

Backstage Coach Productions

Dance Education

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PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUE 1

Performance technique may seem like an innate quality or charisma that some performers naturally exhibit. I believe, however, that these qualities are not as elusive to obtain as it may seem. In my studies at Texas Woman's University I have been exposed to the theory and practice of performance technique and this, in combination with my own performance experience, has given me cause to further examine what is happening when one is performing. I have a new-found appreciation for the space that the performer inhabits and the choices the performer makes within this space. We can thank our fellow actors for much of the theory that has been shared on performance theory. What has been learned in the discipline of acting transcends into other domains of performing arts. I have shared performance techniques in acting that are also applicable to dancers.

As a teacher of dance and as a performance coach I am often approached by dancers who struggle with communicating their intentions in a performance. A critique on skills by the judges seems to be comprehensible while a comment regarding showmanship usually elicits questions into unknown territory. How do you learn to fully express with both the face and body? How do you gain awareness of yourself in relationship to other performers, elements, and the audience in the performance space? Can this be learned? I believe performance is a technique and that there are methods that can be learned. The following are techniques that I suggest for enlivening the performance space. I believe these techniques will afford the dancer with opportunities for making choices that will result in more powerful ownership of the performance.

FOCUS

- Focus is the relationship between what one sees in space and how that intention is brought to life through the eyes, face, and entire body.
- Focus is the one, most important element that defines the performance space. Rehearse the entire performance understanding how focus will be used.
- Focus may be defined as the following:
 - inner focus: absorption coming from within
 - body focus: concentration given to a particular body part(s) while moving or in stillness
 - directional focus: the focus moves with the body in motion
 - dramatic focus: attention is given to an imaginary point, prop or person within the stage space
 - audience focus: the focus breaks the proscenium and is directed towards the audience while performing
 - horizon focus: the focus enlarges to encompass great distance where the sky and the earth meet
 - sky focus: opens outside of the proscenium setting
- Focus is often dropped during transitions. This may be a negative space for the performer, but it is a positive space for the audience.

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- While participating in a technique class keep the eyes active and relax the facial muscles -- meaning do not “glaze” over when concentrating on a balance or frown during a difficult move. Your focus and facial expressions during technique class will transcend into the performance so be aware of it.
- By keeping the face active I mean that you actually need to lift the facial muscles without lifting the brows which wrinkle the forehead.
- Work to remain focused in the moment without letting your mind wander. If you start to mentally plan your activities for after the show while holding a group pose, this disconnection will show in your eyes.

PREPARATION

- Always make it a 10! Begin and end the performance with consistent energy. A gradual build in focus and energy shows an amateur performer. The moment you begin the performance the needed focus and energy should be intact.
- The “moment before” is a term used to explain the preparation by the performer to transform into the character before the first movement begins. Begin before the beginning.
- The purpose of warming up is to develop a mental and physical awareness that brings you into a balanced state of mind that is performance-ready. Make the effort to fully prepare yourself for the show.

SPATIAL AWARENESS

- A performance is made up of both the performer and the audience and takes place in a particular space and time. The moment you arrive in the space you command it. Not the director, manager, nor producer has the power that you do in inhabiting the performance space. Be aware of your power.
- You are the primary agency that energizes the space so acknowledge the audience and invite them into the space to watch you. Own the space. Emotionally shutting out the audience due to stage fright only distances you from the very people you are trying to connect with.
- Nervousness or stage fright changes our pace (temporal awareness) and the ability to control movements. Rehearse with all physical elements as close to the real performance as possible to eliminate unpredictable behavior. For example, consider rehearsing with the actual costume, makeup, hair, props and shoes, in the actual space, with lighting.
- Envision the studio mirror as the 4th wall with a live audience. As the dancer performs he/she should do so with an awareness of the entire audience ranging from the upper and lower balconies, to the pit, as well as far stage right and left.
- Remain aware of yourself in relationship to other performers in the space. This will result in more believable interaction and help you to anticipate your movements.
- The larger the space you are performing in, the more exaggerated your gestures and movements may need to be. Project!

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- No matter what the space you are performing in, adapt the choreography to fit that particular space. When necessary, be creative and use the space you are given to the best of your ability.