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Learning to dance while becoming a dancer: Identity construction as a performing art

Matthew A. Caudill
University of South Florida

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Learning to Dance While Becoming a Dancer:

Identity Construction as a Performing Art

Matthew A Caudill

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Sociology
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Major Professor: Maralee Mayberry, Ph.D.
Spencer Cahill, Ph.D.
Donileen Loseke, Ph.D.

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Learning to Dance while Becoming a Dancer

Matt Caudill

Abstract

In a university undergraduate dance department, students seem to be learning more than *pirouettes* and *pas de bourées*; students are learning how to construct their identities and present themselves as 'dancers'. As they progress through their undergraduate careers, the students are not only developing technical skills, but they are also learning the ins and outs of how dancers look, speak and behave. Based on three months of observation and in-depth interviews, it seems that developing into a dancer requires developing into an individual who shows unique commitment both to him/herself and to the art of dance itself. While many of the students enter the university focused on increasing their technical prowess measured in terms of turning ability, elevation in leaps, and flexibility, the older students in the program seem to be focused more on finding their own – *individualized* – standards of excellence, which frequently have little to do with technical 'tricks'. Over the course of their undergraduate careers, the students

also devote less and less of their class time to performing for each other and more to introspection and self-exploration. All of this is also reflected in their ways of dress and classroom interaction, as well as their relationships with the faculty.

<u>Introduction</u>

"Oh, you're a *dancer...*" I know that I am not alone when I say I have heard that sentence more times than I can count. My response is rarely negative, but it has always made me feel that I have become something of a side-show oddity to be examined with a combination of curiosity and bewilderment. Just why is it that dancers seem to be viewed so differently from people such as accountants or healthcare workers? Is it because we have chosen to dedicate our energy to a pursuit that offers so little in the way of financial reward? Does it come from an unspoken sense of titillation aroused within a culture domi-nated by conservative religious traditions regarding people who spend so much time expressing themselves physically (numerous religious orders throughout history have placed prohibitions on dancing out of fear that it might provoke too much physical passion (Lee 1983))? Do we talk or behave differently than the 'average' Joe's and Jane's of the world around us? Who knows?

Another fascinating question to examine, however, is the possi-ble role dancers themselves might play in causing people to think of them in the ways they do. Do dancers either knowingly or unknowingly

behave in ways that perpetuate the image that others hold of them? Do they do this with other dancers as well? How might these behaviors reinforce dancers' perceptions of themselves and each other? If so, how exactly do they accomplish this? These are the questions that I explored in this study. By closely observing and speaking with pre-professional dance students, I examined what ideas they had about how dancers think and behave, and how closely their own thoughts and behaviors corresponded with these beliefs. I also looked for clues about how their thoughts and behaviors evolved to become more like the dancers they saw themselves to be.

In effect, the process of professional socialization is the process of learning to assume and assert a particular identity. A law student, for example, must not only learn the intricacies of the legal system, but must take on the attributes and mannerisms that will allow the student to identify her/himself as a lawyer, and to present him/herself to others in a way that will cause them to recognize him/her as such.

According to West and Fenstermaker (1995), a particular identity is "an ongoing interactive accomplishment" (p. 9). In other words, an identity cannot simply be 'put on' and then taken for granted; those who claim a particular identity must continually display particular qualities which will maintain the validity of that claim. Particularly for those who claim a particularly unique identity, it is important to estab-

lish boundaries that separate them from 'everyone else,' collectively form a sense of group consciousness that they are indeed unique, and then continually negotiate and reaffirm those boundaries to maintain their unique status (Taylor and Whittier 1992)

The boundaries described here are not concrete, physical ones, but symbolic boundaries which demarcate a specific social space reserved for those who possess and can affirm the identity in question. As stated by Bourdieu: "to exist within a social space, to occupy a point or to be and individual within a social space, is to differ" (1998, p. 9). Therefore, those who seek to claim a particular occupational identity must demonstrate that they are different from those who cannot claim the same identity.

Dancing is similar to other occupations in a number of ways: there are skills and knowledge to acquire; there are shared understandings about what is and is not appropriate when doing your work; and there are professional associates with which you must interact on a regular basis. The social science literature is full of studies about identity construction and socialization in fields from medicine (Smith and Kleinman, 1989) to mortuary science (Cahill, 1999), but unfortunately there is a dearth of resources on such topics among artistic occupations. With this study, I hope to begin the process of filling that gap.

There are a number of aspects of artistic identities addressed in this particular study. First, there is the idea that dancers possess high levels of what Bourdieu would call *cultural capital*, or "a socially privileged set of preferences, tastes, durable cognitive structures and schemes of action" (Bourdieu 1998, p.25). Dancers, and artists in general, seem to maintain their cultural capital in spite of their rather bleak financial prospects as potential performing artists. Indeed, the median income in 2002 for the approximately 37,000 professional dancers in the United States was $21,100 (BLS 2004). To provide a reference for comparison, the median income of primary and secondary school teachers – another group of workers that is often regarded as underpaid – was $44,367 for the same year. Add to that the fact that the number of professional dancers looking for work is expected to greatly exceed the number of paid positions available over the next 10 years, and the financial outlook for professional dancers does seem uncertain at best. (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004)

The combination of high levels of cultural capital and low levels of financial reward might lead to a sense among dancers that what they lack in economic advantages they make up for in artistic sophistication and personal dedication, and while lamenting their financial hardships, they can assert the cultural value of the work they have chosen. Max Weber might even refer to dancers – and artists in gen-

eral, for that matter – as a *negatively privileged stratum* (1946). According to Weber, those who endure hardships or might be regarded negatively by more elite members of society often believe that they will be compensated in other ways. For example, those in oppressed religious groups might feel that they will be compensated for their sacrifices on earth with paradise in the afterlife. For dancers, compensation might come in the form of emotional satisfaction or artistic recognition, or some other less concrete benefits. Similar sentiments regarding the value of intangible rewards over financial rewards have been expressed among child care workers (Murray, 2000), who stated that the affection and interaction they receive from the children they supervise was compensation for their relatively low wages.

Second, there is the romantic notion of the artist as 'genius':

> Genius is seen as an internal gift of nature, a special and specially distributed talent or election that occurs naturally in some but that cannot be explained. Interwoven with the development of the modern conception of genius and creativity is the development of the modern system of the fine arts. (Eldridge, 2003)

This idea might find several expressions within a group of dancers. First of all, it could possibly be used to explain away differences in ability among various students in ways that might not be found in other, more 'practical' occupations. Or, perhaps, dancers may choose not to invest in this idea in order to maintain a belief that they can be as good as anyone with the proper dedication and practice.

This is not to imply that the notion of genius is reserved solely for those of artistic talent, as genius is a term found in numerous disciplines and occupations. However, artistic genius does seem to occupy a unique place in discussions about talent. Howard Becker (1982) discusses perception of artistic genius as a particularly elusive quality that very few possess, and those who do not possess it are unable to acquire it. This stands in contrast to fields such as law (Granfield 1992) and medicine (Haas and Shaffir 1987) where the acquisition of skills and knowledge, while surely aided by talent, is a product of diligent study and practice, rather than a rare, divine 'gift'.

More than once in my own life I have been informed of the sense of obligation I should feel to my artistic 'gifts'. Many of my teachers, both in and out of the art world, have informed me that those who possess artistic talent are somehow destined to a life in the art world. I can remember my twelfth grade calculus teacher saying to my mother, "Sure, he's good in math, but he obviously is meant to be an artist." With that statement, she seemed not only to be implying that my artistic abilities trumped any other aptitudes I might have, but also that my artistic ability was also completely different from my math ability – and the two could certainly not be in any way related. In fact, while most of the other 'smart kids' in my school were meeting with counselors and advisors about their myriad career and educational options,

my career path was already taken for granted without consultation or advice.

Another notion that goes almost hand-in-hand with the idea of artist-as-genius is artist-as-eccentric. According to Howard Becker:

> At an extreme, the romantic myth of the artist suggests that people with (artistic) gifts cannot be subjected to the constraints imposed on other members of society; we must allow them to violate rules of decorum, propriety, and common sense...in return society receives work of unique character and invaluable quality (1982)

Those invested in this particular idea might believe that they have a sort of license for all sorts of eccentric behavior. One can easily imagine how tempting this might be. Also, it would be interesting to see how many people take on more unusual or eccentric qualities to emphasize their claim to an artistic identity. If many people believe that dancers (particularly great dancers) are prone to eccentricity, then how could someone who adheres to mainstream social rules of behavior and appearance be a dancer at all – let alone a great one?

The popular opinions about the inborn 'genius' and 'eccentricity' of artists, though, might lead one to question how someone might *achieve* a dancer identity. This can become problematic, for if the dancer places too much emphasis on their innate, or 'natural' ability, how can those who lack it ever hope to succeed? I suspect that dancers will have different opinions regarding the degree of 'nature' that comes into play in their descriptions of themselves, but that all will

find some way to include agency in the discussion. This will likely contrast the responses of seminarians (Kleinman 1984) and student social workers (Loseke and Cahill 1986), who seemed obligated to frame their chosen fields as reflections of their 'natural' dispositions.

Another potential avenue for discovery is how opinions about what constitutes 'good' dance are expressed within such a setting. According to Becker:

> Wherever an art world exists, it defines the boundaries of acceptable art, recognizing those who produce the work it can assimilate as artists entitled to full membership, and denying membership and its benefits to those whose work it cannot assimilate. (1982)

Therefore, those who view good dance the same way as the art world in which they work enjoy additional cultural capital within the group, which entitles them to the benefits of membership (including a role in deciding what can be considered 'good' dance). One can see how it would behoove anyone seeking membership in the dance world to align their own opinions and qualitative assessments with those already established in the dance world. Again, looking at how dancers examine each others' work could provide some fruitful observations in this regard.

Those who go to medical school not only need to learn the techniques of medicine, they must learn to be doctors (Smith and Kleinman, 1989). Mortuary science students must learn not only the techni-

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cal skills of the trade, but the emotional ones as well (Cahill, 1999) If this is the case, then those who study dance must also learn to be dancers - in the sense that they must exhibit the types of traits and behaviors that help them to identify themselves and to be identified by others as such.

Methods

The site of this study was a dance department in a large public university in a medium-sized southern city. The department in question was well suited for this study for several different reasons. First, this department has a strong undergraduate dance program that has been nationally recognized on more than one occasion. Therefore, most of the dance majors intended to pursue dance as a career, which made the 'dancer' identity particularly salient for them.

In conducting my research, an ethnographic approach seemed most appropriate for gaining insight about the ways in which the dancers interacted. I observed dance classes and rehearsals four days a week for an entire semester, and spent time observing and speaking with dance students during meal breaks and other 'spare time' they might have had. During all of these times I recorded my impressions and observations in the form of notes which I later compiled and examined, noting common themes and particularly illustrative examples.

I also conducted in-depth interviews with eight of the students (which amounts to about ten percent of the enrollment of the department[1]), which I later transcribed in full. The students I interviewed

comprised were mostly juniors and seniors, although I did get to speak with one sophomore. This was not incredibly surprising, as dance students are not considered fully matriculated dance majors until they reach a particular technique level, which generally occurs during or just before the junior year. As a result, although there were a number of first and second year students, they were not yet officially considered dance 'majors.' I must admit that I was disappointed that none of the male students agreed to be interviewed, as there were only four male students in the department during the semester I conducted my research, and none were available. I was able to observe them during classes and rehearsals, however, and included notes on their behavior in all of the observations I made of them. The absence of their voices is nonetheless regrettable.

An additional source of data for this study arises from the setting and circumstances of the study itself. I actually received my undergraduate degree from the very department that I studied, and while that was several years prior to my research, I was still familiar with the faculty and the general departmental structure. Therefore, I was in a unique position to make some autoethnographic contributions to this research. As a veteran of the program, I was able to compare the dancers' impressions and experiences with my own and to question the students more thoroughly during interviews about what they were

saying. My own memories of the undergraduate dance experience also helped me to understand those things that seemed to be the most important to the dance students, even if they might seem inconsequential to an outside observer.

In sum, the data I collected illustrated the processes I sought to examine quite thoroughly, and brought several new facets of the dancers' experiences to my attention that I had not considered previously. The sources of this data were sufficiently varied and the findings themselves consistent enough from source to source to tell quite clearly the story I was hoping to tell: how a student becomes a dancer.

Learning to Dance

The Setting

The dance department at University offers two degree programs, a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree focused on performance and choreography (modeled after traditional conservatory programs), and a Bachelor of Arts degree that allows a student to take courses in one or more other departments in preparation for work in other fields related to dance. For example, those students who express an interest in careers in arts administration can take courses in business administration or in other art areas to better prepare themselves for such positions in the future. The department also offers a dance minor, though the students who choose this option are often regarded less seriously by the faculty and other students. In general, however, there is little appreciable difference between the BFA students and the BA students, and many that I talked to had vacillated between the two tracks at for at least some of the time they were in the department.

The department holds all of its classes in a three-story building near the visual art, theater and music buildings. On the ground floor, there are two dance studios, a small room devoted mainly to electronic

equipment such as video and audio recording devices, and the men's and women's locker rooms. The second floor of the dance building houses the faculty offices and a conference room where most of the department's academic courses are held (e.g. Dance History, Senior Seminar). On the third floor there is another dance studio and a large storage closet where much of the department's costume supplies are kept. The building is attached at one end to the college's two theaters, a moderately-sized "black-box" theater, and a larger, traditional proscenium theater. The locker rooms on the first floor of the dance building also serve as the dressing rooms for performances held in the black-box space, while the proscenium theater has its own dressing rooms in the basement.

Dance majors spend most of their time at school in the three studios, as this is where technique and choreography classes, as well as rehearsals are held. I can recall many days as a student where I was inside a studio from 8 AM until 9 PM, leaving only for bathroom breaks and to pick up a meal. Even at meal breaks, for the sake of convenience, I ended up eating either in the hall or in one of the studios while rehearsal was in progress. There was, of course, a departmental rule that prohibited eating in the studios (ants were an ongoing menace in the building), but this rule was blatantly ignored by all of the students and most of the faculty. The one or two faculty members

who did try to shoo dancers into the hallway to eat were only occasionally successful, and the dancers generally just ate a little more secretively for a day or two.

The Schedule

Dance majors must maintain an intense schedule of classes and rehearsals. The general logic behind the amount of time that dancers spend in the studios is that dance is a discipline that is learned through practice. To become a dancer, one cannot simply think about dancing, write papers about it, or research it; a dancer has to *dance.* Dance is not just a mental exercise, but a physical one as well. In order to execute the steps that are called for in a particular piece of choreography, dancers must develop the appropriate muscles – a dancer cannot learn how to do a pirouette by reading about it, it must be practiced. A lot.

In addition, the demands of dance technique are very intricate and specific. This means that dancers must spend their time practicing with someone else to observe them and point out what they are doing correctly and incorrectly. Dancers often hear the phrase, "this feels different than it looks," meaning that simply trying to imitate a movement will not necessarily produce the appropriate muscular action. It is therefore important for dancers to have someone observing them to correct any mistakes in body alignment or muscle effort, in order that

dancers avoid developing 'bad' habits, which at best are aesthetically unappealing, and at worst dangerous. For example, if a dancer is learning a movement entailing falling to the floor, failure to release the back and neck muscles properly can make the fall look stiff and awkward – something difficult to see yourself if you are in the process of falling. Additionally, failing to release those muscles at the right time can cause the fall to go awry and lead to various injuries, which could result in time spent *not* dancing, perhaps the most dire consequence of all.

For dance majors on either degree track, technique class is the foundation of their training. Technique classes run for two hours each (they are scheduled for 1 hour 50 minutes, but the teachers almost always run over), and students generally take two of these classes a day. Dance majors enroll in technique class during every semester they attend the university, and their performance in these classes is one of the most important aspects of their standing in the program; dancers are only promoted to the next level with the approval of the faculty. The rest of a dancer's day is filled with other classes such as choreography and dance history, which are also held in the dance building, and rehearsals for performances, which generally last until 8 or 9 PM.

This leaves dance majors with very little time to spend outside of the department. While university students certainly have general education requirements to fulfill, rarely is a dance student able to take more than one non-dance course per semester, and many opt to take at least some of these courses during the summer, when their dance schedules are much less busy. Therefore, dancers tend to spend the majority of their time with other dancers. Whereas someone majoring in one of the more 'traditional' academic disciplines will take classes with a variety of other students from different majors in buildings which might house several different departments, and often have their evenings and weekends more or less under their own control, dancers have the majority of their waking hours scheduled for them, and those hours are almost exclusively spent in the dance building with other dance majors.

Such a large amount of time spent in a building occupied almost exclusively by dancers can certainly be viewed as a way to establish a collective identity. Dancers can certainly use their relative isolation as a way of being "different" from other dancers, which, as stated by Bourdieu (1998) above, is one of the fundamental requirements to claim a particular identity. Also, the walls of the building set up both a physical and symbolic boundary, which further establishes a sense of collective identity, as described by Taylor and Whittier (1992). The

time spent in the studio, then, becomes not only necessary for learn-

ing to dance, but also for establishing oneself as a 'dancer'.

This intense schedule and the stresses that go with it are com-

mon targets of complaint among nearly all dancers, and the dancers at

University were no exception. Bianca[2], a senior, expresses how such a

schedule can cause dancers to develop a sense of isolation from other

people:

> B - ... (laughs) Life? I really don't have a life outside of dance.
> Especially now, I think it's gotten worse. There are so many
> things going on, and you want to focus on your art and you
> want to focus and that's what most important here right now,
> and then after that is work because I have to live and support
> myself. So social life is really kind of gone, especially this year,
> I'm really feeling it. I go to school all day, I go to rehearsals or
> I go to work, I get home at midnight and I read. It's just this
> continuous pattern...

Bianca definitely feels that the demands of her major differ from

those of other lines of endeavor. She certainly believes that other

students in other areas have more free time than she does, and

that her schedule can often be difficult to understand for those

whose calendars are not as full.

Felicia recalls how this sort of schedule affected her before

she even arrived at University, and how her schedule limits the

type and number of friendships she is able to maintain:

> F – I remember growing up being so jealous of all my friends
> who were into sports and this and that because they would be,
> like, my core group of girlfriends and they would all be on the
> track team; and it was like I ran track up until like 6th grade,

and then 7th grade I started and had to quit, because it was too much. And I had to make a choice and I chose dance. Um, I was happy with that, but there were those times when I felt left out, you know? So I think it goes in between feeling left out and enjoying what I chose, you know? I think, my social life, I think that's just a part of college, but maybe more so being into dance because it's so much more time involved. Socially outside of here like, other than the people I go to church with, for church things, I really – I don't meet too many people that often. You know? (laughs)

M – Do you find yourself hanging out with dancers all the time?

F – Yeah, I mean, which is OK. (laughs) Sometimes I get sick of the topic; it's what you all have in common.

Felicia also alludes to some of the conflict that dancers often feel when thinking about their busy schedules. There is frustration with the lack of free time and friends, but she also acknowledges that this is the endeavor she chose, and accepts the schedule as part of what it is to be a dancer.

Bianca and Felicia both expressed their feelings about one of the most fundamental aspects of a dance major's life: the sense of total immersion in their chosen field and isolation from others outside that field. Dance majors at the university spend the vast majority of their waking hours in a building dedicated to dance with other people dedicated to dance. This sort of immersion, both perceived and experienced, places dancers in the position where their primary social contacts are with others who share their professional aspirations.

This situation suggests several latent functions that are potentially important to the construction of identity. First, so much contact with like-minded others can lead to a sense of their special status as dancers, much like the medical students studied by Smith and Kleinman (1989). Additionally, dancers also serve as the primary audience to test and compare developing identities, resulting in a situation where many of the traits deemed most important *to* dancers are likely to be influenced *by* dancers, rather than non-dancers, who may hold very different impressions of how dancers should think and behave. Echoes of this idea can be found in dancers' common refrain (repeated by Bianca above) that non-dancers just "don't understand" at all. Other dancers, of course, do understand. As a result, such a schedule continues to be considered quite natural for dancers, and those in the department accept it without significant resistance. Moreover, the schedule itself establishes and maintains boundaries between dancers and non-dancers, as well as reinforces the idea that dancers are different from non-dancers. The ongoing nature of this schedule helps to ensure that the dancers (and others) are continually reminded of these differences, and thus becomes a way of maintaining this sense of difference (West and Fenstermaker 1995)

The heavy schedule and lack of time to spend with others outside of dance is a requirement with which all dancers must learn to

cope. In this sense, it becomes something of a shared ordeal (Lortie 1968) which dancers can use to affirm their identities and provide evidence of their dedication to their art. That is, if an exhausting schedule of classes and rehearsal is a requirement for being a serious dancer, then the evidence of such a schedule can help to assert that a particular dancer is indeed serious. Also, lack of such a schedule can raise questions about a dancer's dedication and/or ability.

The intensity of a dancer's schedule even seems to be built directly into the dance curriculum. For example, the lowest levels of technique class meet only twice a week, while the highest meet every day. Ergo, as a dancer's technique improves, s/he is expected to dedicate more time to developing that technique. There are other reasons for this increasing intensity, of course. For example, in the lower levels more recovery time might be needed between workouts, so that underdeveloped muscles might have a chance to grow more properly, as opposed to the higher levels, where correct musculature is taken for granted and the emphasis is more on stylistic sophistication. Whatever the reasons, dance majors experience a definite increase in studio time as they progress through the program.

Another way schedule demands increase for developing dancers is that many of the younger students spend less time in rehearsals. Since department concerts only feature a limited number of students,

generally the more advanced students are selected to perform. As a result, the upper-level students spend a great deal more time in rehearsals than the lower-level students do. Combine this with an increasingly heavy class schedule, and the effect is evident: the farther along dancers move into the program, the more time they are expected to devote to their art. Again, the sense of difference is constantly established and reinforced, and even intensified over the course of the degree program.

For dancers, though, such a schedule is more often than not accepted as a part of life, and such a shared ordeal can even become a defining characteristic of a dancer's identity. I remember that I often saw this dense schedule as a sign of my dedication to my art. I felt quite certain that I was not just another 'average' student, and many others would have been completely overwhelmed by the amount of time and exertion that a dancer's life takes. Indeed, several of my friends at the time expressed that they could not understand how I could spend so much of my time and energy in the pursuit of one endeavor. I must also confess that I probably devoted more time than I really needed describing the rigors of my profession, primarily in pursuit of the amazement that others expressed at my passion and devotion to dancing. While this sort of cultural capital probably offered little in the way of tangible exchange value, it certainly brought me a great

deal of pride and sense of commitment to my work. By examining the bemused expressions of my acquaintances as I described my schedule, I was assured that I was definitely not an 'average Joe', and that I possessed something truly uncommon in my passion and dedication to dance. I found that it was not even necessary to prove to people that I was even a 'good' or successful dancer; they were convinced that I must be by the level of devotion I demonstrated.

Self-Reflection

Probably the most apparent thing that non-dancers might notice about the studios was the wall of mirrors. To dancers, these mirrors are completely unremarkable, as they are considered necessary in a traditional dance studio for students to examine their movements and placement. While there are certainly teachers on hand to guide the students in how their muscles and joints are supposed to be working, mirrors enable a dancer to see what their teachers are explaining on their own bodies.

The relationship between dancers and mirrors takes on a love/hate quality in most studio environments, and mirrors have been blamed by dancers for problems with body image and by teachers for poor performance intensity ("Get out of the mirror!" is a common re-frain among dance teachers who are trying to coax students to stop

examining their bodies and pay more attention to the expressive intent of a movement phrase). While the relationship between dancer and mirror is not a focus of this paper, it still seems important to mention as it is such a ubiquitous part of a dance student's life, and certainly reinforces the importance of appearances within the dance world. Certainly visual factors are important aspects of the "presentation of self" (Goffman 1959) among the dance students at the University.

There were students I interviewed who defined the mirror as a central figure in their dance experience, however. Annie used her relationship with the mirror as a sort of metaphor for her development as a dancer:

> A - I mean, dancers are looking at themselves in the mirror all the time, so I come in I'm very self-conscious and like unsure of everything and so, the first two years I didn't have a horrible time but I kind of had a hard time figuring out what the heck I was doing and had a lot of doubts about how good I was or if I was ever going to do anything with myself

Elizabeth also brought up the mirror when I asked her about whether she felt dance was a more stressful major than others:

> E - I definitely think so, because the whole aspect of us sitting there staring in the mirror, saying "am I skinny enough, am I good enough, am I sitting up straight enough, is my appearance OK?" Having to satisfy the status quo of what we're supposed to look like as dancers. And then, our appearances really do matter. In a desk job they just see your writing or your work on paper or in a computer. They don't really see who you are in your writing or your work and things. I think that's really emotionally stressful, because you really have to maintain - you have to base your life around some of those aspects...

In Elizabeth's quote as well, it is interesting to note that who she 'is' is evident from her reflection in the mirror. Whereas someone working a desk job can presumably hide their "true" selves behind their work, Elizabeth feels that dancers cannot. This is a "looking-glass self" (Cooley 1983) in its most literal form. In this case, the dancer is not just taking on the perspective of another; s/he is actually evaluating his/her own reflection from a critical perspective. While the idea is to focus on the correct placement and usage of muscles and bones, there are much more general and personal evaluations going on as well. From these examples it seems that, for many dancers, the mirror is more than just a technical aid. It is a tool for self-reflection in a more personal sense, as well as self-scrutiny.

The daily interaction with the mirror becomes another shared ordeal for many of the dancers in the department. Many of the dancers in the department have their 'favorite' mirrors, insisting that in different studios the mirrors distort the reflection differently. More than one dancer has referred to the 'fun-house' mirrors in a particular studio. It is interesting to note, however, that each dancer seems to have a different assessment of exactly how their reflection is distorted. One dancer might say the mirrors in studio one make her look larger on the bottom than she really is, while another insists that they make his legs look overly skinny. These sorts of discrepancies seem to be unimpor-

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tant, as long as everyone agrees that the mirrors are not an accurate reflection of the dancers' actual appearances.

Technique and Talent

The primary technical disciplines dancers study are ballet and modern dance. Each of these areas is divided into five levels: Fundamentals is the most introductory level, and is usually populated with non-majors or those who the faculty feel need intensive re-training; levels I-IV progress in intensity from there, with only the most advanced dancers gaining admission into level IV. In fact, level IV modern had only 12 students the semester I observed them, and ballet IV had even fewer than that.

Placement in technique class is of paramount importance to dance majors. For example, a BFA student must reach level IV for at least one semester in their area of concentration (Ballet or Modern), and level III in the other area. In addition, for a student to officially be considered a dance major in the first place, they must reach level III in one of the technical disciplines. It is important to note that one does not move to the next level after achieving a passing grade in the previous level (as a student might move from Statistics I to Statistics II). Each level is repeatable, and students only 'move up' with the approval of the faculty. There are, of course, other courses required for

the degree, but technique class is the only one which determines a student's overall standing in the department. Most dance majors enter the program in levels I or II, and often take several semesters to advance to levels III and IV. Due to the selectiveness of the upper levels, very rarely does a student reach level IV in both Ballet and Modern (those who do so are generally regarded as 'stars' of the department).

Since placement into the various technical levels is so important in the official status of students in the department, it plays a prominent role in the students' evaluation of themselves. This can be particularly difficult for students first entering the department, as Elizabeth, a junior, illustrates:

> E – The ballet technique, everything was just completely different than what I was taught. I'd never taken modern before, so when I came here, it was like this huge new experience that I was taking and they were like, "You're not good enough for that."

> M – Did that feel weird to you to be evaluated like that?

> E – Yes.

> M – How did you react to it, internally?
> E – It really discouraged me the first year because I was put in Fundamentals. And then I was just talking to a lot of people in the studio, like older members, and they were like, "oh, I was in Fundamentals, don't worry. If you just work really hard you can, like, move up in levels and they'll take you more seriously," and so I just started working really hard and doing all these outside classes at different studios around the place and they eventually moved me up.

As Elizabeth's comments illustrate, there is a definite stigma associated with the Fundamentals level. The dance students all know that Fundamentals is the lowest level of technique, and it is the course in which those who are neither trained nor serious about dancing are typically enrolled. Also, "moving up" is a definite jump in status within the department, and it is generally the goal of all dance majors.

Placement in technique class can also serve as an affirmation of a student's ability (or potential). For students like Deborah (a senior), who had initially been majoring in another discipline, placement can affirm that a future in dance might be possible:

> D - So then when I came here, the faculty placed me in the level I in both modern and ballet. That said to me that, all right, it'll be — I can actually major in this.

Even though Deborah was initially placed in level I, she took that placement as an affirmation that she did have potential as a dancer, and used that affirmation as part of her decision to pursue a dance degree.

One thing that this sort of emphasis on technical placement seems to create is a rather troubled relationship with the idea of 'talent'. Most of the dancers I interviewed had a very difficult time trying to summarize what the word even meant. All of them, though, felt quite strongly that their ideas about talent had changed since they arrived at the university. The general theme among those I interviewed

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was that when they were younger, their ideas about talent tended to-

ward more athletic, skill-based assessments of ability. Elizabeth ex-

pressed her earlier ideas about talent in this way:

> E – For a very long time, I thought talent was about technique, and how well you lifted your leg and how well you did pirou-ettes, and just basic common technique moves

Holly expressed her early impressions very similarly:

> H - ...before I got here, probably talent to me was more tech-nique-based, and who could do so many turns, or who could jump higher or jump longer...

Holly and Elizabeth were certainly not alone in their initial assessments

that talent was very much a set of physical capabilities. In fact, every

student that I interviewed expressed the same ideas.

Ideas about talent begin to take a different form, however, once

the students spend some time in the university program. In general,

talent becomes a much more complex concept, which may or may not

include physical prowess. Holly, for example, continued her description

of talent in this way:

> H - ... Being here and performing more, the performance aspect of someone's talent has come to me. Um, and the expressive-ness as well as the technique, and just their abilities

Felicia attributes her changing attitude about talent at least partially to

her exposure to modern dance:

> M – Have your ideas about talent changed, since you were younger and in the studio scene?

F – Yes. Because I was never exposed to modern dance, and like, you always think you have to have five pirouettes, you have to have this, you have to have that, and just like realizing that dance and just like the arts are so much broader. And just because it's not… like some grand ballet trick, you know?

Whatever the reason, talent definitely takes on a different meaning at the university. None of the students denied in their interviews that they were still working to expand their physical capabilities, but they also did not think that such abilities were the only measure of their worth as dancers. Especially for those who felt that their physical abilities were not exceptional, other aspects of dancing became more prominent. Elizabeth, perhaps as a result of her initial placement in the Fundamentals courses, started to think about ways that she could enhance the steps that she was executing:

E - …when I got here, I was seeing, because I didn't have the technique, I had to rely on other things. And so I, that whole image of talent shifted to what my own personal body could do and how much talent I could hold by conveying my emotions or doing little nuances of, like, maybe my leg wasn't high enough, but maybe I could reach my arm with to make it look better. The whole talent thing didn't like totally change, because I saw dancers that maybe didn't have the technique but looked better than the dancers that had the technique, because they really got into the movement and explored it.

What Elizabeth started to do might be simply described as adding more embellishments to her movement. After examining the responses from the other dancers, however, it seemed to me that Elizabeth was describing one tactic among many that dancers might describe as making the movement 'her own.'

Dancers are continually encouraged to add 'themselves' to the movement. This might take different forms for different dancers, but in general the idea is to incorporate elements of the dancer's individual personality into the steps that are given in a combination. To cite a rather extreme example, I can recall early in my first technique class an instance where the instructor gave us a series of relatively simple steps to execute, but provided us with no particular way to approach them – not even a set of counts. She then instructed us to make *our own* phrase out of the steps she gave. The purpose was to demon-strate how a single set of steps can take on countless qualities when the dancer infuses them with her/his own personal style.

This might explain why so many (in fact, all) of the dancers I in-terviewed framed their current ideas about talent more as individual stylistic attributes than universal gifts. Deborah responded this way when I asked her about talent:

> D – Yeah, um, no I don't (laughs). And I hate, almost hate it, as a term – because everyone's talent is different, just like their personality is different.

When I asked Bianca about how she thought talent manifested itself, she related that talent could take many forms, and physical skill may or may not be included at all:

> B - I think one of the interesting things is that we sometimes think of talent as the dancers who are really proficient in some kind of technique, and just extraordinary in their skills. And then... you realize that talent comes in different packages, it's

not just about technique. Because there are people that are creatively, that I think were exceptionally talented and were gifted in choreographic aspects and pushing the boundaries, and they really weren't the most skilled dancers in terms of pointing toes and triple pirouettes and everything, but they could make outstanding pieces and you're still drawn to them as dancers, because they have a power and they have a passion inside them. So, I really don't know how to define talent anymore, because I think it's hard to just say talent is technique or talent is choreographic.

There is another interesting attitude about talent that seemed to recur in most of the interviews that I conducted. In general, there was a definite tendency for dancers to characterize themselves as not having a great deal of talent, even while they were asserting that talent was something that was very individually variable. When they were discussing their relative lack of talent, the dancers generally seemed to be referring to the idea that talent existed in the realm of physical ability (flexibility, strength, balance, etc.), as opposed to talent being an individual and highly variable attribute.

As I listened and considered their thoughts more carefully, I began to wonder if the dancers' claims to a lack of physical ability could indeed further their claims as passionate and hard-working individual dancers. In other words, a dancer who is lacking in 'natural' gifts yet still manages to become a successful performer must be extremely dedicated and passionate about her/his art. Indeed, several of those I interviewed seemed to employ this particular approach in describing themselves. Annie provides an excellent example of this approach:

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A – Um, I kind of think that that word (talent) is emphasized too much, because like, me personally, like, I don't have a lot of the natural stuff you're supposed to have, you know what I mean? I think that once you get onto this level, it's not as much about talent anymore it's about your drive and your want and your need for it. I think that like in my experience when people would say, "oh she has all this natural talent", that made me feel like I would never make it because I didn't have that natural talent. I don't think it's as important – I think it's a good thing, but I don't think it's as important as everyone makes it seem like it needs to be.

Bianca made similar points when I discussed talent with her:

B - For me, I strive for; my vision of talent for myself is just to be a well-rounded all-encompassing dancer who's knowledge-able of everything. Of course I want to push myself to better my technique and skills, but... I wouldn't know how to describe natural talent, because I don't feel like I've had natural talent. I think I had to work really hard my whole life to build what I have now. I don't consider myself talented now. I think it's a hard thing to label, especially on yourself.

There is, of course, the issue of modesty, and a dancer who brags about how talented s/he is certainly does not gain much in reputation or status. However, in a department where most of the students would be considered 'talented', it seems that there might be more than modesty at play.

One possibility is that the notion of talent as a 'natural', essential quality might actually lessen the perceived work ethic of a particular dancer. Indeed, one does not have to look far to find dancers whose accomplishments are minimized by characterizations such as, "she doesn't even have to work at it", or "it just comes so naturally to him". It is also not uncommon that two dancers will use the exact same

characterization of each other. In general, though, the label of 'talent' is one which dancers describe as desirable while at the same time denying any claim they might have to apply it to themselves.

Of course, the dancers to whom I spoke were certainly willing to provide evidence that they were 'talented' and then allow me to draw my own conclusions. In my interviews, I generally started out by asking each dancer about her/his background before coming to the University. Each had their own list of places and disciplines they had studied, but most of them added a bit more. At some point during their descriptions of their backgrounds, most of the dancers offered clues to indicate to me that they had been more 'advanced' in some way as compared to others their age when they were growing up. Deborah provided a good example of this practice in her interview:

> D - I danced from like 7 or so until I was about 14, stopped dancing. I went all the way to doing pointe. I was the youngest in an adult class, I was like a teenager in an adult class...

These 'hints' were generally very subtle, but were definitely common. Holly even elaborated on this idea by combining her accomplishments with evidence of her dedication, and even alluded to the fact that a former teacher felt it was 'stupid' that she did not major in dance.

> H - When I was twelve I was dancing with the 18 year olds, you know? We had to bring in teachers from out of town, because we were like an hour and a half from anywhere, out in the middle of nowhere... and my junior year I started driving out of town for classes, and for my senior year I was going three times a week, driving almost two hours each way, you know.

> And I wasn't going to go to school for dance; I was going to go to school for journalism, and my dance teacher told me that that was stupid (laughs)…

Elizabeth, on the other hand, was more open about being more advanced as a younger student, and admits some concern when she arrived at the University and was no longer at the top of the class:

> E - At my studio, I was in all of the advanced classes, the best one in the advanced classes. And when I came here, I got put into fundamentals, so it was really hard. And the technique was completely different.

While Elizabeth admits some difficulty with her perceived change in status among her fellow dancers, she also offers a possible explanation why this might have been the case (the difference in technique).

These simultaneous assertions and denials of 'talent' provide an example of Goffman's (1959) "presentation of self". The dancers were definitely working to create an impression that would make me think that they were better than average, but that their ability was achieved through dedication and hard work, rather than simply the product of 'natural' ability. It seems that for these students, the idea of the artist as divinely-ordained creative genius held much less value than the artist as devoted, passionate craftsman.

However, it seems that a certain notion of natural talent still exists, and the dancers would certainly like for others to think that they possess it. Perhaps the dancers' thoughts about the concept of talent, then, could be described more accurately as increasing in complexity.

Since the idea of innate ability is so connected to the romantic notion of artistic genius, many dancers (myself included) might still be unwilling to completely abandon it. At the same time, accepting the idea of talent as entirely predetermined robs the dancer of her/his agency, and negates all of the dedication and effort that is so central to the dancers' experience. Therefore, framing talent as a development of natural potential through passionate work allows dancers to showcase their own agency and still allow for a certain degree of romanticism at the same time.

Becoming a Dancer

As they progress through the program at University, young dancers are working intensely to learn the technical skills and history of dance. At the same time, though, they are developing the attitudes and behaviors that will help them to define themselves as dancers. One of the aspects of this evolving process of identity construction has already been introduced: the evolution of increasingly complex ways they begin to interpret the word 'talent.' In this section, I will discuss other ways in which dancers set themselves apart from non-dancers.

First of all, the dancers develop ideas about how to present themselves to each other and to non-dancers in ways that distinguish dancers from the more general population. In addition to learning new and more complicated ways to evaluate talent, dancers begin to adopt styles of dress which, whether intentionally or not, serve to distinguish them from students in other disciplines at University. Also, through their interactions with their instructors the dancers develop an approach to technique which places more emphasis on individual expression than external standards of 'perfection.' Finally, they develop strategies to explain and account for perceptions that dancers and other artists are 'eccentric.' These methods of self-identification, and

possibly others, describe a process that is separate from - although in-tertwined with – learning to dance: the process of becoming a dancer.

Performances (for Selves and Others)

It goes without saying that any study of people involved in a performing art must include some examination of the art of performing itself. As I spent more and more time observing the dancers at University, however, I quickly realized that many more performances were happening outside the walls of the theaters than happened on stage in front of paying audiences. In fact, the actual time the students spent performing on stage was miniscule and much less interesting than the performances the students gave both in the studios and around the campus.

My use of the term "performance" here does not refer to formal stage productions, but to the more everyday types of performances described by Goffman (1959). This "dramaturgical" approach suggests that individuals manage through appearance and interaction the im-pressions and expectations they want others to have about them. By establishing and managing the impressions they make on non-dancers and each other, the dance students can help to ensure that their unique identities (and public perceptions thereof) are maintained.

I am reminded of my first orientation as a new dance student when I began my study at University. For our initial meeting, all of the new students in the various performing and visual arts were grouped together. As we were beginning our meeting, one student walked in late. Upon her entering the room, the leader of the meeting said, "I can tell by looking that you're a dance major." Everyone in the room laughed, but I initially did not understand exactly what made a dancer so easy to find, even in a room of other artists. As I progressed through my degree program, though, I began to figure it out. It became even more apparent when I began observing dancers as a sort of 'outsider' myself.

Dancers are relatively easy to distinguish by the way that they tend to dress, particularly on the occasions that they are able to leave the studio for the more common areas of campus. Since most of their time on campus is spent in the studios, dancers usually opt not to completely remove their dance attire, even when venturing out of the building. If a dancer does leave the building, they will more often than not remain in their leotards, and sometimes their tights, and simply layer some sort of easily-removed garment over them. At the lunch hour each day, for example, there was a group of anywhere from fifteen to approximately thirty dancers who stayed in their black leotards and tight hair buns (a requirement in morning ballet), donned pajama

bottoms or sweat pants and sandals, and ran off to the student dining area, which is a relatively short walk from the studios. While pajama bottoms and sweat pants are certainly not unheard of on campus, it is uncommon for a group of students to be traveling together in these garments wearing nearly identical black leotards and hairstyles.

Also more common among dancers is the tendency to 'customize' their outerwear. While the dancers were certainly free to leave their clothing more or less in the same state in which they bought it, dancers almost always modified their clothing in some way. A t-shirt might have the collar cut out or the sleeves removed, and sweat pants are frequently cut off at the knee. In addition, dance majors' clothes often look relatively worn and outfits more 'thrown together', appearing more to have come from a thrift store (if not actually having been purchased at one) than a designer shop.

There are a number of possible explanations for the dancers' wardrobe, as I discovered through a variety of casual interactions. Most students offered a rationale that such clothes are simply more convenient, since dancers leaving the department tend to have to return to it relatively quickly and changing clothes completely is simply impractical. I was fortunate enough to begin my observations at the beginning of the academic year, when quite a few students (especially freshmen) took the time to change from their tights to 'street clothes'

and back again over their lunch breaks. By the end of the semester, almost none of the students bothered to change at all, and the ones who did were generally leaving the building for the rest of the day.

Another reason provided which relates to the tattered and haphazard nature of dancers' attire is that dancers often wear these clothes to afternoon Modern classes and rehearsals, (which have much less strict dress codes than the morning classes) and their clothing receives a fair amount of punishment from rolling on the floor and the other movements dancers practice regularly. This also served as justification for the 'customization' of pants and shirts; it was simply a matter of facilitating movement or allowing for quick changes. For example, there were several students in each class who began wearing two or three shirts in order to stay warm, gradually removing them as the exercises intensified. The students would often do this in the middle of an exercise, which provided justification for cut sleeves and necklines. One dancer even noted about a new shirt, "I feel like I'm choking in this collar." The next time she wore the shirt, the collar had been removed.

Justifications such as those listed above might be grouped in the category of structural components which served to reinforce the idea of dancers as 'different.' This could be thought of in much the same way as the medical students studied by Haas and Shaffir (1987),

whose occupational attire (in their case, hospital scrubs), helped to cement their identities as future doctors. To extend this idea slightly, perhaps the types of alterations dancers perform on their attire serve not only to distinguish dancers from non-dancers, but to help make individual dancers unique from one another (a point upon which I will elaborate later).

Several students admitted, however, that the alterations to their wardrobe were based at least partially on vanity. "I just think they look better like this," said one first-year female. "This is just how I am," stated a second-year male student, in a context which implied that his attire was an expression of his personality. I must confess that I probably relate more closely to this approach than any other, as I still have several pairs of the brightly-colored pajama bottoms that I always chose for classes, a deliberate contrast from the dark, monochromatic selections of most of my classmates.

While dancers generally regard their manners of dress as insignificant or attribute them to more practical causes, their attire seems to have become a sort of unofficial 'uniform' for dancers when they are not in the studio. While dancers are easily recognizable in a classroom or rehearsal by their tights and other apparel, maintaining as much of this appearance as possible when outside the studio might also serve to reinforce the public image that dance majors are recognizably dif-

ferent from other students. Wearing tattered, mismatched clothes can certainly add to a 'bohemian' image, and/or the notion that dancers care less about clothing than their professional aspirations. While none of the students stated these ideas explicitly, the students' nearly unanimous adoption of this particular dress code leads me to suspect that it might provide another source of evidence for them to claim a 'dancer' identity.

Instilling Individuality

Just like any other undergraduate program, the bulk of the learning process for dance majors at University occurs in the classroom – or in this case the studio. It is in the three studios where the dancers learn the fundamentals of correct ballet and modern dance technique, musculoskeletal anatomy, choreography, and other conventions required in learning to dance. Howard Becker even uses dance as an example when he discusses the importance of conventions in art worlds:

> When a particular convention can be taken for granted, when almost everyone involved almost always does things that way, anyone with experience in the art can be counted on to know that basic minimum... Thus, most modern dance, designed *not* to be like conventional ballet, ends up presupposing that recruits will have had some ballet training and have acquired the muscles, habits, and understandings that come with such training. (1982, pp. 56-57)

If this were all that occurred in class, the dance classes at University would seem altogether unremarkable, as the students first and foremost are learning the conventions of dance; the same conventions which dance students learn everywhere.

The students are exposed to more than a set of technical conventions, however. They are interacting with their faculty, individuals who are already professionals in the dance world. Similar to medical students (Smith and Kleinman 1989), whose faculty provided examples of how to confront the emotional demands of their work, or students of mortuary science, who became acquainted with the "rhetoric of death denial and public ignorance" (Cahill 1999, p. 114) and how to confront it through examples set by the instructors, dance majors at University received guidance from the faculty not only in the conventions of dance, but also the most important qualifications for claiming identities as dancers.

What then becomes important is examining not so much the conventions of technique but the artistic priorities the faculty members are communicating when they teach. As I observed the different levels of modern dance, I was interested to find a relatively clear progression of instructor expectations as the dancers advanced. As I moved from levels II through IV, the instructors were not only presenting more difficult steps and sequences, but they were also asking for more and

more individualized interpretations of those steps. They were gradually steering the students away from external evaluations based solely on precise execution and asking them to pay more attention to individual expressive efforts. Different instructors, of course, will have different teaching styles, but the teachers substituted for each other several times and I was struck by how their priorities and interactive styles changed with the level of technique they were teaching.

The description of the shift in focus from physical execution to individual interpretation mirrors quite closely the students' responses to my questions about their perceptions of talent. Just as their descriptions of what constitutes talent shift from physical prowess to more individualized and complex interpretations, so do the priorities within each progressive level of technique. Physical execution remains part of the picture, as it is the common convention of all dance forms, but conventions about what constitutes a 'good' dancer become much more complex.

The Modern II course was taught by Alana, who recently moved to the area after performing with a well known New York-based modern dance company for several years. The students enjoyed her classes a great deal and spoke quite highly of her outside the studio, as she was a very energetic teacher and worked with a very athletic movement style. She kept the pace of the class quite brisk, and spent

more time demonstrating the exercises than discussing them. Even when the students were quite familiar with an exercise, she continued to demonstrate for them throughout the semester.

When she took the time to explain a concept, Alana usually showed the students at the same time, rather than relying on verbal instructions alone. Occasionally, she would use a student as an example, adding her explanation in terms of what the student was doing correctly or needed to improve. When the students asked questions, they generally were related to how to execute a particular step, or the counts required for a particular movement. Occasionally, a student would even correct Alana if she executed a step differently than she had in a previous class.

It was evident from her actions and statements, though, that what she wanted from the students was more than imitation. She spoke frequently of their need to place more emphasis on the expressive efforts behind the movement. As opposed to technical and physical similarity, Alana was continually asking the students to look for the 'intent' behind the steps, which might not look the same for everyone. This is a particularly important distinction within the progression of dancers through the program; it is important to recognize that dancing a phrase well will not necessarily look the same on every body. Whenever the dancers would lose their timing or sense of unison in an effort

to approach a phrase more expressively, Alana would reassure them several times that such variation was acceptable. "That's OK, That's OK. Just go with the momentum of it," was a typical comment that Alana would make to the class. In other words, "dancing well" does not equal "dancing the same as everyone else."

The students in Modern II mimicked Alana very closely, following her steps as she demonstrated them. They also were very aware of each other as they went through the class. They talked and offered corrections to each other in between exercises, and watched each other in the mirror as they worked. There was also a sense of competition between the students, which I inferred from their occasional discussions between classes about who was a 'better' dancer. They also seemed to 'show off' for each other, occasionally adding extra steps at the end of a phrase and then looking around to see if anyone noticed. Their comments and questions were also focused almost exclusively on the external, physical execution of the steps, and they were very concerned with doing the steps precisely as choreographed.

I saw perhaps the best illustration of the Modern II students' awareness of each other during what might otherwise be viewed as a momentary diversion one day. Alana had left a compact disc she wanted to use for a particular combination in her office, and instructed the students to practice the combination while she ran to retrieve it.

What several of the students did during her absence instead, however, was demonstrate for each other all of the "cheesy lyrical tricks" they had learned during their previous studio training. While they laughed and discussed how ridiculous these steps were, it was clear that the dancers were selecting 'tricks' which they did particularly well. Each was also sure to call attention to herself (all of those participating were female) by calling out something along the lines of, "how about this one?" before launching into an elaborate sequence. When Alana returned, the dancers immediately stopped, panting more heavily than they had in several days.

The Level III modern class was instructed by Beverly, who had performed for several years before coming to University. One of the more veteran faculty, Beverly has become a respected choreographer since she stopped performing, choreographing work on companies in several countries as well as the United States. The pace and energy in her classes is somewhat more subdued than Alana's, creating a more intensely focused atmosphere, which she often lightened with her off-beat sense of humor.

Beverly's expectations of the students continued the lessons Alana first tried to instill. Beverly was able, however, to take for granted at this level that the dancers had abandoned the notion that correctness and unison were associated. Her corrections were almost

always directed at individual dancers rather than the class as a whole, and even when she did address the class collectively, her comments were exclusively about intent and expressive nuances, as opposed to specifics about the execution of steps and counts.

In general, Beverly approached the students as individuals rather than as a group. This was doubtlessly made easier by the number of students in her class (twelve, while Modern II had nearly thirty), but even when she was teaching Levels III and IV combined, she maintained this individual approach, though with considerably more effort. She would ask a student how a particular movement felt, and help him or her individually to figure out how to make it more comfortable. She asked almost as many questions of the students as they did of her, and constantly emphasized importance of individual understanding over precision. The students were also given time to 'figure things out' during class, where Beverly would leave them time to practice a phrase and ask specific questions, as opposed to demonstrating and repeating a combination multiple times.

In Modern III, the students' attention was much more on themselves. They were still concerned with executing the phrases as correctly as possible, but correctness was determined more by the capabilities of their own bodies than external standards. Students at this level also spent the most time looking in the mirror at themselves,

rather than each other. It was visibly apparent that they had em-braced the idea that they did not need to compare their performances to those of others to determine how well they were dancing. They were also much less inclined than the Modern II students to talk to each other or offer corrections between exercises, choosing instead to practice more problematic steps while studying themselves in the mir-ror. In this way, the Modern III students provided the most literal ex-ample of the looking-glass self (Cooley 1983), as they focused on their own reflections and experimented with the phrases while examining themselves the way that others might.

The Modern III students had also developed a stronger sense of self-discipline than the students in Modern II. Whereas the students in Modern II demonstrated "cheesy lyrical tricks" when left alone, the Modern III students generally stayed focused on themselves. Beverly occasionally gave them the opportunity to practice independently for several minutes, and even left the room one occasion, but the stu-dents continued to study themselves diligently in the mirror (although several conversations about unrelated topics began while the dancers were practicing).

Christopher, who joined the faculty three years before, led the Modern IV class. He has performed with companies in New York and Europe and still performs and choreographs independently on a regular

basis. Somewhat similar to Alana, he was quite energetic and athletic in his approach, and was quite talkative throughout the class as well. He continued the individualistic emphasis initiated by Alana and developed by Beverly, and expanded on it even further.

When Christopher taught an exercise, he usually demonstrated it only once or twice, and then simply led the students verbally through the exercise after that. In fact, he generally spoke throughout the combinations. Rather than explanations or corrections, though, his instructions sounded more like narratives. He would offer the students various images and impressions, which they were then left to interpret for themselves. "The leg unfolds, then everything melts into the floor," were typical of the directions he would give while leading the class. He would generally only mention the specifics of the choreography when a student would ask him about a step that they did not understand or that felt awkward. He had no problem with doing this, but he was much more interested in seeing their interpretations of the movement than his.

The Modern IV students were at the final step of the 'individualization' process. They were the least likely to be looking in the mirror at any point in the class, and were the most different from each other in their execution of the combinations they were presented. At the same time, they were also the most dynamic in the way they ap-

proached the phrases, which were still quite uniform in terms of timing. They also were more talkative than the students in Level III, but their interactions with each other and the instructor took the form of conversational exchanges, quite different from the strict question-and-answer format I observed among the Level II students. For example, where a Modern II student might ask specifically how to execute a particular step, a Modern IV student might comment, "I feel like I need to do it this way," and that approach would generally be accepted and even attempted by others.

This sense of independence seemed to be the ultimate goal of the progression through the modern dance classes. By first convincing the students that individuality was acceptable, then leading them to a sense of its precedence, and finally encouraging them to actively interpret phrases for themselves, the faculty's efforts combined to produce dancers who approached their art as individuals with particular strengths and preferences that may or may not adhere to some external set of standards.

Whether they were performing for each other, their instructors, or non-dancers, the behaviors and interactions the dancers demonstrated all seemed to progress in a particular direction: toward a more independent and individualistic approach to themselves and their art. With other students, there was the tendency for dancers to

present themselves as different from those in other departments, and their attire a sort of unofficial uniform which distinguishes dancers from non-dancers. Within the studios, the dancers go from comparing and competing against each other to becoming independent interpreters expressing themselves through the phrases they practice. All of this is guided and reinforced by the faculty, who not only explain how to be a dancer, but also control a student's passage from one level to another, ensuring that only those who take this particular approach to dancing find themselves in the most advanced classes.

Embracing a sense of difference, both from other students and other dancers, seems to be a significant part of the identity the neophyte dancers are learning to construct. This is not surprising when one considers the popular notion of what an artist is:

> The definition (of 'artist') emphasizes traits of the maker of fine works; it asserts that such works do not get made accidentally, that making great works is not something anyone could do on a good day, that the works get their value from being made by unusual people, of whom there are not many. (Howard Becker 1982, p. 354-355)

If this definition is taken at its word, then in order to be an artist, one must be unusual (i.e. different). Therefore, uniqueness becomes a necessity, and dancers must work continually to differentiate themselves from others. Moreover, since unusual people are rare, the individual dancer must also distinguish him/herself as different within the field of dance, so as not to be seen as "just anyone." In this way, dance dif-

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fers from medicine or law in that dancers must not only show that they are competent and knowledgeable in the conventions of their field, but also that they are unique *within* their field. As the instructors communicated in class, 'good' dance does not look the same for everyone, and to dance well a dancer must also demonstrate their individuality. Perhaps this is why talent becomes so difficult to describe; when there is no universal standard for what makes a 'good' dancer (other than uniqueness), 'good' dancing becomes a very difficult thing to verbalize.

Eccentricity

Perhaps the widest variety of reactions I encountered when interviewing the dancers was when I asked how they felt about dancers (as well as other artists) being characterized as eccentric. Few, if any, of them seemed to feel that they were eccentric people. In fact, most of those I interviewed saw the perception of dancers as eccentric was more a misunderstanding of their field than an actual attribute all dancers possessed. Bianca, a senior who had attended a magnet school for performing arts as a high school student, related how such a characterization existed among her fellow students even then:

> B – It's funny because in high school, there's the kids who were zoned for there, and the arts kids were all called the 'freaks'. It was the 'zonies' and the 'freaks'. So we were already labeled as some kind of character.

The 'freak' label had already taken hold among the students at the

school before Bianca even enrolled, so it is impossible to determine the

reasons behind the selection of that particular term. She certainly felt,

however, that the perception of eccentricity must have had something

to do with it.

As our interview went on, Bianca offered some reasons why art-

ists might be perceived as eccentric:

> B – I don't know about the eccentricity of it, but I think you
> tend to be open to a lot of things as an artist. At least for my-
> self, I try to be very open and respectful, even if I don't like the
> art, I appreciate that they've made it or that they've done it
> and a lot of people are very – I mean closed minded is a big
> term – but in a sense they are. To be different, it's unusual…
>
> M – Do you feel like artists are just generally accepting of
> things that would be considered unusual?
>
> B – and even if they don't like it, they appreciate it or respect
> it. I think that sometimes it's hard for people to understand
> that kind of mindset.

For Bianca, the perception of eccentricity came from a larger mind set

– in this case, a sense of open-mindedness – which she felt was part

of the larger art world. Elizabeth, a junior, was even more specific in

this regard, and related the idea of eccentricity to her dance training:

> E – …I think that artists have different thought processes than
> 'normal' people. (laughs) The non-art-based people. I think be-
> cause we're taught to abstract things and take things from eve-
> ryday life and put it into movement or put it into music and so
> we have a different way of thinking about everyday life. So I
> think in all aspects that's true, because if you're walking down
> the street and you get inspired by a tree, and you start making
> up movement, people are going to think you're weird.

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Elizabeth and Bianca both shared the feeling that the thought processes required or encouraged in dancers were contributing factors in the perceptions others had of them. Qualities such as creativity and open-mindedness are nurtured and encouraged, particularly in courses such as choreography (where the conventions of creating new and original work are learned) which prize uniqueness most highly.

Probably the most common answer to my questions about eccentricity was that the origins of that perception were in the rather isolating life dancers led. In general, everyone I interviewed believed that dancers were often misunderstood due to their relative separation to those outside of the dance world. This was something about which they often had mixed emotions. Bianca relates this idea in this way:

> M – People don't always get it when you have rehearsal...
>
> B – No, they don't understand! (laughs) That you live in the studio, and that it's important to go to rehearsal and to sleep sometimes, because it's a rare thing to sleep (laughs). It's hard to understand that kind of life if you're outside of it...
> And also just the way that you spend your time, people don't understand the choices that you make. To go to class every day, to spend all of your time in rehearsal, doing all these things. I think they feel kind of a weirdness because they just don't understand the choices that you make.

Deborah, another senior, was a little more philosophical about the perception of eccentricity, but still felt relatively strongly that perceptions of eccentricity were related to the dedication and passion dancers showed for their work (which, conveniently enough, was demonstrated

by their intense schedule and isolation from non-dancers). She was also a little more willing to acknowledge that she might actually possess some of the eccentricity that others ascribed to her:

> D – Well, you know, the more I read about it, I'm starting to realize – before, I'd be like, oh forget it, that's ridiculous. But now, you know, getting fully into it, I think it's true, but I think anybody that's passionate about doing something has that eccentricity for it, whatever it is. And because somebody else doesn't have that, that's what they, they – it's a perception thing. They see it as eccentricity but it's somebody's passion for that, then they see it as weird or whatever, but it's their passion. It's the same thing as an engineer, who's like all gung-ho about creating a new formula. You watch them go to work and you're like "what?" - If you're somebody who is, like, a dancer (laughs). But that's their thing… I definitely feel like I have that, just like that, like, "Whoo! You know like, up and a down…" (laughs).

Interestingly enough, the younger dancers in the department were less likely to dismiss the idea of eccentricity as a misperception. Gretchen, for example, is a sophomore and is decidedly less negative about the 'eccentric' label. Still, she sees the origins of the perception in the lifestyle that dancers generally live:

> G – Oh yeah. I think that all artists in general are freakin' out of their minds! It's like you have to be at least somewhat crazy to like, to get this. Because there's all this whole crap that you do: injuries, like, everything like that. You're in the studio for hours a day, like, working your ass off. Like, the average person doesn't want to do that, they just want to, like, have their happy little life.

Perhaps Gretchen was less bothered by the 'eccentric' label because she saw a close relationship between eccentricity and her dedication to her art.

It did seem that people like Gretchen and Deborah, who framed perceptions of eccentricity as indicators of dedication or passion, were more comfortable with having those perceptions applied to them. Annie, however, felt differently, especially when she felt that others underestimated her dedication:

> M – ...when you tell somebody you're a dancer, what kind of reactions do you get?
>
> A – Um, they usually, I don't know. They're kind of like, 'Oh, ok' like, I feel like they don't take me seriously, I guess. Because it's not like a 'real' quote-unquote major. But if you just talk to me a while, I mean I can get pretty silly, but you can tell I'm not like an idiot, so then I think after a while they're like, Ok
>
> M – How do you kind of react to that, when you can tell that somebody is kind of going, "ohhh"
>
> A – Um, it used to like really tick me off. I was like, "what? This is what I'm doing" Especially near the beginning, when I was like a freshman or sophomore, and I was kind of thinking 'is this a good idea, da da da', so then when you get that reaction that's really like (laughs). Now it doesn't bother me as much...

Annie tended to take the label of eccentricity as a sign that people weren't taking her seriously. It seems, then, that reactions to the label of eccentricity were associated with how negatively or positively the dancers interpreted that label. Deborah (who, as noted above, was more comfortable with the term) had this to say:

> D – ...If you say eccentricity, you might think that's a negative, but it's not. It could be negative and positive, but that's life, you know?

In fact, Felicia, one of the seniors, was initially ambivalent about the term:

F – I don't agree with it. (laughs) I think everybody's unique. I mean maybe for artists it shows more up front, but I think any person that you get to know, they have quirks, and there's something about everybody. Maybe for certain artists it's more out there than other people.

When I probed further, however, she admitted that she too was occasionally guilty of a little unusual behavior:

F – ...my friends and I – she was in the theater program and she graduated like a year or two ago. And we were just hanging out one night, and she started telling me about this on-site thing they did with their theater class, kind of like what we do with dance. They had to be squirrels. And so next thing you know – and we weren't by ourselves, we were hanging out with other people – the next thing you know we were like being squirrels, because I just wanted to experience it, you know? And it was really funny just to see the reactions, you know?

As I compared these reactions to my own experience, I found a few commonalities between what the dancers related to me and what I experienced myself. I feel I must admit here that I was labeled 'eccentric' at a relatively early age, even before I decided upon an artistic field as my college major, so my experiences and feelings about the label cannot be completely attributed to my undergraduate experiences. In all fairness, though, it is more than likely that most artists have contended with at least some form of such a perception since before their college days, as well.

My relationship with the 'eccentric' label has been one that has moved along a general continuum between total denial and gleeful ac-

ceptance, depending largely upon the group of people with whom I am associating at the time. Like the students I interviewed, I generally regard eccentricity as a misperception arising from my dedication to my work. However, I am also aware that I have used this label as a sort of cultural capital when I had the feeling that it might work to my advantage. It might certainly provide a reasonable rationale for a particular incident when I might breach certain standards of conduct ("well, he's an artist, he can't help being weird"), or when I am in the company of others who share a belief that eccentricity and artistic legitimacy are somehow related. On the other hand, when others are looking at me as perhaps less intelligent or self-disciplined as a result of my artistic nature, I am quick to minimize any possibly eccentric mannerisms in order to assert that I am indeed a clear-thinking, hard-working individual.

After reviewing the interviews I conducted and my own personal experiences, I found that the ways dance majors reconciled perceptions of eccentricity fell into two general categories. First, there were those who approached eccentricity as a negative stereotype that did not apply any more to artists than to the population in general. When choosing this approach, the dancers were generally addressing it as a negative term, which others had used inappropriately to account for what the dancers saw as more positive attributes. Bianca, for example,

cited her intense schedule and open-mindedness as possible sources for the 'eccentric' label. This tactic was the common choice among those who expressed discomfort with eccentricity as a label.

The other approach was more common among dancers like Deborah and Gretchen, who were more comfortable with being described as eccentric. For those who chose this tactic, eccentricity was used as an indicator of their dedication and passion for their art. For them, eccentricity was also not an essential trait, but it was used as evidence that they had chosen a path that was atypical, and that required more from them than other fields. Of course, the dancers were fully free to choose either approach, and – as I realized that I do – likely alternate between the two depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves. If a dancer feels that a perception of eccentricity will produce a favorable image in the mind of her/his audience, then s/he can acknowledge and perhaps even emphasize those qualities which might encourage that perception. If the opposite situation seems to be true, then the dancer can frame eccentricity as a misperception of what would be considered more favorable attributes (particularly dedication and passion). Eccentricity thus becomes another tool to manage impressions (Goffman 1959).

Whichever strategy the dancers employed, however, all of them chose to frame perceptions of eccentricity in a way that allowed for in-

dividual agency and emphasized passion and dedication. If eccentricity was explained away as a misperception, for instance, then it was a misperception of traits such as social isolation due to schedule (a sign of dedication) or open-mindedness. If eccentricity was more willingly embraced, it was evidence of such traits as passion and willingness to follow inspiration. Either way, it was the dancers' individual choices, and not their essential natures, that others saw as eccentric. In a way, this mirrored the attitudes the dancers had developed about talent, which had evolved from purely 'natural' abilities to a mixture of physical traits and personal effort, as well as their approach to technique, which increasingly emphasized the dancers' individualism. In both cases, the dancers worked to present themselves as independently expressive and active participants in their own development, as opposed to divinely ordained 'eccentric geniuses.'

Conclusions

Since West and Fenstermaker describe the process of identity construction as an "ongoing interactional accomplishment" (1995, p.9), then those claiming identities as professionals in a particular field must do so in ways that continually and consistently reinforce those identities. In addition, those who claim a collective identity must establish symbolic boundaries which distinguish them from others who do not claim the same identity, and constantly negotiate those boundaries to maintain a common consciousness about what that particular identity means (Taylor and Whittier 1992). There are many different ways to do this, and in the case of the dance students at University, some are more complex than others.

Whether it was through the development of their talents, their performances, or their interpretations of eccentricity, the dance majors I observed and interviewed seemed to be working toward a common goal. First, they were identifying themselves as distinctive and unique from non-dancers as well as each other. Unlike neophytes in fields such as medicine, law, and mortuary science, however, this uniqueness was not based primarily on knowledge and skills. This makes the achievement of a dancer identity a bit more problematic, as there is no

standardized definition for what constitutes a 'good' dancer. This might lend even more significance to the adoption of the unofficial 'dancer's uniform', where recognizable dance attire is maintained even when the dancers leave the studio.

The dancers also seemed to share the belief that being a dancer required a significant level of passion. In fact, the word passion was mentioned specifically in every single interview I conducted, and can be found in more than one quote. While passion might seem at first to be a difficult term to define as well, the dancers had ample evidence to assert that their passion was authentic. The most popular source of such evidence came from the descriptions of the intense schedule dancers were required to maintain, which can be described in terms that any layperson can understand. The dancers also utilized passion as a possible source of perceptions of eccentricity. Even more interesting is that passion could be used whether the interpretation of eccentricity was positive or negative.

The desire to be seen as unique is not difficult to understand in a field such as dance. As in all the arts, the importance of distinctive abilities and qualities is paramount. As Becker (1982) notes:

> Both participants in the creation of art works and members of society generally believe that the making of art requires special talents, gifts, or abilities, which few have. Some have more than others, and a very few are gifted enough to merit the honorific title of "artist."...We know who has these gifts by the

work they do because, these shared beliefs hold, the work of
art expresses and embodies those special, rare powers. (p. 14)

In other words, in order to earn the title of "artist," one *must* be unique. The work that they produce, of course, should be original and distinctive, but the work is also an extension and expression of the individual. Recall Elizabeth, who stated in her discussion about her relationship with the mirror that, for dancers, people are seeing "who you are" when they see "your" work.

Particularly problematic for dancers, however, is the degree of 'naturalness' about the qualities which might serve as evidence of their identity. Unlike seminary students (Kleinman 1984) and those in fields such as social work (Loseke and Cahill 1986), who felt obligated to describe their professional identities as part of their individual 'natures', dance majors are wary of attributing more than a small amount of their identities to 'natural' and inherent qualities. Their abilities and behaviors were not 'gifts', but products of their own passion and effort. Even in their discussions about talent, where they were unable (or unwilling) to disregard completely the role of genetic factors, they were sure to imply how their efforts to develop their inborn potential were at least equally, if not more, important than their 'natural' abilities.

If typical beliefs about artists characterize them as uniquely gifted, though, why might the dancers embrace and exploit their uniqueness while denying their giftedness? There might be more than

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one explanation for this. The dancers might be expressing their belief in the classic American preference for hard work and dedication over 'sliding by' on one's talent. Also, 'giftedness' is a much more difficult distinction to draw than uniqueness, which makes the establishment and negotiation of symbolic boundaries between who is gifted and who is not much more elusive to define. Uniqueness, by contrast, can be relatively easy to establish through more tangible evidence such as wardrobe or schedule.

While these ideas likely play roles in the emphasis of uniqueness and denial of 'giftedness', and there are some themes in the interviews which seem to fit these explanations, I am disinclined to see this as sufficient to describe the extensive set of behaviors and beliefs that I observed within the dance department. A more thorough explanation of the significance dancers give to individual effort and dedication might be found by considering the highly competitive nature of the dance world outside University. If talent and artistic qualities are indeed pre-ordained, then those who are destined for greatness would be relatively easy to recognize (an idea which could find support in the increasing presence of teenage professionals) and those without such gifts would be doomed to mediocrity. On the other hand, if talent and artistic personality are achieved through passion and dedication, then – at least theoretically – artistic greatness is possible for anyone who

shows sufficient passion and dedication. Moreover, those who achieve artistic greatness are more justified in taking credit for it than those who simply possess it 'naturally'. In a field such as dance, where there are far more people interested in working than there are jobs, there is considerably more hope for success when that success can be achieved.

Therefore, I would propose that in the case of the University dance department, a great dancer is not so much uniquely gifted as s/he is uniquely *passionate*. This model seems a more accurate way to account for both the emphasis on individuality and the importance of agency in the development of the 'dancer' identity. Others' perceptions about eccentricity certainly fit better if they can be framed in terms of misunderstood signs of dedication and/or personal passion. Instructors also encourage the students to express their individuality and 'stand out from the crowd,' particularly in ways that involve expressive choices about the material with which they are presented. Finally, talent becomes a process in which a dance student develops and exploits his/her strengths through effort and dedication.

At this point, we arrive back at the notion of being distinct, or different. Just like any other occupational group, those who claim to inhabit the social space reserved for dancers must distinguish themselves from those who are not dancers. One could argue that the way

that dancers seem to do this is not unlike other occupations: a distinctive manner of dress, and expertise in a set of skills that others do not have. The identity of dancer, however, becomes more complicated than that.

Unlike those in other occupations, dancers (and likely all artists) must also distinguish themselves as unique within their particular social world. Bourdieu describes the role of the artist in this way:

> The pure intention of the artist is that of a producer who aims to be autonomous, that is, entirely the master of his product, who tends to reject not only the 'programmes' imposed a priori by scholars and scribes, but also – following the old hierarchy of doing and saying – the interpretations superimposed a posteriori on his work …It also means a refusal to recognize any necessity other than that inscribed in the specific tradition of the artistic discipline in question (Bourdieu 1984, p. 3)

In other words, the artist (in this case, the dancer) is expected to be individually distinct, bound only by the conventions which make her/his work recognizable as dance. Therefore, in order to be a 'good' dancer, s/he must be distinctive from other dancers, as well.

This uncovers an aspect of artistic professions which might distinguish them from other occupations that have been studied to date. The common occupational standard by which a 'good' dancer is determined is his/her distinctiveness from other dancers. This places the dancer in an interesting quandary; in order to claim a 'dancer' identity, one must assume present a self that is truly unique, and consequently unidentifiable. This is not to say that there are no common boundaries

between dancers in general and non-dancers, but there is an additional layer of distinctiveness required in order to be evaluated favorably by one's peers. Moreover, this additional layer is by its very nature indefinable. This places dancers in a rather precarious place with regard to maintaining their identity. They must be unique from other dancers, but not so unique that they are no longer recognizable as dancers. Perhaps this is the most difficult dance of all.

Notes

1 – The exact number of students in the dance department is impossible to determine, as students are not considered fully matriculated dance majors until they reach a particular technique level (usually by the junior year). Therefore, there are a number of students who classify themselves as dance majors who are not officially considered so by the department. The department office manager estimated the enrollment of the department to be between 70-80 students during the semester I conducted my research.

2 – All names used are pseudonyms.

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