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The False Dichotomy Between Dancing and Writing

How Professional Dancers Communicate Their Work Through Writing

Dancing and writing are two intrinsically different entities. Writing uses words as a means of expression; dancing is expression in the absence of words. That being said, writing and dancing are more heavily intertwined than one would think. Contrary to common belief and speaking from personal experience, writing itself is essential in a professional dancer's life. As a dance major pursuing my Bachelor of Fine Arts from The University of Arizona, I am widely familiar with the field. I have trained with professional companies, choreographed pieces, and have had experience as a professional dancer- all situations which have required me to write. Therefore, I can attest to the fact that there are many reasons professional dancers are put into writing situations throughout their careers. Three such examples are: resumes, grants, and the creation of choreography.

Writing a resume is a universal skill that most Americans need to have in order to apply for jobs in modern times. However, in order to book dance jobs, dance resumes are structured specifically to highlight certain qualities and experiences. While the resume itself is not the sole reason one gets a job, according to Max Foster, a graduate student at The University of Arizona, "a well written resume is still very important." And of course it is a required document that you need for most auditions and interviews.

The structure of a dance resume is fairly simple; allowing the merits listed to be the main focus instead of overly flashy design. Like other resumes, the very top of the page should denote basic personal information: in large letters should be your full name, followed right underneath by your contact information, including email, phone number, and address. But where dance resumes differ is the overwhelming focus on your performing experience, awards received, dance training, education, and special skills. Those should be the subheadings with the information in bullet form underneath them. Overall, resumes should be organized, neat, and easy to read with a lot of white space. You want to inform your readers about yourself, without overloading them with excess information. Each resume should be tailored for the specific job you are trying to get. You have to think about the job you want, who will be reading your resume, and whom you are competing against for the job. “Even in such a large crowd you can stand out if your resume is better than the rest- just as you’d hope to stand out on stage by dancing with more dynamics, precision, and control than the other dancers (Wolfram, Eric Wolfram’s Writing: Your Dance Resume: Resume Basics).”

The purpose of dance resumes is to inform your audience of your training, experience, and credibility to book the job you want. The simplistic style of dance resumes allows the merits of the dancer to be the sole focus. These resumes are one of the only chances to establish ethos with whoever the reader may be. You are the author and your audience is whatever individual or organization you are trying to get the job from. The content in your resume should always be up to date and only include the most important information about yourself. For example, you would want to include how

many years you trained, where you trained, and the dates of the previous jobs you have held. The goal is to have your audience to read your resume and be intrigued, impressed, and interested in you.

Another writing skill dancers must have is being able to write a grant. The dance world is not an easy place to survive. Funding for the arts in general is very limited and competing for the little money there is can be extremely difficult. For the lucky dancers who join large, popular dance companies, there is no need to worry about this because said companies have artistic directors and departments that are responsible for funding. However, most dancers start off on their own, and do not have the funds to produce their work. Many starting off in the field are unaware and unfamiliar with this situation. “One thing that the graduate degree teaches that maybe the undergraduate degree doesn’t is that if you are going to be a working artist, especially a freelancer, you need to write, a lot... you have to be able to speak about your work, write an application, write a grant... (Kaczmarska).” Grants become essential and therefore writing a good grant is key.

Firstly, grants should follow specific instructions from the grantor and it is important that the project definitively meets their guidelines before even attempting to write a grant. From the beginning, you need to be thinking about the grantor and doing everything to win them over. An example of a project you may need money for is the production of a show. Few realize how costly projects like this are; you need to hire dancers, a choreographer, rehearsal space, a theatre with lighting and stage crew, costumes, fliers, etc. and without grants it would be impossible to produce.

Grants essentially are an opportunity to persuade and appeal to the benefactors and their structure reflects their function. Most grants are simply a letter to the grantor where you use any rhetorical strategy and structure you can to convince the grantor. The letter should introduce yourself and/or organization, include a summary of your project, a statement of need, objectives, and methods for producing your project, your plan on future funding after the grant, and how you plan on budgeting the money you are given for your project. The crucial part of this is framing and writing about it all in a compelling manner- after all, the goal of your grant is to convince your audience to give you sufficient backing to produce your work. Your grant should be organized in a formal, yet personal letter to your grantor in order to appeal to your grantor's emotions by connecting with them and developing empathy through pathos. Not only that, but you must also appeal to their logical side. You want to be clear with your reader about what your project is and how you plan on using the money. "Clarity in communicating your ideas is very important (DanceNet, Grant-Writing Tips)." The more specific the better. If possible, you should spell out every date and detail of the project's production and delineate the specific ways the money is being spent. For example, you could write out your week-by-week plan and include your budget in a table. This structure allows the information to be presented in a clean, transparent manner that appeals to the logos of a reader. Additionally, because the funding for dance is so limited, the way you present your grant is vital. You are trying to convince the grantor to give you the money, rather than someone else and this deep competition for funding means that writing grants is a heavily relied on ability.

Without a doubt, the most important and well-known way dancers communicate their work is through choreography. “Movements are used as words to ‘say’ something to the viewer (Ambrosio, Learning About Dance).” Choreography covers such a vast variety of different forms and focuses and therefore there are many different ways choreography can be created and communicated. Some forms of choreography, such as competition dance is more restricted and structured. “Normally if I am teaching at a dance studio, they are going to want a two minute piece, to this song, with this costume, with this dancer (Veluz).” There is very little creative freedom with that process. However, through other forms like concert dance, choreographers are able to create their work however they please. Some use improvisation, some choreograph on the spot, others “create phrases then set it on the dancers (Sheather).” It all depends on the choreographer and their creative process for creating work. But, what seems to be universal is the unexpected reliance on writing in choreography. While it may be surprising, many choreographers use writing in their creative process. “I tend to write a lot, but in my writing there’s a lot of bullet points, sketches, and little “isms” that I would understand so that way when I choreograph, it follows the pattern in my journal (Veluz).” Some choreographers even write out their entire storyline before they begin choreographing. Writing itself is a great, yet unrecognized tool for choreographers to organize their thoughts before creating movement. The use of writing in this process allows choreographers to effectively communicate their thoughts and intentions.

For any choreographer, the purpose of creating work is to communicate, entertain, and evoke emotions from their audiences. “I feel that when people go to a

show they want to experience something and be taken out of their daily routine/ daily life (Worley).” Choreographers should create work that their audiences can relate to.

“They’re going to see a bunch of people moving around the stage. But, how the music resonates with that movement is really the thing that audiences see and relate to, not the narrative that the choreographer has going on in their head (Foster).” The goal of choreography is to have the audience feel something from watching it, whether it is joy, anger, sadness, or just appreciation for the art. Writing helps to achieve this goal.

Choreographers spend painstakingly long hours trying to mold their thoughts into movement and art and the use of writing can help accomplish just that. It allows them to pour their raw emotions and feelings into their work in an effective way. The use of writing in choreography is one of the purest forms of pathos. This is without question the most important and most intense form writing takes in a professional dancer's life.

In today’s modern society, it is naïve to think any professional can get by without writing, and dancers are no exception. Many would be initially inclined to think that dancers have no real need or purpose for writing, but the truth of the matter is that writing is not just an important skill for dancers to have, it is an utmost necessity. I know first hand how essential the ability to write is in this profession- I would not have made it this far without it. Whether it be for finding work, garnering support through grants, or better communicating their work to others, the need to write persists throughout the whole of a dancer’s career.

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