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Flying Closer: The Intersection of Circus and Dance

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Pace University

Flying Closer: The Intersection of Circus and Dance

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Commercial Dance

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Abstract

Dancers entering the professional industry must consider whether to be a jack of all trades, able to perform any style and any skill, or a specialized performer who has achieved mastery of one specific technique. Because commercial dancers require a greater variety of skill sets, and jobs for commercial dancers such as cruise ships, backup dancing, and Broadway shows, are increasingly asking their dancers to perform aerial arts - and circus companies such as Cirque Du Soleil, and Circa are blending circus and dance, I am arguing that a dancer entering the commercial industry has to also consider the value of circus training.

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Introduction

The dance industry is comprised of two sectors: company dance and commercial dance. Company dancers are performers who have chosen to specialize in ballet, contemporary, modern, hip-hop or tap, perform solely with their company, and take class with their company. It is a notoriously low paying profession. Company dancers are known to dance for passion, and not for a paycheck. Commercial dance is a relatively young sector of the dance world, and commercial dancers, although also passionate dancers, are specialized in the ways to make dancing the most profitable career it can be. They tend to freelance, unlike company dancers who generally have steady work usually with one employer. The bulk of the commercial dancer's work is in music videos, Broadway shows, commercials, industrials, touring shows, and cruise ships. Their contracts are often shorter, but the pay is greater than what company dancers earn. Due to the variety of jobs commercial dancers are expected to be work, they are expected to be well versed in many movement styles including - tap, jazz, ballet, musical theater and heels.

Circus is a different type of performance from dancing, and some compare circus more to a sport, than to an art. For the purposes of this paper, the distinction between the forms will be defined by their aesthetics. Frequently dance strives to hide the physical effort necessary to perform amazing feats. A large part of their training is dedicated to showing the least amount of visible labor, which keeps the audience's attention on the story-telling of the dance. In circus the

athleticism is frequently highlighted, the effort is not hidden but purposefully exposed to make the performances more thrilling. Although circus and dance are very different, there is a recent crossover of skills, Broadway shows such as *Pippin* and *Paramour*, used circus and dance in the same performances. Popular circus companies such as Cirque Du Soleil, and Circa, use dance aesthetics in their shows. Pop artist P!nk frequently uses circus arts in her productions; Therefore, if commercial dancers want to continue to be trained in such a way to be castable in most shows, I am arguing that an increase in circus training would be beneficial to the 21st century commercial dancer.

Literature Review

In order to determine why there is an increase in circus arts being used in dance performances, and how this crossover of skills affects the arts forms of circus and dance, I researched articles and critical explorations by many writers, dance critics, and historians. Danielle Garrison, author of “Realigning Vertical Dance on a Horizontal Continuum,” in the *Athens Journal of Humanities and Arts*, discusses the idea that although concert dance and circus have traditionally been divided, “the line is now distorted and the genres are blending due to their techniques mixing at festivals (such as the Aerial Dance festival in Arizona)...and as both forms become accessible global practices ...”(116). The internet and media have made the consumption of art forms very simple for both audience members and performers. This creates

an atmosphere in which the audience is educated in many different forms of art, and performers have access to many different kinds of training.

Sonya Smith, circus and dance expert and choreographer, discusses the mixing of genres, and defines some characteristics of a technique called “Aerial Dance,” which is a blending of both circus and dance. Her first definition of the combined discipline states that, “...it’s the intention of the choreographer using aerial and its relationship to modern dance aesthetics... that make it aerial dance” (Smith 2). The choreographers she references have training and understanding in both circus and modern dance, and are choosing to enhance the natural relationships between the two to create a whole new style of performance. To define the specifics of what Smith sees as the difference between “aerial circus” to the blended form of “aerial dance,” she describes that, “...the inclusion of floor work and greater emphasis on transitional movement is included in aerial dance” (23). These examples show that that there exists a blending of forms in circus and dance, and I will discuss some of the positive aspects of using both disciplines, below.

According to many circus scholars, using dance in traditional circus shows is helping the longevity of circus by bringing it onto the same playing field as dance, and making it a legitimate mainstream performance. Sonya Smith writes, “In the postmodern age circus has lost the marginality... and can now be seen in theatres as well as a tents”(19). This change in popularity she credits to what she defines as the “New circus...Aerial performance in the new circus, with

its use of transitional movement on the floor and in the air, overarching narratives or themes that indicate broader creative intentions”(19), dance assisting to provide these “Overarching narratives...” enable circuses to use more complex stories and to reach more varied audiences, and have allowed circuses such as Cirque Du Soleil to become globally popular.

Garrison also discusses this benefit of using dance in circus shows, and she discusses the decision Terry Sendgraff, the founder of Aerial Dance, made to add dance elements into a traditional circus art, “Sendgraff felt that in order for her work to be taken seriously, she needed to stray away from circus aesthetics and utilize dance aesthetics”(110). Once Sendgraff started to align her company of performers with traditional dance aesthetics, Sendgraff’s company, “received more funding when it became identified as a dance company...(110).” The use of dance in a circus show enables the performance to be viewed as a more valid art form. The idea of dance as a “higher” or more legitimate art form than circus can be traced all the way back to the use of ballet in Louis XIV’s royal court. Dancing, of course has existed since before history officially started recording it, but the study of ballet was greatly developed in the courts of Louis XIV. He was the was a monarch of the House of Bourbon, and reigned as King of France from 1643 until his death in 1715. Ballet was an integral part of court life under his rule, and he viewed good dancing as synonymous with good character. To be a good dancer was to be closer to God, and Louis XIV viewed someone’s grace as a dancer as a representation of their class status (Homans). This was an important time in the development of dance. At the same time that

ballet was influencing how the public viewed dancers, acrobatics was considered to be done only by the lowest social class, and it was assumed to be a less a purposeful activity than ballet. In Louis XIV's opinion, dance was an "art" while circus acrobatics was just a "craft" (Garrison 112). Extreme movements of the body were considered by Louis XIV to be vulgar and unmannered (Homans).

Although this specific view on dance verses circus was introduced in Louis' court in the 18th century, remnants of it still hold true. Garrison sums this idea up by saying, "This aesthetic hierarchical split between dance (art) and acrobatics (craft) created a "high" and "low" art division in Western performance and continues to inform the validity of performance arts in the US" (Garrison 112). This is showing some of the old fashioned ideas that are still held, but the continued attempts of directors and choreographers to use circus to enhance dancing leads me to believe that shows will continue to use circus skills to enhance the productions.

The use of a "high art" in circus shows immediately grants it some legitimacy which brings the performance into art critics' good graces (Garrison). In agreement with Smith and Garrison, Ernest Albrecht, author of *The Contemporary Circus*, discusses some characteristics of circus today, and explores how the incorporation of dance has affected the artistic qualities of circus, "...the integration of the related performing arts like dance and acting as a means of enhancing the work of its performing artists... [achieves] a greater degree of audience involvement...[raising] the circus to a level of artistic achievement equivalent to that of any of

the performing arts, and whose work is as provocative and as stimulating as any of their fellow artists”

Another circus which is employing dance to great esteem is the contemporary circus, Circa, from Brisbane, Australia. In an article written about the company in the *Poorhouse International* newsletter, the reviewer says, “[Circa] is pushing the boundaries of the circus art form and blurring the line between movement, dance, theatre and circus,” and credits the circus’ success to the company's ability to “...build bridges between different artistic disciplines such as dance.” This is showing that just by applying other disciplines into a cirque show brings in a larger audience, and makes the show a better commercial success.

To sum up the idea that dance helps circus to become more successful, Smithsonian writer, Holly Millea explains that “The future of the circus...is a combination of different genres—so there’s dance, acrobatics, trapeze, satire, critique, juggling, all of that in a different kind of intimate experience.” These articles all show that the blending of these two art forms makes circus a more commercially accepted artform, which is beneficial to the longevity and popularity of circus arts.

Combining these forms is not just good for circus, but is also good for dance. Debra Brown, Zachary Whittenburg and Joanna Haigood argue that choreographers and dancers can use circus training to unlock different forms of creativity that help dance to develop and grow in new and innovative ways. Brown, the choreographer of more than eight Cirque Du Soleil shows,

who has won the prestigious Bob Fosse Innovative Choreography Award, discusses how the addition of circus is inspiring to her as a choreographer, "There is certainly something to be learned by cross-referencing, by looking at other art forms and learning different ways to give expression to your passion to move and perform" (Berardi). Her work with Cirque du Soleil has enabled her to create movement that is not just restrained to a horizontal floor. The cast, and sets allowed to her, enables her to build movement in any direction imaginable. Similarly, Whittenburg writes in *Dance Magazine*, that the application of circus training can help choreographers and dancers find new ways to use the floor, "Break dancing, circus arts and gymnastics could also help you unlock gravity" (Whittenburg). They can use this training to problem solve, and to open up new forms of movement. Haigood discusses, in an interview for *Dance Magazine*, how using aerial unlocked a whole new level of choreography for her, "[Aerial inspired me] to start thinking about choreography in a new way—vertically, horizontally, diagonally, laterally" (Cunningham). The ability to actually let dancers fly, and employ the sky space above the stage, gives choreographers a new dimension to work in, and enables a new kind of performance. These benefits to circus while employing dance are all reasons that I think that circus and dance will continue to be used in the same shows.

It is worthwhile to investigate specifically why utilizing dance aesthetics in circus shows makes them more palatable to critics and audience members. The article "Why Circus Works," by Reginald Bolton, explains that dance helps to give circus more complexities of storytelling.

The article is an investigation of the benefits of circus training to the development of young children, and why circuses are well suited for young audiences. But in his discussion of why circus works for children, he also touches on why circus sometimes *doesn't* work for the audiences seeking a more sophisticated entertainment experience. In a discussion of how circus is marketed and presented to children, he explains the narrative structure of a traditional circus shows, "...unlike theatre, dance, music and stories, the circus narrative often deals in binaries. Its simple properties of funny or serious, up or down, on or off, alive or dead"(Bolton 90), this simplified structure lends itself well to marketing to young audiences, but fails to really invite in a wider all-ages audience, and be relatable to the complexities of life that dance and theatre is better suited for.

Although these writers show how the theatre brings circus and dance together in a way that is beneficial to the success of the forms, it's important to note that not all dance is good for circus, and not all circus is good for dance. In an interview with the Chicago Tribune, Gypsy Snider, an influential member of the circus world, and the choreographer of *Pippin*, says that she is forced to be, "a kind of liaison between the world of the circus and the world of the legitimate theater, which often wants to steal from the circus without fully understanding the distinctiveness of that culture"(Jones). This compounds the problem of circus not being viewed as something as legitimate as dance. Without training and knowledge, other types of performance use it and represent it as something less complex, and ignore the rich history of circus. This can be helped

if dancers who are using the form take the time to be fully trained and educated, in order to honor each discipline they choose to perform.

This mixture of forms means that it is increasingly important to educate dancers to cope with this new demand from the industry. Joshua Dean is an aerial arts teacher in NYC and Duncan Stewart was in charge of casting for the circus revival of *Pippin*, so they are biased on the side of circus, but nonetheless they both agree on the importance of circus training for the dancer. Dean, quoted in Adam Cates' book, *The Business of Show*, says that, "circus tricks are now often used in theatre, concert work, commercial dance, cruise ships, industrials, theme parks, and more. Several Broadway shows require some sort of aerial work. Dancers should definitely have aerial training"(Cates 43). Likewise, Duncan Stewart, a casting director, points out in an interview for *Dance Magazine* that, "Broadway casting calls increasingly ask for more-specialized and even quirky skills," and that he has hired dancers simply because they had prior aerial training. His advice to young dancers is, "Keep up those childhood piano or guitar lessons or cross-train at your local circus school"(Thompson).

Adding circus elements into traditional dance shows has not always been viewed positively. The New York Times critic Ben Brantley saw the circus updates in the revived *Pippin* as desperate and distracting from the overall story, and said, "You can just sit back and let this exhaustingly energetic team work you over until you're either all tingly or numb." Similarly, the Times reviewer of *Paramour*, Charles Isherwood, said, "The resulting show, I'm

sorry to say, achieves the singular feat of being simultaneously frenetic and tedious.” The added “wow” factor from the circus elements didn’t enhance the show, but distracted from the impact of the story.

The founder of Aerial Dance Chicago, (a dance company dedicated to the performance and education of aerial dance,) also experienced this negative stigma associated with circus arts. A particular foundation would not fund ADC because of its appearance as “circusy,” and Smith explains why, saying that there is a “negative stigma with the circus arts in that they are still somehow lower class, or a lower concept of art”(Garrison 115). In the article, “The Acro Invasion,” Karen Van Ulzen argues that, “In fact, the word ‘acrobatic’ or ‘gymnastic’ when applied to choreography is often used as a pejorative,” and that acrobatic and contortionistic displays in dancing are “crass lapses in taste”(Van Ulzen). As discussed above, the addition of a more traditionally accepted “high art” form, such as dance, can help to raise the level of a circus show, but when circus is added into a dance show, the dance elements, and the circus elements can be weakened. Rather than the addition of a new level of physicality to raise the greatness of the dance show, some view the addition of circus elements as cheapening the dance. Is this distaste toward the circus elements in dance and theatre performances enough to stop the influx of the spectacular and extreme? Although there is some disagreement as to whether or not circus and dance *should* be used in the same shows, there is no question that it is happening, and that

circus and dance when used together are contributing to a more versatile circus, and a more liberated dance.

Methodology

To research this topic I have looked at articles exploring the current role of circus in dance, specifically focusing on aerial arts, because that seems to be the most frequently used by dancers. I have researched articles in dance magazines that discuss training, and what casting directors now look for in dancers. I've also investigated some problems with incorporating circus and dance into the same shows, both from the perspective of the critics, and from dance instructors. I have talked with dancers who have recently entered the industry, as well as directors working in the field, to gain insight on how dance and circus are currently being used, and how that affects both directors and performers.

For the purposes of this paper, I am defining "circus" as the use of a set of specialized skills usually seen in traditional and contemporary circus, such as aerial arts, juggling, clowning, and acrobatics not trained in dance classes. I am defining "dance" as the groundwork used in techniques such as: contemporary, modern, ballet, jazz, tap, and hip-hop

Results/Discussion

My reason for interest in this topic stems from my experiences as both a juggler, and a dancer. The first show I performed in at my college was *L'amore Medicina*, a Moliere comedy about a doomed romance in which the father refuses to allow his daughter to marry. The show

involves singing, dancing, and in one scene, juggling. Intent on distracting the evil father, one of the characters juggles for a few minutes to allow the couple to escape. Although I had not participated in the audition process for the show, the director heard that I had experience as a juggler, and I was immediately cast in the role. This allowed me to play a leading role, and gave me the opportunity to work as an actor, and dancer, and only actually employed my circus skills in one scene. While this occurred in an independent community, I spoke with other dancers who have experienced similar advantages in the professional world due to their circus abilities.

So what kinds of shows are specifically looking for not only dancers, but also for dancers with circus skills? The casting call on the Royal Caribbean website states, “Royal Caribbean Productions is seeking Dancer/Aerial Artists...Must have a strong dance background. Prior aerial experience is a plus.” Norwegian Cruise Lines casting call for dancers says, “All dancers must have outstanding performance quality...Gymnastics, aerial training, tumbling & partnering skills are a plus!”

Cruise ships are looking for dancers with aerial skills, and now the trend is also for pop artists to use aerial elements in their shows, which affects what they need from their backup dancers. One example is the artist Pink, who has made a big splash in the music world by using aerial arts as a central feature of her shows. Her performance of “Get the Party Started” starts with three backup dancers striking poses, and doing hip-hop behind the artist as she sings the first verse. During the chorus, aerial silks lower from the ceiling. Each of the dancers wraps themselves in a silk and is hoisted up to add a literal element when the artist sings, “I’m coming up.” They perform above the singer during the chorus and then slide back down to the stage to

dance for the next verse. Pink is not the only pop star to use aerial in shows, but she has made it a main element in her performances. Most of her songs now employ an element of aerial arts in one way or another. Critics say that Pink's use of aerial has been, "a game changer in the career of pop artists everywhere"(Chuidian). Pink has been named the number one pop artist by Billboard awards, and she performs to sold out crowds all over the country (Letkemann). Guardian Liberty Voice reporter Victoria Chuidian writes, "her dedication to innovation is telling of the relevance this woman has in pop culture as a performer and an icon." Pop art is either trend following, or trend setting, but either way Pink's performances show an increasing need for dancers with aerial skills.

These are just a few examples of the requests for circus skills in dancers. I was recently at an audition for *Oklahoma* at Ogunquit Theater, and during the audition they asked each of us if we had any special skills, specifically acrobatic and aerial related. Ogunquit isn't alone: other regional theaters have started adding circus arts, aerial, juggling, stilt walking, and clowning into their shows. Arkansas Repertory has done several very successful shows which utilize circus arts to enhance their productions. I spoke with director Donna Drake, (*Godspell* and *The Wizard of Oz*,) at Arkansas Repertory, about her experiences working on shows of this caliber which use circus arts. In *The Wizard of Oz* she chose to completely reimagine the story, as Dorothy's nightmare. She heavily incorporated circus elements to add a sense of magic to the production. For *Godspell* she chose to set the whole show in an old traditional circus, and had everything from jugglers and tightrope walkers, to a bearded lady, a puppeteer, and an impressive Cyr wheel act. I asked her what it was about circus that draws her in, and made her decide to use it in musicals that she is directing, and she replied, "I want my musicals to be original, outside the

box, I always want to put a spin on shows I am working on. I want to get my hands dirty and try something new”(Drake). While trying new things, Drake is careful to always partner with an expert in the field, to make sure her productions are authentic and respectful of the form. Some problems that critics have had with circus, when it is used in musicals, is that it is a distraction from the story. I asked her about this viewpoint, and if she ever struggles with that as a director. She said, “it does add a challenge, and I have to do my homework. But the story and the play always come first. It’s a fun challenge to see what other layer I can put on to add to the story. I’m not afraid to challenge or provoke an audience” (Drake). In order to help her to always serve the story first, the most important element she looks for while auditioning people for the show is whether or not they can act. She hired a few performers who did not have previous circus ability, but were phenomenal actors and singers. She then took 6-8 months before rehearsals began to train them in circus arts, and then staged the show based on what skill each performer had acquired, but featured those people who had the most advanced circus training. I asked her if she thinks that circus elements will continue to be used in more diverse shows, or is a trend that will die out soon. Her reply, “I hope not. Yes currently it is a trend, but I hope it doesn’t die out. I want to educate people to see circus as an art form” (Drake).

This idea is compounded by the articles explored above, about the use of dance to legitimize circus to the theater world. Drake is not trying to take circus arts, and make them feel more like dance. She is giving them a valid place in her storytelling to support an already respected narrative, and letting them exist as the elements that they are. She does require that all people in her shows are capable of performing both circus and dance very well, and also spends time training her specialized circus performers how to dance. She said that this isn’t a struggle

for her because, “the thing circus performers and dance already have in common is an incredible



work ethic and understanding of their body. I know I can get them in a room and teach them to do anything.”

Arkansas Repertory: *Godspell*

In addition to regional theaters, Broadway is also using circus arts in performances. *Pippin* was a 2013 revival of a Fosse musical, and to bring something new and fresh to the revival, the director wanted to emphasize the theme in the show, which she sums up as, “How far are we willing to go to be extraordinary in our lives?” (Moore). And to her, that question is “at the heart of every acrobat and circus performer”(Moore), so the choice to employ circus arts into the show was obvious to her. The creative team chose to feature circus artists, but also cast dancers who had some experience in aerial arts, or juggling. The director specifically looked for

dancers who already had experience in circus arts, so that she wouldn't have to train all of the dancers from the ground up.

In the show, *Paramour*, a Broadway collaboration with Cirque Du Soleil, the creative team took the feel of old Hollywood, and mixed it with an existing Cirque du Soleil show, *Iris*. I talked with Spencer Clark, a Pace commercial dance alumnus from Pace about his experiences as an ensemble member in the production. Clark pointed out that working with circus performers meant that the dancers had to be very flexible with their timing. They would take their cues off of the circus tricks, and once the trick was completed they would move on to the next section, rather than having a specific timing that was consistent night after night. They also had to have a few different versions of the show memorized. because if there was an injury among the circus cast, a different act would go on in their place, and the dancers would have to relearn some blocking in order to keep up with the changes that were made. He described this element of the show as, "more like a sport," because it lacked the formulaic consistency of dance. It was more about reacting to what was happening, and making adjustments in the moment. The dance ensemble was frequently employed as spotters for the circus cast. Their choreography took them closer and closer to the circus acts as the big trick was about to occur, so that they could be there to assist if something went wrong. Clark said that, although they were there to keep the circus artist safe, the dance ensemble had almost no knowledge about the inner workings of the trick, and so were often unsure how to really see if something was starting to go wrong. Although *Paramour* utilized both dance and circus skills in one show, Clark said that there was minimal crossover in performance. "The dancers are there to throw focus to the circus acts happening," he said, and that the show felt very much like two different pieces of a puzzle that were fit together,

more than one cohesive show. In order to smooth over this line between the dance ensemble and the circus ensemble, the circus performers had to learn one group dance number, and some of the dancers, including Clark had to learn circus tricks. He described his challenge of performing a brand new skill on a Broadway stage, and how much the circus performers struggled with learning the choreography in the dance number. He expressed that a greater crossover in training would have helped both casts work together more cohesively, both to learn their specific role more effectively, as well as to have a better understanding of the show as a whole.

The line between the circus elements of the show, and the dance elements of the show also were felt backstage. Clark described that the dancers didn't associate much with the circus performers, and vice versa. Each side of the cast had something very specific to bring to the show, and they kept those elements mostly separate, on stage and off. The show did not achieve large acclaim from critics. The use of circus arts was criticized for distracting from the story. Clark's thoughts suggest that if there was a greater crossover in how the show's construction, and if the ensemble cast was not so divided, the show could have felt more cohesive.

Through researching how circus and dance are different, and what different elements they bring to a performance, a crossover between both art forms is apparent. Some of the tricks used by circus performers that critics view as "cheapening" the storytelling, are mimicked very closely by some classic ballet partnering shapes. Garrison also mentions this phenomena, "...ballet choreographers can appropriate acrobatic and circus elements and have them be considered high art" (Garrison). In the images below, you can see that the shapes are almost completely the same. The quality of how each is done does differ, but the physical skill is the same.



Image 1: English National Ballet



Image 2: Missy Malone & Friends

The first image has the feeling of weightlessness, In the piece, *Vue de l'autre*, the two dancers intertwine and float around the stage as one being. The audience is voyeur in the experience, meaning the dancers never look to the audience and invite them into the experience. The costumes are ethereal, and unlike any streetwear. This is contrasted by image 2, the costumes are more pedestrian, and the lift is not a transitional to show the unity of two people, it is a display of the man's strength and both performers are looking to the audience for applause which breaks the fourth wall and invites the audience in to the moment. Physicality these two images are essentially the same, but the intention is very different. Image 1 is a continuation for

the story, and is not necessarily intended to “wow” more than any other part of the dance, whereas image 2 is a break from the story, and a moment to stop and generate applause during the show.



Image 3: *Giselle* San Francisco Ballet

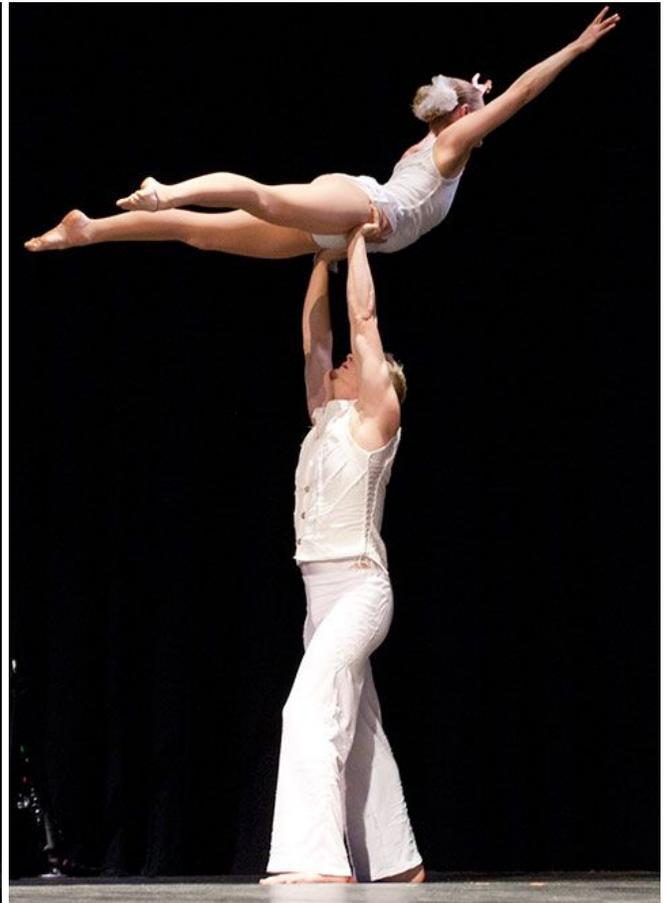


Image 4: Boston Circus Guild

The differences in the above two images are more subtle. In image 3 the pose is a stark moment in a duet between Giselle and Prince Albrecht; Giselle rescues him from the river spirits, and they dance a final goodbye before Giselle must leave. The pose is similar to image 1 above,

and is a moment of weightlessness to show a relationship between two people. Image 4 is part of an athletic partner duet in which the woman is thrown high over her partner's head. The act is not a story, but an impressive display of physical prowess intended to wow and shock the audience.

Both sets of photos illustrate that dance often has a greater intention of storytelling, whereas circus is often used as a display of physical prowess intended to elicit applause from the audience. I think that bringing the circus skills to a dance piece can enhance and benefit the story by giving a greater vocabulary of movement, as well as the addition of dance transitions to a circus piece can grant it a more visually appealing structure.

To discuss a performance which uses these dance transitions and circus feats, I spoke with a commercial dance alumni from Pace, Scotty Jacobson, who was the aerial captain of a show on Holland America cruise lines which utilized circus elements into each dance number to be a finale climactic moment. On the ship, all dancers are required to learn aerial arts on many different apparatus. They have a month and a half to master lyra, trapeze and spanish web in order to perform those acts on the ships. Jacobson had two semesters of aerial training at Pace before he started this job, giving him an advantageous foundation before starting rehearsals for the show. The instructors didn't use terminology while teaching, which made communication and corrections for the piece difficult. Although the dancers were eventually able to do the choreography, they didn't have the understanding to communicate about the steps, "the people

training the dancers for aerial were amazing aerialists, but probably not qualified to teach aerial”(Jacobson). This supports Gypsy Snider’s argument, that circus is being used without the knowledge and training needed to respect the form. Because of this lack of terminology and proper training, the aerial teachers on the cruise ship relied on Jacobson heavily to reformat numbers so that they were easier on the dancers’ bodies, and to check the safety of the dancers because he had a knowledge of both aerial and dance.

Jacobson was originally hired on the ship as a dancer, but because he had prior training in aerial, he was promoted to the role of Aerial Captain. His responsibilities included rehearsing and supervising the aerial portions of the show when the director was not present. Having this title gave him a pay raise, and a greater status among the cast. (In general, when dancers are asked to do aerial in a show they are given a pay raise in the form of “Hazard Pay,” which is compensation a performer is given when they are put in any sort of danger while performing.)

Jacobson said that he sees many casting calls for dancers that inquire about circus and aerial abilities, and that in order to stay relevant, and to have an edge on other dancers, circus training - especially in aerial work - is vital. “It’s almost ridiculous not to,” he adds.

Interestingly enough, it was never assumed, or even asked, in the casting process for Holland America if the dancers auditioning had circus abilities. The producers and directors just accepted that they would have to take the time and money to train the cast. But because Jacobson came

into the show already with the skills needed, he was allowed a more important role than the other performers on the boat.

Finally, what do directors say they want from their dancers? The co-owner of Stewart/Whitley, a casting agency responsible for shows such as *On The Town*, *Pippin*, and *Chicago*, says that he has hired a dancer simply because she had prior aerial training, and in an interview for *Dance Magazine* he points out that because Broadway is employing circus arts more frequently, dancers might now be asked to “...juggle, throw knives, breathe fire...” and he sees a “noticeable shift away from simply singing and dancing” (Thompson).

Conclusion

As shows start to incorporate more circus elements, and directors seek wow factors to make their shows stand out, it is more and more important for performers entering the industry to have a strong foundation in circus arts. Attending an open call for dancers means standing in a line of two hundred other performers, so what can makes an artist stand out from the crowd? In such a saturated industry, it has been proven that having specialized skills helps dancers stay competitive in the ever changing dance industry. Even if circus arts are a trend, it is the job of a commercial dancer to be educated in current trends, and use them to benefit their career. In the 2000s, the style was to pare down the musical, and present it with the smallest cast and set possible (Kaye). But just few years later the extravagant is in style, and directors like Donna Drake are looking to be “original and outside the box,” which is leading many to explore the use of other skill sets besides just singing, dancing and acting. As experienced and influential

directors start to use circus arts in theaters, the class distinction can start to erode and circus arts can continue to enhance and be enhanced by theater and dance. As circus become more widely used in kinds of performance that have mostly been dominated by dance, dancers need to alter their training in order to meet the demands on the industry. This involves bringing more than dance technique into an audition, and being a versatile performer who can bring all kinds of talents into a room.

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