D'Beck and I began preproduction on VCU's fall 2011 Mainstage production of *Grease!* This would prove to be a wonderful opportunity for me. Once again I was back working with the person who had truly refined and defined the process of story-telling in choreography, for me anyway! Like the many great choreographers who came before us, we began each number by asking ourselves what the story was and what should happen, as well as researching as much as we could about the era. The use

of Youtube as a visual research source has opened up so many instant references. By watching James Brown and the Temptations, as well as the original Hand Jive dance, we were able to quickly get a feel for the actual dances and moves being done in the 50's and 60's. Choose from the best and disregard the rest, I always say! What we discovered is that the 50's were rampant with social dance. Groups of young people got together to do steps that they could do together and in unison, as a social activity. Therefore, to be authentic, as mentioned in a previous chapter on period movement, we had to walk the line between authentic movement of the era and movement that would advance the story.

That is easier said than done. One place that I thought we were particularly successful at it was the challenge dance in the "Hand Jive" number. As opposed to having the two final couples just one-up each other over and over, with dance technique and tricks, Patti suggested we show up the bossiness and desire to win by the Patty Simcox character and have her push Eugene around in the dance-off! It was hysterical, with Patty at one point, in an effort to imitate Cha-Cha, ending upside down, legs spread in the air! It was simultaneously amusing, entertaining and revealing about the personalities of these characters and advanced the plot through to the next scene, which is the end of the dance.

Interestingly, the number that brought the house down every night was "Beauty School Drop-Out." Patti's idea, based on the 1994 Broadway version, was to use just the men as back-up singers, compared to using the Pink Ladies as is often done. This created a boy-band à la Temptations feel that was extremely effective. Here is another case where the steps didn't so much further story as enhance the mood of the number, the gospel-like quality. Which proves that story-telling is not necessarily essential if the hook or idea is strong enough and plays up the point of view of the character, which it did for Teen Angel.

Following that, in the spring of 2012 I was assigned to do the movement for the play *The Elephant Man* on the VCU Mainstage. It ended up being a show that was the perfect culmination of all the previously learned lessons from my time at VCU. Admittedly, working with songs within a musical is much easier than creating movement and choreography for straight plays that have a song here or there or no songs at all. With a musical, the choreographer is able to create a style, a language if you will, that can be used over and over again. As we learned in David Leong's movement classes, any non-natural stylistic choice - such as slow-motion, freezes, or even song and dance - must be presented within the first 2 or 3 minutes of a show, so the audience understands the rules of acceptability in what they are about to see. That is true in a play as well. To have a play

with no music or dance-like movement for the first hour or so and then to expect the audience to accept it half-way through the piece is not only jarring but immediately takes the audience out of the world of the play. So it was with some trepidation that I took on this project, and only proceeded based on the successes of both *Troy Women* and *The Winter's Tale* prior to this.

The director, an actor of some note from New York City, Casey Biggs, luckily already knew this rule and put a live cello player on stage to underscore and accentuate the entire play from the very first moment. Just having this one element made approaching the Victorian era party scene, the Pinheads circus numbers and the body of the "elephant man" with greater ease and range of options. Once again I researched: the play, the video of the play on Broadway, the movies, the historical documents and pictures from the London Hospital etc.. The greatest challenge was how to recreate the body of the malformed character of John Merrick without injuring the actor. The author, Bernard Pomerance, suggests that no prosthetics be used and that the actor playing this role have access to physical therapy. The actor playing this role, Austin Seay, a senior BFA Performance major at VCU, was luckily willing to try anything and eager to please, which always makes things easier. Though we quickly found a workable shape, it wasn't until David Leong

suggested adding weights to the actor's hands and legs for a few rehearsals that the young actor really connected to the struggle, effort and rhythm of this character. I learned then that sometimes going to an extreme can really make a difference in performance. My careful and worried nature makes me trepidatious about asking actors to do radical exercises in rehearsals, but here I saw it pay off in spades. To truly and authentically tell the story of this character and the gravitas of his physical disability meant pushing beyond the normal rehearsal process.

For the Victorian period movement, I now knew to research but to remember the theatrical world and focus on the story - here one of societal games and status - within the party scene. Creating a dance for the Pinheads was where I encountered the most trouble, since they were supposed to be doing a real "dance" but one that is done badly and that gets interrupted. Bad dancing is a unique challenge. How does the audience know the difference between an actor who just dances badly and a character who dances badly due to internal or external influences within the theatrical world?! Also of factor was that the Pinheads were all freshmen acting students who were not really in their bodies as of yet and moved awkwardly already. I had a double whammy of a challenge! I let them improvise, based on their ideas of the characters, and I used Casey's guidance to



shape their movements. We used simple folk dance steps and children's games patterns. Patience is always the key with young actors. Let them try, let them fail, notice and encourage the successes, and then try again. The number changed several times throughout rehearsal and even once on stage with set elements at play. I am not sure if I ever succeeded in telling the story of their diminished mentality, their fear of being beaten and their child-like desire to please with this dance. But I did learn much from the process, which is to keep looking for the best movement that will best tell the story of these characters lives.

A challenge for me, when working after that with the Riverside Dinner Theatre's production of *Cabaret*, was to create choreography that did exactly what I have said is essential - dances that advance story or reveal character. Some of the onus falls on the composer and arrangers musically. If you are working with a click-track, as I was there in Fredericksburg, then your options are limited. I did my best to let the mood of each number be a heightened and expanded inner-monologue for the characters in the scene just prior to the song. I feel that I succeeded. One web reviewer noticed at least, saying, "As the musical progresses, the dance routines begin to take on dark, Nazi overtones such as bold gestures and loud stomps. Choreographer Penny Ayn Maas does a fine job at making these

changes gradual and subtle, as the plot itself subtly changes with Nazi infusion" (Exline). I was very proud of that show!

Unfortunately for this particular commercial theater, the dark venture that is *Cabaret*, veering away from what is their usual light fare, was risky and not always appreciated by the audience. The artistic director, Patrick A'hearn, said he has never had so many calls and complaints and so many people walking out of the theatre. Clearly the audience reception was not what I had hoped it would be. Were we serving their needs then? Was I awakening them to new ways of looking at things? On the other hand, on opening night, I had two ladies approach me and say thank you, for they felt it was important that this story be told. So again, audience taste and likes will vary depending on region and political beliefs. I was successful though in telling an important story with emotional impact!

Story must be communicated not only by the creative team but by the actors as well. What the actor does every moment he is on stage is "tell story"! Ultimately, acting is simply being and doing, on stage, as we are told by many theatre practitioners. Actors "be" by expressing themselves through action and a language of "movement, of gesture, of voice, of the creation and projection of character by things done or left undone" (Boleslavsky 6). It is a physical medium. Words are just words without the actor infusing them with life. The guideline

for actors are the three D's: discover, define and do! The actor's job is to create outwardly what is felt and thought inwardly, for the audience to be able to connect to it. We must always return to our earlier audience reception theory and remind ourselves that theatre is a shared medium. Actors must develop perfect body technique in order to project whatever emotion they are prompted to express but they must never forget why they are doing what they are doing. They have an objective and a guiding principal, a super-objective, to be communicating as well. Both dancing and acting share the need for repetition and perfection of skill so that the story can be the focus and clearly told.

The final chapter of my Richmond area theatrical journey has just concluded at the Riverside Dinner Theatre in Fredericksburg. After my success with *Cabaret*, I was offered the co-choreograph position in their production of *Anything Goes*, working with the locally acclaimed director Justin Amellio. This is a show with a light book and thin plot that ties several wonderful songs together but is comprised of music and dance numbers that really don't tell much in the way of story or character development. The other personal challenge for me would prove to be time. In light of job interviews and wrapping up my two years of graduate school, including the writing of this thesis, it may have been a bit ambitious to take on

choreographing a show I had seen a couple of times but never worked on before. *Cabaret* had been easy to mount due to my extreme familiarity with the show and having choreography notes from other productions. Though I reworked much of that show to fit the theater's needs and to serve those particular actors best, there is a big difference between tweaking and fixing a number versus creating something from scratch! Further, I had little to no time to research properly, which had served me so well up until now. Knowing the show better than your actors can only serve you. As Barry Bell tells his acting students here at VCU, read the play at least 10 times, until you can begin to really understand the point of view of every character. Sadly, I was unable to do that with *Anything Goes*.

What I did have going for me was the understanding and collaboration of my co-choreographer, Amellio, and his very clear communication of the direction and story of each song. But admittedly, there were days in pre-production where we were rushed to get through numbers so that they could be taught in time. The default setting of most choreographers is to just give them some dance steps. (Yes, this is the very same big no-no that I have been talking about this entire paper! Shhhhh) The first number I set was "Bon Voyage", a simple "setting sail" number. Justin's idea was to have Billy surprisingly encounter Hope here, which works very well. However, the rest of the cast

is also on stage at the same time and what are they doing?! We came up with some charming waltzing steps and some couple-y moves. I taught it enthusiastically and got in return some not-so-well-covered-up mocking by a couple of the ensemble members. It seems that they too know when something is not telling story and thus making it harder for them to act and dance. I was so disappointed in my cop-out choreography and immediately talked to Justin about ways we might bring in some story. Based on some later cat-and-mouse games the ensemble plays with each other, we came up with the idea that perhaps the story of this chorus is that the men are always trying to steal kisses and get romance from the women and the women are always flirting, leading them on, but never coming through. Though simplistic in idea it has the potential to bring the dances up greatly. By changing a few steps in "Bon Voyage", having the women leave their waltz partners to move on to flirt with the next man in the circle in one 8-count, the number suddenly came alive and the actor mocking ceased. SUCCESS!!

The other wonderful collaborative effort that Justin Amellio and I worked in to *Anything Goes* returns again to the idea of story-telling. We decided to simply add our own! Though a dangerous endeavor, as mentioned in the Introduction, when carefully crafted with the intention of the script always in mind, it can be an effective way to help the audience connect to

the material. To fill some musical transitions and to give new life to some songs that were once again just big dance numbers, we created a minor plot of having the character of Bonnie constantly flirting with and pursuing the Purser character. Without taking too much license with the show, adding this small objective and obstacle for the two of them opened up so much for us choreographically. The "Let's Step Out" number that we faced with glum thoughts of trying to choose what period steps we might use that had not been used yet turned in to an issue of how we could put him in the number and tell their story while still keeping it a fun, light dance piece. I think we succeeded with that as well!

I believe that each of these classes and production stories serves as proof that when story-telling is the goal and the focus of the dances, there will always be a greater success level for both the artists and the audience!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Contradictory Evidence

Since a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, I will now present evidence that possibly challenges my own thesis, to see if it still holds water. *Mamma Mia!* is quickly becoming one of the longest-running hits on Broadway. The pop songs are familiar to an older generation and due to the success and congruent release of the movie musical, a new, younger audience has also become interested. An interesting side note here is about how media has affected theatre over the decades. First radio and then film helped to establish the success of many musical productions, popularizing the songs and dances. This is particularly true in both the Tin Pan Alley heyday and in the Golden Age of musicals where the songs heard in the musical were also available as sheet music and were the beloved radio hits of the time. That link helped draw in audiences, familiarizing them with what was happening on stage prior to and long after the show. From the late 1950's on, with the rise of rock-n-roll, show-tunes became less aired and less part of the mainstream awareness. The theatre world saw an attempt to re-capitalize on

popular hits with the string of "juke-box" musicals that flourished in the 1990s.

*Mamma Mia!* is one show that did so successfully. Sadly though, when I saw it on Broadway, I came away feeling as if I witnessed some of the worst choreography I had ever seen. The show is full of silly dances that don't tell us anything at all about the plot or the inner life of the characters. One number, "Lay All Your Love on Me," is actually performed in scuba-diving flippers! Do the audiences notice or care and has it lessened its success? NO! People have fun regardless of the dances, or maybe because of them, and are up on their feet in the end, dancing along! They don't seem to care whether the story is advanced in the numbers or not and certainly aren't looking for sub-textual meanings. Their familiarity with the songs is enough. There are some theories that say that after 9/11 the country was ready for light-hearted entertainment from Broadway again, as has happened during war times in the past, and may partially account for its success.

Another contrary example is a recent production of *My Fair Lady* at the Barksdale Theatre in Richmond, Virginia that got wonderful local reviews. The Richmond Times-Dispatch said this of the production: "Bruce Miller's deftly romantic direction emphasizes the unlikely relationships that develop among the characters, with a lively street energy enhanced by Leslie



Owens-Harrington's choreography" (Haubenstock). So the reviewer knows to write about whether we see relationships and story conveyed in direction and choreography but sadly, I came away thinking the exact opposite. The website Richmond.com said that the choreography was, "as usual, stellar." I felt all of the dances were just dance for its own sake, perhaps giving a feel for the time but not advancing plot or enhancing character in the slightest. I often wanted the dance numbers to be shorter and was tired of seeing the same jig step used over and over. Several of my peers also came away with the same critique. So are we all just crazy or are both of these reviewers bad? Or is it a case of the reviewers and the audiences either not knowing the difference or not caring? Am I a dance snob?! Both of these shows are perfect examples of commercial and critical success occurring where story-telling is not present in the dances.

Regarding *My Fair Lady*, I know I and several of my colleagues came away feeling like it was a long and boring show, poorly directed. Could more story-telling through the dances have helped this? I think maybe, especially considering the wonderful script and the layered social meaning that the original book had. What I believe to be crucial in both of these cases brings me to my second point: the importance of a unifying, clearly communicated theme for a production. Though I don't know if one was presented for *My Fair Lady*, my experience

tells me that if everyone on the creative team had been aware of the spine of a show, the "super-objective" as Stanislavsky called it, then each dance number would have to be working to further that overall goal. Sadly, that did not happen with *My Fair Lady*. So many professional theatres don't have even this basic level of communication!

So does this mean we cannot look at reviews and long runs as signs of "good theatre"? Whose opinion is correct and whose can we trust? What we must return to then is the audience. Are they really enjoying these productions? In the case of *Mamma Mia!* I think most audiences do come away saying they were entertained. The larger question is whether they were moved, touched or transformed in any way? I would say not. So *Mamma Mia!* might be considered what we call in show business a "fluff musical." *The Producers* was another show like that; highly entertaining, successful at the box office and with the award committees, funny and frivolous, but comparable to eating an entire meal consisting only of desserts - sweet but empty of any substance. Did I leave the theatre feeling as if my story had been told or that I connected to any character or to the universality of mankind's journey? No! I think that for theatre to really be advancing us as humans, serving its initial purpose of reminding us of ourselves, remembering our stories and journeys, and perhaps even teaching us new things, it must

strive to be more than mere entertainment.

There are some easy solutions to both of these productions. First I would look at the characters and what they want and then figure out what could be expressed of that desire through the movements of the song. For example, in the number "Get Me to the Church on Time" in *My Fair Lady*, instead of just doing a merry dance around the stage as they did, it's fairly clear in the script that he actually doesn't want to get married or is at least very reluctant. So I would use that duality and have him say "get me to the church" but physically do the opposite and use the surrounding characters as his obstacle, with them doing what he says he want, to get him to the church. The resistance the character could show, through redirection and avoidance could be very amusing and effective and revealing of his subtext. The same could be true for other numbers in *My Fair Lady*.

In *Mamma Mia!* it might be trickier since the show itself is just a loose story forced around a set of pre-recorded songs from an album. There isn't a book or text to pull conflict and character development from! It really is a vehicle for songs, the way early musical comedies were. Yet the way our theatre system is set up, because it is playing in a Broadway house it is considered a Broadway show and thus brings the quality of the entire category of "Broadway shows" down, in my opinion. My

complaint is that shows don't market themselves for what they really are. My fix for *Mamma Mia!* would be to label it as a pop-music spectacle. Perhaps we need more stringent definitions of what constitutes a book musical, for advertising and for awards as well.

I conclude that my initial thesis of a need for storytelling in dance has not been refuted. These two examples of commercial success only prove the laziness of many directors and that audiences still enjoy entertainment for its own sake, even when disguised as art and theatre. The theatre that will last will be that which has a larger goal and serves a greater purpose. Since Aristotle wrote his *Poetics*, believing we all share a basic human nature, the question of how to move the audience has been taken up extensively by theatre philosophers and historians over time. Connection, in a universal poetic sense where we realize that what we feel is felt by everyone, can truly be said to be the goal of theatre. At some point, a line must be drawn in the sand between what is art, or artistic, and everything else, regardless of commonly accepted labels.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Importance of a Central Theme

As proven in the chapters preceding this, story is the key to creating artistically fulfilling and meaningful theatre for both the artists and the audience. Yet doing that is not possible without one other element - a strong, clearly communicated theme. The truth is that all action on stage, whether acting, movement or dance must be in service of the "dramatic action" or the underlying "spine" of the piece or play. As Boleslavsky defines it in his Acting book in 1933, "dramatic action (is that) which the writer expresses in words, having that action as the purpose and goal of his words, and which the actor performs, or acts..." (55). This is the indispensable foundational element in all theatre. The goal of a good director and choreographer then is to define and keep this super objective, the dramatic action, in mind at all times with all movement and dance in service to it. Actors must learn how to choose actions, whether musicalized or danced, that are not only in accordance with their character but also in keeping with the dramatic action. And they must respond truthfully to those

characters that oppose them too. No action without conflict! So in the end, we must ask not only what the theme of the play is but more importantly how the theme perseveres or does not persevere through all obstacles.

Classes, like plays, must also have a strong unifying and clearly communicated theme or goal! My learning of this lesson actually happened by failing. As a preface, I will admit that it is not in my nature to defy authority. I tend to believe my teachers and trust their wisdom and experience. Much of that is generational. I did not grow up defying authority. The students today though have no problem challenging what is taught to them and questioning everything. My downfall as a teacher may be that I don't question things enough. I must begin to read and observe with skepticism and learn to trust my instincts. I gained a very helpful pedagogical lesson about this in my first semester of teaching Junior Movement at VCU.

I had one male student who always performed his class assignments at an A level but his attitude and laziness, from my perspective, was at a low B level. I decided to give him a B in the class and he was furious. Though "participation" was presented in the syllabus as a portion of their grade, I failed to put certain language in that defined exactly what that meant. Not only did he challenge the grade but flat-out refused to acknowledge any of the qualities he was bringing to class that

seemed so obvious to me. I was saying black and he was saying white. Despite my best explanations he would not be convinced that he needed improvement on anything in the class and was willing to take the fight to the highest level to get his grade changed. I was wisely advised by the head of the theatre department to simply change the grade, because I wouldn't win. Though I was surprised by this, his experience regarding these situations and wisdom about my lack of definition in my syllabus saved us all countless hours of battle and worry.

What I take away from that early teaching experience is that I was ultimately to blame. As the leader, the teacher, the director of the class, it is I who should have been setting out clearly defined goals and guidelines! Pedagogical study has revealed that students, not unlike pets and children, seem to desire structure. They don't necessarily care so much about what they are learning so long as they know what is going to be taught ahead of time so that they can prepare. They want to know what the point of it all is.

The challenge of being a good acting or movement teacher is rooted in this issue. As the one guiding the young performers through their paces, much of what they will learn in a theatre class, whether movement, dance or acting, is dependent on what they bring to the table that day. If an exercise is planned that isn't getting the desired effect, then a quick change of plans

and a new exercise is needed. It is this flexibility that allows the greatest learning outcome potential. Unlike math or science, where one can follow a natural, ladder progression of steps for learning, the arts live in a hazy field of difficult-to-measure artistic advancement and subject to somewhat subjective grading. It doesn't seem to matter how many times the words "subject to change" is on the syllabus or how many TBA days are included to allow this kind of "teach what is needed" approach, the students don't quite get it. They seem to only be concerned about what they need to do to get the "A", as opposed to really embracing the lesson and the learning. Yet what every class and production experience has taught me, beyond the importance of patience and listening, is that communication of a clearly defined goal, both overall and on a day to day basis, are the keys. To use a nautical metaphor, if everyone on the ship knows where they are sailing and why, then it is easy to be the captain and a good and true course will follow.

Professionally, this same concept, of needing a strong guiding theme, has shown itself to be an invaluable and theatrically necessary element. I have had the good fortune to have worked with some of the greatest choreographers and directors on Broadway during my 21 years in New York City. The list includes Susan Stroman, Rob Marshall, Jack O'Brien, Tommy Tune, Jerry Mitchell, Casey Nicholaw and Mike Ockrent. I spent



five of those years, just prior to graduate school, in the Broadway production of *Cabaret*. Due to the long run and the revolving door of stars coming into the cast, I also had the opportunity to work with and get notes from one of the finest stage and film directors of our time, Sam Mendes. Beyond the obvious ways he effectively utilized Brechtian elements in this shocking production, the most remarkable thing he did with the show was to edit the script down to just the bare essentials, so that nothing superfluous was ever said that wasn't furthering the story or our understanding of the characters. Further, he presented each of us, even the chorus members, with a picture that visually represented the theme he was trying to communicate. Much of the success of that show had to do with the world being created from the minute the audience entered. Beyond that though, the strength of the cast came across because everyone was so clearly on the same page, telling the same story, based on Sam's clearly researched and defined vision of his cabaret world. We were all acting in the same manner, with the same vision in mind, presenting a unified message.

Beyond that, Sam conveyed to every new "MC" or "Sally Bowles" that came into the cast that the songs were merely reflections of and reactions to the scene that has preceded it. The musical numbers were the subtext, the inner monologue made public. As Bob Fosse, years before him, once said, "The time to

sing is when your emotional level is too high to just speak anymore, and the time to dance is when your emotions are just too strong to only sing about how you feel" (Joosten 4). This heightened state of feeling must be conveyed as clearly as possible. In short, all that we present on stage must be tied together, working towards the same end. Anything less than that in theatre feels like a let-down.

I know that with the exception of Sam Mendes in my performing career I was NEVER told anything about what we were all working towards and why, not even in the other two Broadway shows I did. Table work is surprisingly absent from many professional theatres, especially for chorus members. Yet to really present a strong overall concept, every single person affiliated with the show, from the dressers to the stars, must understand what the goal is. Perfection is often in the small details. The scarcity of this happening professionally can perhaps be attributed to a lack of time or perhaps laziness. Whatever the cause, I can say from personal experience that having a clearly defined goal makes a huge difference in communicating effectively and truthfully.

Further examples of the need for guiding themes came this past year. The first was with the Riverside Dinner Theatre's production of *Cabaret* that recently opened in Fredericksburg, VA on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Thirteen years after my *Cabaret* Broadway

experience I found myself saying the same exact things to this cast that were said to me and to the incoming stars at Studio 54. I presented to my young, non-Equity cast members that the super-objective for every character, the one thing that should motivate every word and movement on stage, was to survive at all costs. I constantly reminded the cast of this and brought to their attention when anything they were saying and doing was not tied into that. They often looked at me like I was crazy! I doubt they have even been given this kind of guidance for this level of a show. I constantly reminded them that there should never be a gesture or step or movement without justification, and no action without desire or need. We are never just dancing; we are always extending the scene, the action, the story or the character with each note sung and movement made.

I ran into another awful situation regarding communication with this same production of *Cabaret*. I assumed that the often absent costume designer, who had seen one run of the show, would automatically know what to put my actors in so that the choreography I had set would be able to be properly executed. Due to the distance of the theatre and various scheduling conflicts, there were never any production meetings. I always believe that everyone else is working as hard as I am and again assume they understand my vision. I was wrong. The night before we were to have our first audience I finally got to see the

costumes for the first time and several of them were completely unusable! With a limited budget, the costumer was both angry and resistant to the changes I was proposing at the last minute. It was totally my fault for not communicating the dance needs earlier. I assumed that when he saw that one of the dance numbers, "Mein Herr", was filled with angry expression including much stomping, he wouldn't put an actress in spike heels that she could barely walk in, let alone stomp or dance in. Tempers fly in the theatre, as they are wont to do. Yet it all could have been avoided by a little more effort on my part. If I had insisted on there being more time spent talking, if I had checked in with the creative team's progress, and if I had clearly communicated my ideas and needs, all of the drama and problems could have been avoided. These are the kind of lessons that are hard learned and forever imprinted!

The second reinforcement of the need for clear communication of theme came with the VCU production of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* that I choreographed in the fall of 2010. I was heavily criticized for my work in *Liaisons* primarily because the dances I created were added to an already lengthy show and because they failed to communicate anything about story or character beyond an accurate recreation of the dances that would have happened in this period. A prominent faculty member advised that I should have talked with the director and helped her to

understand that there was no need for these dances. In retrospect I agree. At the time, as a new graduate student and with most of my professional experience being situations where I simply did what I was told, I did not feel comfortable confronting or challenging the director's vision. Hindsight is of course 20/20. What I should have done was insist on a lengthier and more comprehensive amount of time in discussion with the director to flush out the vision while still keeping my knowledge of the importance of story-telling in the mix. I should be comfortable enough in my story-telling dance style to insist on that with every show. My job as choreographer then is to also convince and sell the other creative team members on my truths. I did not realize this before.

Revisiting a production mentioned earlier in this paper, *The Elephant Man*, I luckily had the great advantage of having a director who very clearly communicated his vision of the play! He set the tone, the mood and knew exactly what he wanted. Every time I created a little bit of dance for the Pinheads, at the beginning of the play as well as for their death dance at the end, he would watch and then comment and help shape based on his needs. His hands-on approach to every single element in the play was inspirational. If he oversaw everything, he was assured of its unity and consistency. He also established some style elements early on that allowed a macabre dream sequence scene

later on. Whether it sold well or not, as a creative artist, this experience was one of the best examples I have had of the right way to make a play happen. What he did very well was win the loyalty and trust of his cast. As Michael Bennett once said, "The key to working with performers is being able to handle people. That's almost more important than the ability to choreograph...the goal is to inspire, get their best, to create trust. The best work comes out of a room full of trust and love" (Grody and Lister 111). Creating that safe environment is vital for every production and every classroom as well!

If there is one thing we can learn from all of these examples, it is that nothing of any consistency, continuity or clarity can happen on stage without a clearly communicated theme in place. Good story-telling relies on it! The other lesson seems to be that there is still so much to learn!

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Ten Tips for Future Choreographers

Experience has been the ultimate teacher for me. As I move on to begin teaching at my first full-time faculty position in Texas, I will take certain core lessons with me. These lessons inform not only my own pedagogy but the way I will approach all future creative ventures and productions as well. Though I try to live without regret, I wish I had been given some of these tips and lessons earlier in life. Perhaps with them I might have been a bigger success. So, in an effort to pay it forward to others, here is a short list of the key guiding principals to keep in mind for anyone working in university or professional theatre as directors and choreographers.

1. Know what story you want to tell and use every possible means to communicate that to the audience or class: every action, movement, gesture, dance step, song and word must work towards the same end.
2. In order to do this, all direction and choreography must have a clearly communicated and strong guiding theme. Bring to the work a vision that's driven by

fresh insights into human nature and society, coupled with in-depth knowledge of your characters and your world.

3. Find a hook: choose an idea, a theme, a concept, a step, a prop, an image or sound that unifies and draws the audience in.
4. Find the most unique choice: the unexpected and unexplored can be compelling. Try something new. Put things together in a way no one has ever dreamed.
5. Establish your world within the first two minutes: any style or stylized elements must be presented early on to define the reality and inform the audience about what is acceptable and what is not.
6. Respect the audience: keep them in mind when you create, honoring their intelligence and always striving to serve their needs. Good story means something worth telling that the world wants to hear.
7. Create characters that the audience can relate to and that the audience can care about and empathize with. Transition of values and transformation of characters is interesting. The character journey is important.
8. No movement or dance without need! Justify every choice or don't do it. Playable action is the only thing that reads.



9. Be specific, concise and clear. The director, actor and audience must all know what the characters want and value at all times.
10. Love it! Bring to whatever you do a passion and love: the love of story and the belief that your vision can be expressed only through story, the love of the dramatic, the love of truth, the love of humanity and a willingness to empathize with suffering souls, the love of sensation, the love of dreaming, the love of humor, the love of language, the love of duality, the love of uniqueness, the love of beauty, and the love of self.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Advice for Potential Pedagogos

Though many of the above tips can apply to both artistic endeavors and academic ones, there are some unique challenges to teaching. Pedagogical efforts - passing on one's knowledge and guiding others to self-discovery - can be both challenging and rewarding. For anyone on their way to joining these ranks as a future teacher of theatre or movement, I offer a few kernels of wisdom from what I have gleaned thus far.

One of the most valuable ideas, of many, that have awakened in my consciousness these past two years is the tenet of mask and counter-mask. This concept of having an outer and inner life or a stereo-state, taken from LeCoq's mask world, is yet another acting term that has come to be a vital part of my teaching philosophy. When I am able to communicate to a class or a cast that every person and every character on stage has an outer persona that they willingly share and an inner persona that is perhaps hidden but pops out, they are immediately able to begin to add depth and dimension to their characters. The level and degree of contrast and revelation of that duality will vary

based on the given circumstances of the play, scene or song. The expression of this yin-yang state of being, the duality and polarity of character, is a powerful tool in acting, musical theatre and even Shakespeare. Creating fully realized characters is something that allows audiences to relate to what is being presented on stage. I encourage the incorporation of this in any and all theatre classes.

It can be effective for productions as well. A common pitfall found in many small theatres is a plethora of one-dimensional, unbelievable, stock characters. Being able to help actors find the truth, depth and layers of their characters has been life-altering. While I was directing *Cabaret*, I discussed mask and counter-mask with the cast quite a bit. It is the first time I have ever done so in a professional situation. I was worried it wouldn't make sense to them since we were not in an academic setting. But lo and behold, they not only understood it but they were very excited about it. I believe it added richness and emotional truth to the entire production. Based on that, I had several actors ask me if I could do private coaching with them. This interest in hiring me to help them with their auditions was such a positive affirmation of how I have grown as a teacher and director!

For anyone teaching period movement or style, an important lesson I have learned is that research is crucial. Have the

class do it as well as doing it yourself. An understanding of historical manners, relationships and status is the key to truthfully creating worlds from the past. Looking at the art, the architecture, the paintings and most importantly the clothing of a time all give clues as to where to begin. Another important theatrical factor for doing period work with a class is improvisation. Giving the class the ability to think and react naturally while moving within the confines of an era's social strictures is vital to theatrical success. For women of society so much of period movement is about showing off the clothing most effectively but "it is far more important to show character than period...(and) it should be perfectly possible to do both" (Oxenford 265). Manners and dance were such a large part of society in the past. Sadly, social dance is no longer a required element of societal education for young ladies and gentlemen. In fact, as I encountered in teaching Junior Movement at VCU, many of today's students aren't as quick or as eager to learn dance at all. It is vital that they understand how dance from both the Renaissance and Restoration eras were mirrors and reflections of societal status and courtship games and were learned by everyone. My new approach to Period Movement then, within a class or a production is: research era and play, have the actors synthesize through improvisation, discuss goal and the story, embody those goals while being physically true to

character and era. That, I have found, is the most effective process.

Something that I see younger theatre students struggling with the most is the ability to fully engage the body and communicate action and impulse and tactics. According to Albert Mehrabian's research, when communicating feelings and attitudes, which is what theatre is all about, 55% of that communication is done with body language and only 7% of it is done through words! Taking away their words then is valuable in that it reveals how capable or incapable they really are at this. There are many non-verbal-scene exercises that are useful, found in most acting books. Non-verbal communication can also be achieved through the use of masks or by using music. I am particularly fond of using music, especially for musical theatre students. Using music as the given directorial vision or the necessary guiding principle, the importance of which has been discussed throughout this paper, provides an excellent and easy way for young choreographers to build numbers within parameters and structure while still being able to create freely. In other words, music can be the platform for practically any story and can also provide a little shape and direction. Music also gives the student a sense of build and arc, which is inherent in most music but lacking in many scenes or improvisations. I have used these exact lessons with my Junior Movement class, linking this

work with their Contact Improv segment as a means for building group dynamics and for creating dance and telling story. Once they are able to tell a story with no words, they will be able to communicate even more fully with them!

Finally, I realize I have been gaining an awareness of a continuity of theories, the connecting threads that appear throughout all the facets of theatre. The one element that best ties together the study and application of movement and dance to all of the other theatrical classes and theories is rhythm, or organized energy. This includes rhythm of action, rhythm of thought and rhythm of character. According to Emile Jaques-Dalcroze all the arts are basically the same except for the method of their expression: "This common basis to the arts...is rhythm" (48). Each song and each production has its own unique rhythm. Once you find that and are able to lock in to it, then there are no wrong choices! And rhythm is all around us; in our consciousness, forced upon us by others and society and of course there is the rhythm that we create. Being aware of the inherent rhythms as well as the created ones in a classroom will aid in learning from both sides.

But what is rhythm exactly? Boleslavsky defines it as, "the orderly, measurable changes of all the different elements comprised in a work of art - provided that all those changes progressively stimulate the attention of the spectator and lead

invariable to the final aim of the artist." (112) Ah-hah! There we see both of my theories again; making sure the audience is engaged and the importance of an overriding theme in a piece! In a book about acting, which in theory has little to do with the director or choreographer, the reader is advised of these same two principal: providing an engaging story for your audience and having a "final aim" in mind!

Rhythm can also be defined as the transition from one thing to another greater one, encompassing the change and the transformation. This goes back to our earlier mention of catharsis in Greek theatre. We as audiences want not just to go on a journey but also witness a change, thus feeling a release. All great emotion happens in the character/actor making that choice. We as an audience must be willing to go on this journey and the actor must use action - and specifically rhythm, dance and movement - to take us there! As actors we must observe the rhythms and stories all around us in life and be willing to absorb them and recreate them on stage. A perfect, simple example of this was discovered while researching the legendary Mae West for VCU's Historiography class. I ran across a wonderful quote of hers, something she said in regards to her success on stage and film, epitomized by her swaying, sexy walk. "Everything I do and say is based on rhythm" (Watts 54). Comedy is all timing and rhythm. Understanding the power and proper

usage of this simple concept can make or break a show or a classroom.

Whether in acting class or musical theatre class, and whether in a professional production or a university lab show, I am learning that there are some concepts that apply over and over: play the action and the emotion will come, don't move until you must, always remember what you desire and then go after it. It is really all Stanislavsky basics! In addition, as demonstrated above, the use of mask/counermask, research and improv, developing non-verbal communication and the importance of rhythm are all crucial teaching factors. Other general principles I have discovered are: create a guiding principal that is clearly stated at the beginning of class, state objectives up front and remind them frequently, keep the goal in mind at all times, and the more expert you are in your subject, the easier it will be to teach and the easier it will be to pass on that knowledge effectively. Finally, when teaching, patience is essential for the process and the product!



## CHAPTER NINE

### Final Words

So now I return one last time to the initial question proposed: what have I learned about teaching and how have I grown as an artist? My conclusion is that communication is the key to success - in telling story, in expressing theme and in the overall creation of good theatre! Recapping from the tips above, whether one is working in a classroom or on a stage, clear expression of both story and theme is vital. Achieving these things requires thorough and constant discussion and a flexibility based on the needs of the art and the audience or class. Further, once these elements are clarified, the story must be expressed and furthered as much as possible with every mode available, including all movement, all gestures and all dance steps. As I move forward in my career, I will always be keeping these two core ideas at the forefront of mind. Beyond that, the question I will constantly be asking myself is what is needed to best serve the overall good - of the student, of the University, of the actors, or the audience and of the production?!

As a creative artist I have grown immensely. To begin with, I have been shown that with great risk comes great reward. Cautious and careful artistry will rarely get you where you want to go! Letting go of fear and being willing to go beyond the usual, rushed, only-give-them-what-they-have-to-know approach will ultimately be the route to creating truly remarkable theatre - whether with a cast or a class. Two other important lessons I have learned have to do with collaboration and research and the importance of both. I steal one last time from Michael Bennett, following these words of wisdom: "I have never worked a day in my life alone and never intend to" (Grody and Lister 107). If I am lucky, I can only hope to continue to be able to work and collaborate with such amazingly talented artists as I have been fortunate enough to have worked with thus far! Finally, Bennett reminds those of us who are attempting to follow in his footsteps "to understand the way very good choreographers work in the medium is almost more important than the vocabulary. But of course the more you know the better off you are" (Grody and Lister 107). These words inspire me to keep striving to learn as much as I can every day.

In conclusion, I believe that this look at the development of Musical Theatre dance, at the importance of audience reception, along with the many professional and personal examples provided from my time working in the classroom and on

the stage have proven that story-telling within the dance and the movement on stage is not only noticeable but also necessary to achieve theatre's highest goal: the communication of the story of the audiences own lives, expressed as fully and truthfully as possible! Movement and dance on stage has the power to communicate the heightened world of theatrical performance more immediately than any spoken words. The language of the body and the stories it can tell through dance can effectively express to an audience what is happening both internally and externally. As Stanislavsky said, "The language of the body is the key that can unlock the soul" (Blumenfeld 74). If we endeavor as creative artists to create stories in our theatre through the dance, stories with meaning and beauty, then like the hero of a fable, that dance will dazzle the world!

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Appendix A

Choreography Production Photos



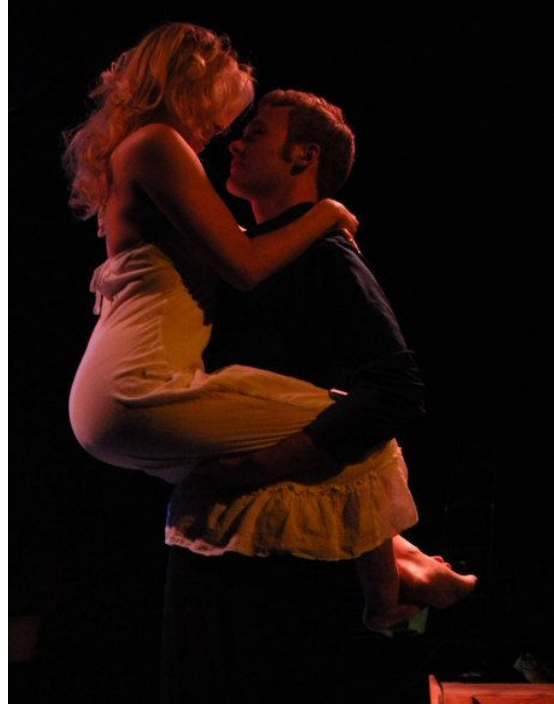
"Mein Herr" from *Cabaret*, Riverside Dinner Theatre, 2012



"Willkommen" from *Cabaret*, Riverside Dinner Theatre, 2012



Paris/Helen Dance from *Troy Women*, Shafer Street Theatre, 2011



## Vita

Penny Ayn Maas was born on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1965, in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada and is an American citizen. She graduated from Woodstock High School, Woodstock, Illinois in 1983. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Music Theater Performance from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1987, graduating magna cum laude. She then went on to live and work as a professional actress, singer and dancer in New York City from 1989 through 2010. While there she performed in three Broadway shows: the original cast of *Crazy for You*, directed by Mike Ockrent and choreographed by Susan Stroman, from 1992-1994; the revival of *Damn Yankees*, directed by Jack O'Brien and choreographed by Rob Marshall, from 1994-1995; and the revival of *Cabaret* directed by Sam Mendes and choreographed by Rob Marshall, from 1999-2004. She has choreographed Off-Broadway for the National Yiddish Theatre, from 2005 to 2011, for the Algonquin Theatre Company, from 2008-2009, and for various other Off-Off and Off-Broadway theatre companies in New York City and for many regional theatre companies and high schools around the country. She was the associate director and choreographer for the Broadway benefit

"Broadway Backwards: III, IV & V", 2008-2010, working with such celebrities as Whoopi Goldberg and Florence Henderson at the American Airlines Theatre and the Vivian Beaumont Theatre. She received her Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2012. While at VCU she taught Audition Technique and Advanced Movement for the Actor. She has an appointment with Texas Christian University beginning in the fall of 2012 as Assistant Professor of Theatre.