

Lauren Mortimer

Capstone I

Melissa Teodoro

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The Hybrid Dancer: Versatility as the New Professional Standard

There is an old saying that goes, “Jack of all trades, master of none.” The saying dates back centuries. It may warn that overextending oneself and focusing on more than one thing may prohibit the mastery of one skill. While it may be comforting for people who stick with what they are accustomed to, it can also be harmful because it suggests that expanding your views and opening yourself to new experiences is a negative thing. In dance, this saying can become very restrictive. For a dancer seeking a lasting career, expanding their experiences and versatility is not only extremely helpful but also essential. Being a versatile dancer means being able to adapt and engage in a variety of dance styles, which opens up lots of opportunities. Terms such as “concert dancer” or “commercial dancer” can sound somewhat compartmentalizing, as a dancer must decide between two worlds. I am interested in researching how the already trained modern-day dancer can become more versatile in order to excel in this currently evolving competitive dance industry. How can the trained dancer continue to become more versatile to market themselves, build confidence, and create a stable career? For the sake of this paper, I will primarily be focusing on commercialized dance because I am keen to see the way it's evolved and the way it continues to progress. I am by no means looking to ignore concert dance, as I believe being able to do several forms and styles contributes greatly to the versatile dancer. I am looking to understand more about commercial dance because it is continuing to evolve, and I

have not had formal study and research during my time in higher education on this contextualized form. I have gained lots of insight into the values of postmodern dance and how these artists continue to push the limits of what dance can be. However, I will take a moment to define and compare “commercial” and “concert” dance for a deeper understanding of what it means to be versatile. I will make the case for the need for education and adaptability in every dancer’s journey. By embracing the evolving dance industry, dancers will see the need to be versatile, the importance of education, adaptability, and how to create a sustainable career.

The following information serves as a general overview discussion in comparing “concert” and “commercial” dance. Concert dance can be labeled as “...modern dance is, by definition, not definable” (Kaplan 7). From my studies, I have understood that postmodern choreographers wanted to test the boundaries of what dance truly was. They thought more about the task of creating movement and not necessarily the final performance or audience perspectives. One of our very own professors at Slippery Rock University classifies what postmodern dance was aimed at. Professor Ambrosio aimed postmodern dance as, “...post-moderns wanted to reduce dance to its simplest form and to examine what they thought dance really was... the eliminated the use of formal technique, instead examining the basic movements of dance, such as walking, running, skipping, and hopping” (Kaplan 8). Many postmodern dancers value the process of creating movement and the quality over the quantity. During my time at Slippery Rock University. I have had a class focused on the history of postmodern dance, improvisation, and Laban Movement Analysis. These are just to name a few classes. Recently, students at Slippery Rock University had the opportunity to learn repertory from Trishia Brown. Brown is a postmodern dancer and choreographer born in 1936. Her movements and company are still performing today to preserve her work. Brown has a specific technique. After learning

some of the repertory, I had a better understanding of concert postmodern dance and Brown. Her technique is task-oriented and focuses on simple movements. Not adding any extra movements or expression. It is about being very neutral and simple. For me, this was a hard thing to do, and I appreciated learning from Leah Ives from the Trishia Brown Company. Another more recent example was my experience in performing my contemporary work at the Detroit Dance City Festival. I performed a contemporary work at this festival, and I had the opportunity to watch many other performers. While concert dance has evolved so much, most of the dances were rather an internal expression and had a deeper meaning that the audience had to think deeply about. This was another great experience and opened me up to a variety of different dancers and choreography geared towards the idea of concert dance.

Commercial dance is geared toward the audience and is more business-oriented. This type of dance is highly produced and built for music videos, tours, television shows, commercials, and movies. It is intended for consumption and usually to promote a brand or artist. While concert dance seems to value quality, commercial dance values quantity and how it is the product is viewed. Commercial dance continues to evolve and raise new standards. I am so lucky to live in a time when dance is so alive. Dance has recently made a huge impact in the MTV Video Music Awards, becoming a huge hit and viewing experience with artists like Tate McRae and Lady Gaga. Dance continues to be involved in commercials like Gap. The emphasis on dance has completely changed by getting a larger community involved in watching and consuming it. Commercial dance, "serves as a liaison between the intellect of the concert stages and the general public...dance functions of television for a variety of different or overlapping reasons, the wider community is exposed to work that is somewhat comparable to that on the concert stage" (Williams 23). Viewers have easier accessibility to watching dance. Think about

the millions of views that the NFL Halftime performances, Dancing with the Stars, and popular music videos get. For example, Dancing with the Stars gets millions of views each week.

Dancers and popular stars perform duets within many styles and are then judged and eliminated each week. The audience has a huge say in who goes home because they get to be involved and vote. While there is a lot of behind-the-scenes work that goes into the dance that nondancers in the audience don't see, it is amazing how many people are so interested in the value of dance. This is another example of how commercial dance values what is being performed rather than the process. The audience and viewers' enjoyment and satisfaction play a huge role in the success of commercial dance.

The evolving way that dance is performed and produced shows the overlap and value of both aesthetics (Kaplan). I feel that these aesthetics are different in their own ways, but do exist on a spectrum. Understanding both aesthetics and the value of both process and product is something I believe is important for all aspiring professional dancers. The author goes on to say, "Exact placement on this spectrum isn't necessary; these points may not even exist. It is simple a tool to comprehend that nothing we do is purely and solely one thing" (Kaplan 17). Both are a mix of different views, decisions, characteristics, and choices that blend. Blending styles and learning to do both make for a versatile dancer who is prepared for their career. Sticking with one particular aesthetic is detrimental to a career. A toolbox of different ideas and styles will help dancers navigate and succeed professionally. My studies in higher education have been specifically focused on concert training and techniques. I have taken trips to NYC and Las Vegas to immerse myself in commercial dance and add more tools to my belt. My collegiate dance program has continued to add more opportunities and has begun integrating commercial values into the mainly modern curriculum. Continuing to evolve the curriculum places this program on

a continuum, understanding the importance of more variety and versatility. I will continue to research and develop ideas based on the idea of commercial values to educate myself and others on some of the skills, branding, and education needed to excel, as I am very interested in this research.

Versatile dancers are more marketable in the evolving industry. As dance continues to grow, more dancers are challenged by the competition for jobs. Being versatile and being able to do the many commercialized styles in addition to concert dance makes one more likely to be hired. Many works blend styles, and being able to morph the body into different techniques helps dancers stand out. Malcolm Gladwell says something important about bettering oneself: “it takes 10,000 hours to become a ‘master’ of one kind of skill.” (Ida 3). One doesn’t need to be a master of all styles, but rather to expose oneself to many different styles as much as one can. It is almost impossible to train that many hours on each style, but if a dancer splits up those hours and focuses their talents on many things, they will be more well-rounded. Dancers should prioritize taking classes that challenge them in other styles rather than one particular style that they are best at. Taking other styles that are challenging will help dancers become even better at the styles they already feel most comfortable with.

Marketability is extremely important in the role of social media. Trending posts on Instagram, TikTok, and the internet are ways for choreographers, agents, and casting directors to book dancers. These social media platforms can be digital profiles. Previously, auditions were in-person and required a resume and a headshot. I aim to share my research on how to brand oneself and the new social media tips while acknowledging the risks of social media, such as mental health.

According to the author, “social media allows users to sell themselves as the product or brand in exchange for attention.” (Rene 8). While social media is continually growing and instrumental in the commercial world of dance today, it does have risks to mental health. Dancers and others can spend hours making sure their post is perfect and allowing their likes and comments to become validating. This can negatively affect self-image. So, while social media can be important to get yourself out there, dancers must learn to use it as more of a business tactic and not too personally. Social media can sometimes lead to frustration. When social engagement starts to determine opportunities and professional life, it is important not to get this conflicted with one’s personal life and maintain their genuine well-being. This requires finding a balance between personal and professional life.

Media Update, which shares information regarding related information on marketing and advertising, shared an article titled, “10 Social Media Terms You Should Add to Your Vocabulary.” The authors “focus on 10 social media terms in wide use today: Engagement, Ephemeral Content, Filter, Handle, Hashtag, Lens, Impression, Share, Story, and Twitterati.” (Rene 12). Most of these terms are commonly understood and used by the Gen Z audience that grew up using social media. However, some of these terms I was not familiar with. While it is not significant that I go through these terms, I would recommend that readers and dancers research the meaning of these commonly used terms on social media so they have a better idea when using social media.

In addition to social media, personal branding is very necessary for dancers to develop. In the Social Media and Its Effects in the Commercial Dance World article, the author discusses the importance of creating a social media strategy for branding and its importance, “A personal brand refers to the sum of what a person uniquely offers to their followers on social media. It

distinguishes a person's vision, values, and way of life. This personal brand should set an individual apart from other Influencers on social media" (Rene 21). Developing a personal brand is essential to determine the kind of dancer you are, what you value, and what jobs you want to work towards. Everyone is unique, and it is crucial to determine what one's likes and dislikes are so they can start to develop a plan as they move into their careers. Dancer AntBoogie is a professional dancer and commercially successful dancer for the group known as The Amount Boyz. He notes that from his experience, social media can really impact the way that the commercial industry looks at you for paid bookings. He concludes that it is important to stay competitive and keep your social media up to date, so choreographers, agents, and casting directors have an updated view of your skills. One should continue to build their brand that highlights what they do, what they are good at, and what makes them stand out from others in the market (Rene 14). Furthermore, the article highlights that bringing social media information and its place in the commercial side of the dance into college programs would "help to bridge the gap between the commercial industry and college dance. Allowing dancers to be exposed to that type of training could greatly benefit them and prepare them for more opportunities in the future" (Rene 31). There are so many different routes for dancers, and giving them as much information as possible is very helpful. All students learn differently and are interested in different things.

The industry has also been shifting to a lot of online audition submissions rather than huge cattle calls. I have submitted several video clips of myself dancing and also learning little phrases to submit, rather than attending in-person calls. This saves money and time for both dancers and casting teams. However, it does mean that now many more dancers can submit to the audition, which ups the competition by a lot. So, this is another reason that online presence on social media is important to show your brand and be competitive. You may submit a 30-

second video of yourself dancing to the casting team, but then they may go online to see your presence and content if they need more information on you.

It can also be useful to apply as a brand ambassador, “a brand ambassador, sometimes called a corporate ambassador, is someone hired by an organization or company to represent a brand in a positive light to help increase brand awareness and sales” (Rene 34). Companies look for dancers to support and promote their brands, and while you can support them, they can support you by reposting and posting your content on their social pages. This drives more people to your page and can help you gain more followers who are interested in your content. When branding yourself on social media, it’s important to figure out your target audience, your personal strategy to stay up to date and show your versatility, what content you will post, engagement, which includes using hashtags, reposting, and consistency, and finally, how you will monitor your performance on socials, like your audience growth.

Now, to tie this into in-person auditions, I found some valuable information regarding auditions. Preparation and research for the audition are key. You must research what you are auditioning for and be able to embody what that is. Understanding the role for which you are auditioning will help you connect to the character. You must wear the appropriate attire and follow the instructions; this is the first look that casting directors get when you enter the room. You will feel much more confident if you research what you are auditioning for and prepare successfully.

Do not overlook this information; it is the first thing the casting agents will look at, to see if you can follow directions and if you are actually prepared. The author goes on, “In other words, don’t waste someone’s time if you’re 29 and they’re looking for a 13-year-old girl, just to be seen” (Evans 2). Commercial auditions usually look for a particular person. They may be

looking for someone with a certain hair color, height, and body type for that day. Pay attention to whether they specify this; if they don't, don't be too hard on yourself because they may be looking for someone particular on that day. It's also important to research the audition so you are not wasting your time. It can be beneficial to audition for experience, but you should prioritize auditions that interest you and align with your artistic skills. Auditions can be time-consuming and costly, especially if you have to travel, print headshots, and purchase specific attire. For some commercial dance auditions, for cruise lines, for example, you may have to sing. If one is interested in auditions where singing is involved, one should be able to hold a note. The author urges dancers to start training early to develop the confidence to sing and hold a note. The author notes, "This is a skill that most dancers overlook. Today, the auditioning staff does not just look at technique; they look for personality, type, character, and whether or not the dancer can actually communicate and emote her dancing and singing" (Evans 3). Have a song prepared in case they ask you to sing, and you must be able to display confidence. This is essential for Broadway shows as well. Singing adds more tools to one's belt and makes the versatile dancer stand out.

Understanding the reality of transitioning from college to a professional dance career is crucial. A dancer can be faced with economic challenges and may have to develop additional skills to support themselves. One needs a Plan B and maybe even a Plan C for the times in between a contract. It is important to keep your face out there and stay connected while you are just graduating and maybe doing other work before dance work comes along. Continue to train and stay present in the field. Start auditioning early.

Professional Insight from Rebbi Rose is a great reminder of the mindset needed to transition into a career. Rebbi Rose has toured with Rihanna, Beyoncé, Missy Elliott, JLo, and Pharrell Williams. She offers helpful advice in the industry:

“When you keep training, you're always at your very best. It's important to be as versatile as possible and not limit the types of jobs you can do. Get an agent and start auditioning when you can. Make a bucket list when you check everything off, make another. Do your research and make a list of choreographers you want to work for. If they teach classes, then make sure you are there. Take care of your mental health, the industry can be brutal, and yet we must still push on, but you’ve got to get your mind right to fight another day” (Trahearn 50).

This professional insight helps tie my paper together. It shows how training, versatility, and mental resilience are all needed to transition into a long career in dance. To be successful in the commercial dance industry, a dancer not only needs to be versatile and technical, but they must also be persistent and adaptable.

I believe that having experience in concert dance has made me a better commercial dancer. Likewise, I believe that my experience with commercial dance has made me a better concert dancer. The skills between both of these aesthetics translate well and make one more versatile. Concert dance explores clear body awareness and an emphasis on internal expression and quality. These qualities translate to commercial dance and help approach these aesthetics in better ways. Commercial dance also strengthens my versatility, along with concert dance. The precision and ability to pick up commercial choreography quickly help one become more versatile. Both of these aesthetics feed into each other and bring out many positives. A well-rounded, versatile dancer will benefit greatly from having training in both aesthetics. They will be able to keep up with the evolving demands of the professional dance career.

In the Spring, I plan on pulling inspiration from my research to create my work. I have created a few pieces during my time at SRU. I have created a political piece, a concert work, and

a commercial heels work. These experiences have helped me decide on my research and will also inspire my future capstone piece. After researching the pros of being a versatile dancer, I will prioritize diverse movement and work in collaboration with my dancer to create movement that is diverse and incorporates many styles. I plan on talking with my dancers about the marketability and how to brand themselves as dancers in this competitive industry. I want to work between concert and commercial dance, as many of my aesthetics have been shaped by both of these forms. I also hope to challenge my dancers to work between different aesthetics and genres and encourage versatility. Through my research, I have also learned about how to launch a professional career. I will save this work in my portfolio to show agents and casting directors. It will also serve as a platform for networking. I would submit my choreography to more festivals and add to my reel.

In conclusion, the modern-day dancer must take their training to the next level and become versatile in order to have a sustainable career. Commercial and concert dance continue to blur lines and work with one another in several aspects. Dancers need to be able to transition between both worlds. The dance world continues to evolve and expand. The commercial dancer must use versatility and relationships and maintain a strong personal brand. Experiences in both concert and commercial dance strengthen adaptability and make dancers more marketable. My research and personal experiences have shaped me and led me to the importance of being a versatile dancer.

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