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Artists and Audiences

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Slacktivism and Unspoken Cultural Policy

When tasked with writing a piece about arts and activism, I drew upon what influences me as an artist now. As much as my pure love for the art of dance was a prominent thought, I found that my interest in dance and activism works within the realm of cultural politics pertaining to competitive dance for adolescents. I began to question the politics of this realm of dance and how I could participate in the conversation as an educator and participant in Competition Dance culture, while also applying my knowledge of and passion for activism as a teacher and choreographer. I set out with the following question: how has competition dance evolved into this machine for creating slacktivist athletes?

To begin, I wanted to look at the histories of postmodern dance and competitive dance at the same time and draw comparisons. The first established competitive dance platform is known as Showstopper and it still is a nationally renowned competition. It was aired on television for 20 years, much like *World of Dance* and *So You Think You Can Dance* are aired now, but now it is for live spectators and those following on the online live stream. This form of dance was created within a sports-like view of dance, as stated by the founder of Showstopper competitions Debbie Roberts, “Before 1978, dancers didn’t have a stage to perform on... or a competitive outlet like most sports,” (Our Story « Showstopper). In 1978, Postmodern Dance had been growing and

expanding as an art form and an organism for almost 20 years, with works such as *Trio A* by Yvonne Rainer being produced that year.

By watching footage from the early competitions and *Trio A*, you can see here that there is a very specific comparison and contrast to these two realms of dance. For the purposes of my research, I refer to the dance being done by Rainer to be concert dance. Rainer's position within concert dance and postmodern dance in general was from an activist standpoint and even opposed many of the aesthetics of those who trained her such as Martha Graham. Debbie Roberts, the founder of what became the platform for competition dance or commercialized dance as we know it today, described finding her aesthetic within the realms of dance as a competitive sport. This could position Roberts as an early activist operating the opposite end of the spectrum as Rainer. Rainer looked into the concept of dance as art through pedestrianism and Roberts was looking at the world from a lens of dance as sport through the performative showcasing of gymnastics within dance.

Both performances seemed to showcase dance for dance's sake- dance not attempting to be in a narrative format or derived from emotional sensations undertaken, but movement generated by bodies and the sensation of purely creating movement. This loose definition would categorize early competitive dance as postmodern dance as well. However, the way in which it is presented in each context is very different. Rainer utilized no sound in *Trio A* as well as minimal costume elements that supported the main idea of the dance. The multiple Showstopper performances showcased dancers dressed in bright rhinestone coated costumes with excessive hair and makeup. The movement of both works was more distal in nature, but the movement in the competitive performance seemed to incorporate more gymnastics and high kicks than that of

Rainer's work, being physical evidence to how both platforms value what their idea of dance is. After considering these histories I asked: how is it that we have ascended to this level of false activism in competition and commercial dance today? I find that the answer lies in two ideas: capitalism, and slacktivism.

Capitalism fuels artists and non artists alike, and concert and competition dance are no exemption to the rule. While the NEA has funneled over \$268.7 million between 1966 and 2015, and they are very open about this fact, dance competitions do not disclose their yearly earnings, so I did some investigation of my own. I decided to look into just the entry fees of the dancers who competed in Showstopper in 2019 (National Endowment for the Arts). By looking at the lowest end of the spectrum's entry fees for Showstopper (\$50 a dancer for group numbers), and averaging the amount of dancers in each -as solos and duet/trios are more expensive it evens itself out-, we can see at least just how much the competition is making. With 43 events around the country, with an average number of entries around 200 a weekend, that makes approximately 8,600 dances a year. If the average number of dancers in these works being eight, times \$50 a dancer for entry fees, this comes out to about \$3,440,000. Now this is just for entry fees and does not include profit from apparel, optional titles, conventions, and sponsors. On the entry fees alone, it seems to fall short of what the NEA average to dancers has been for the 49 years it reported on. And yet the works that the NEA has endorsed and pushed into the world air on the side of true activism, like the works of Ananya Dance Theatre. Dance competitions, unfortunately, continue to operate in this realm of slacktivism.

Slacktivism is defined as "when people 'support a cause by performing simple measures' but 'are not truly engaged or devoted to making a change,'" by the United Nations (Muslic) .

This style of storytelling in competitive/commercial dance has reached new heights of popularity, reaching to audiences everywhere through the screening of works from popular media based on the foundations of competition dance online now. An example to look at within this is how Travis Wall, a prominent commercial and competitive choreographer, addresses how he handles racism through both his piece titled *Strange Fruit* and an interview conducted by The Wrap on YouTube. His interview indicates that the piece was being considered when the Unite the Right rally happened in Charlottesville happened in 2018. His words seem to inspire a lot of passion, “take my hand in your hand... we’re all in this together”, visions of a future where people can be together. Within his interview, he also states that the piece helped people who watched the piece be able to explain the injustices happening in that part of the country to those who may not otherwise understand. Halfway through the interview he says, “...was it controversial maybe that I was speaking on this? Yes, I didn’t care...”(Wrap 1:41). While, yes, it is good that white people respond to and reject racism and racist parts of culture, the dance created is a poor reflection of Wall’s mission in this interview.

The piece of work begins with a myriad of bodies clothed in all white laying in the shadow of a barren tree, almost as if they are the fruit themselves. The majority of the movement derives from competitive work, utilizing athletic lifts and jumps to further the message, working within a mimetic syntax in tandem with Nina Simone’s rendition of “Strange Fruit”. While the movement does work well in the context of the platform in which the dance is settled, the actual semiotics of bodies reads another story. Not only do the bodies utilize a historically white and appropriative dance style to tell their story, but they also do the exact work Wall was speaking against in his interview. The piece deals with lynching in years past, as made evident to the

slavery-era inspired costuming and the moment when each dancer is writhing on the ground in the shadow of the tree as if they are being hanged. While this is also problematic and generationally traumatic for those who may have witnessed and lived through these events then, the piece ignores the fact that this kind of violent act of racism is still alive and well today. It also performs its own kind of violent act through the cinematography and staging of the piece; in all but two moments the bodies at the forefront of the stage and screen are white bodies posing as if they have the generational knowledge of lynching in them. The bodies which the music is specifically referencing, “Black bodies swinging in the summer breeze,” were not even those highlighted within the piece. So how, then, did this work present itself on such a big stage in such a big way, with such a backwards ideology fueling it, and provide any sort of clarity to the racism happening?

In this case of racism and the telling of stories of the suffering of black peoples, it is not a new idea seen in dance or the greater spectrum of art for that matter. Art pertaining to black struggles more often than not have to do with slavery only in the time it existed and not the ripples it causes with audiences today. This is to make modern white audiences more comfortable about the black struggle, and this is evident through popularity of media. Look at *Revelations* from the Alvin Ailey company and it’s popularity with audiences across the board for over 50 years. It is work that places the black struggle on stage framed by spiritual song, creating that familiar and comfortable narrative of black people only struggling through slavery and not struggling through times of today. There’s no denying the genius of the work of *Revelations* and it is still an incredible piece of art, but there is something to be said about its popularity in comparison to works like that of Urban Bush Women’s *Hair and Other Stories*. I

observed mostly white dance appreciators and people who were a part of the black community at the showing I attended of this work. This work was one that challenged notions of racism today without repackaging the tale of slavery when it happened; it was a response to the ripples of colonialism that continue to affect the lives of the dancers and those within their communities. And yet the popularity of Urban Bush Women does not extend itself far beyond the reaches of the dance community as that of the Ailey company. The platform on which competitive and commercial dance sits upon reaches even more audiences than even the Ailey company does due to its cultural power and relevance yet again. It uses sensationalism and entertainment to put ideas on display without responding to or commentating on those ideas, such as that of *Strange Fruit*. The piece did not provide new insight to the issue of racism from a new lens, it did not challenge any ideas in place, it simply said “Racism is bad, we should stop,” while operating racist colonial ideologies to get its point across. So why, then, does work like this do so well virally?

This is where cultural policy comes into play. The National Performance Network defines cultural policy as, “a system of arrangements (policies, practices, trends, etc.), both public and private, that govern and influence the arts and cultural sector.” (“Cultural Policy / National Performance Network.”). Both concert and competition dance utilize different aspects of cultural policy to their advantage through the kinds of activism they wish to enact upon. Concert dance uses the monetary cultural policies in place, such as receiving funding from the NEA, to enact dance with social change and activist messages that often times live past the works themselves. This goes without saying that concert dance has a lot of problems while dealing with all kinds of intersectionality ideas, but dance that gives back to communities and

enacts social change concentrates itself more in the field of concert dance. Competitive and commercial dance, however, operates the private and unspoken policies of sensationalism and entertainment to keep the industry afloat while operating this light activism. Cultural Policy, within that of social norms, relies on not being challenged, but feeling as though an individual has made a difference. This is how slacktivism has become a part of the culture of competitive dance now and will probably continue to be a part of the culture as well for many years to come. Spectators often do not want to be challenged in the way they think, we as humans want to be reassured that we are right. This is why stories of slavery or black people overcoming oppression in the past through the help of a white savior, do so well with vast audiences. This almost unspoken cultural policy of “do not challenge ideas presented only bring them to the light” feeds a culture that thrives on instant gratification through social media. Dances done about racism or the holocaust put on bodies that do not have a place telling those stories or pieces about bullying that simply tell statistics of bullies and suicide rates among those bullied do not spark new conversations as much as they continue to perpetuate old ones.

So how, then, can we, as educators, change the conversation for these young dancers without losing the essence of dance as a sport? Is it even possible? There are two avenues that a choreographer can take in regards to this: removal of activism and move back to dance for dance’s sake, or amp up the activism and community engagement. There may be other options, but after discussing my findings with my other colleagues and noticing trends in competitive dance, these two options seem to be up in the very top.

The removal of activism or activist messages from pieces can stop the spread of misinformation to young dancers and can bring the form back to its historical roots. Competition

dance, while always flashy and athletic, hasn't always had messages behind the dances and stories to convey. This has been a trend within the last 25 years of competition dance, and while storytelling does make a dance more competitive, telling stories about subject matters that both the teacher and the dancers are not properly educated on can hinder the social growth of young dancers. As a competitive dancer myself, I fell victim to a stifling of personal growth through the negligence of my choreographer. My senior year of High School, she decided to do a dance piece about human trafficking. While that was the subject matter of the song, and we lightly discussed it in class, the adult in charge of us teenagers ranging from ages 13-17 did not do any careful research into the subject of human trafficking, derive any movement from reactions to that of human trafficking, or align us with any ways to help put an end to this tragic crime. We simply said we were doing a dance about human trafficking, emoted while doing an athletic and entertaining dance, and never gave the subject a second thought.

A way in which choreographers could change this norm could be with the inclusion of community engagement and activism within the actual dancing. Instead of simply stating the idea to the dancers after placing seemingly unconnected movement to music with a message, creators could educate their dancers and create works that are catalysts to social change within youth populations. This would be a fusion of the concepts of process found in concert dance and the product based machine put in place for competition choreographers to work within. While this may be difficult for choreographers as it would mean they need to do more research and find community engagement, it is possible to do. Asking choreographers to look at their population of dancers they have to work with and ask themselves not only what stories they can tell but what

stories would be appropriate for the dancers ages, races, genders, classes, etc. and still include the techniques being worked on by these young athletes is not an impossible task.

With the answer to my initial question answered, I set off as a choreographer of young competitive dancers to seek a new form of competitive dance art. One that values both process and product without sacrificing the heart of competitive dance: dance as a sport. Through careful research of the dancers I have available and activist concepts that interest me as an artist, I can create work that sparks social change with young dancers as they blossom into the adults they will be one day.

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