

Character of the Dance

A Multimedia, Performative Lecture on Competitive Ballroom Dancing

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Problem Statement and Significance

For many people, ballroom dancing is something their grandparents knew how to do, or it's something they saw on TV, or its just plain foreign to them. What is Ballroom dancing? Where did it come from? How has it changed over time to become what we are familiar with today? In what ways have our cultural attitudes impacted its history? I have been grappling with these questions for a long time, and I have found many different "characters", meaning traits and roles, to which the form adheres. How important are these characters? What makes ballroom dancing, ballroom dancing? What exactly is the Character of the Dance?"¹

The above passage is the first section of text spoken in *Character of the Dance*, a multimedia, performative lecture on the competitive world of ballroom dancing. While the development of social dancing has been widely published, the competitive history, and the implications of that history, have largely fallen through the cracks of dance academia.² The codification of formal ballroom technique in the early 20th century provided a structure in which skilled dancers could excel and elevate the form to new heights. However, the formalization of the Standard and Latin dances has implicitly tied the form to larger socio-political issues including cultural appropriation, racism, sexism, and heteronormativity.³ Ballroom dancing has been repeatedly stylized and bastardized such that it has lost a great deal of the character in which it was created that distinguishes it from other dance forms – the art of two bodies moving together as one in time to music while maintaining some form of physical connection through

¹ Max Greenhouse, *Character of the Dance*. (2016).

² Key works that have been published include Juliet McMains, [Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry](#). (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2006), Julia Ericksen, [Dance with Me: Ballroom Dancing and the Promise of Instant Intimacy](#). (New York: New York UP, 2011), and Caroline Picart, [From Ballroom to Dancesport: Aesthetics, Athletics, and Body Culture](#). (Albany: State U of New York, 2006).

³ "Ballroom" in the American, competitive sense refers to an umbrella category of four different styles. Standard, the original style, is comprised of the Waltz, Tango, Foxtrot, Quickstep, and Viennese Waltz. Latin, short for Latin and American, is comprised of Cha Cha, Samba, Rumba, Paso Doble, and Jive. Both Standard and Latin are competed internationally. The American version of Standard is known as Smooth and is comprised of variations of the Waltz, Tango, Foxtrot, and Viennese Waltz, while the American version of Latin, Rhythm, is comprised of variations of the Cha Cha and Rumba but also includes the East Coast Swing, Mambo, and Bolero. Internationally, Standard is sometimes referred to as "ballroom."

which to transmit or receive energy.⁴ Its genre is even ambiguous, for ballroom's identity as dance, sport, or DanceSport, its most recent categorization, has been hotly contested for over twenty years. For all of these reasons, ballroom is often considered far too grotesque, shallow, and inauthentic to have true artistic potential.

Framed as a lecture on competitive ballroom dancing, *Character of the Dance* seeks to combat these issues in live performance and propose long-term solutions. There have been very few experimental dance or theatrical productions that have previously taken on these issues. Louis Van Amstel's company, Van Dance Creations, mounted two productions, *Ballati* in 1998 and *Latin Fusion* in 2002 that "[represented] ambiguous attempts to a develop a viable stage form in which DanceSport is integrated with concepts and techniques from concert dance."⁵ The 2000 production *Against Line of Dance* "attempted to combine theatre and dance in a narrative performance that employs DanceSport vocabulary to critique the ballroom dance industry."⁶ Other theatrical dance companies that have existed both past and present include American Ballroom Theatre Company, American Dance Montage, and the Brigham Young University Dance Company.⁷ There have also been a few show dance routines that satirize the ballroom industry through their thematic and choreographic content.⁸⁹

⁴ In a group lecture, former Latin champion Eugene Katsevman asked the participants to pinpoint why they dance before concluding that it was the act of moving with another person to music that separated ballroom from other dance forms.

⁵ McMains 181.

⁶ Ibid 187.

⁷ Frank Regan, *Championship Ballroom Dancing*, (Minneapolis: EAB, 1994) 111.

⁸ See McMains 176-180 for a thorough analysis of show dance routines by Dima and Olga Sukachov, Sergej Milicija and Katja Klep, Kenny and Marion Welsh, and Stephen and Lindsey Hillier.

⁹ Show dance routines are choreographed numbers that dancers use when contracted to perform for a live audience. These routines are not judged. The couple enters the space not as competitors but as highly lucrative performers. Their show is often the highlight of a weekend-long competitive event. Show couples often perform for a sold out audience. A large portion of the audience for these shows is less experienced competitors who competed that weekend and stay to be inspired by more experienced dancers and more advanced choreography.

To my knowledge, none of the aforementioned productions have taken into consideration the role that media representation has on the public's perception, obsession, and/ or distaste of the form. In that same vein, the incorporation of multimedia and cinematic content in theatre is still a relatively new and experimental concept. Because many people do not regularly observe ballroom competitions in person, the representation of ballroom on camera has proven one of the most massive conduits of spreading the form to new audiences. As such, the narrator of *Character of the Dance* analyzes a variety of media content in real time to not only provide commentary but to juxtapose that content with theatrical scenes and unconventional ballroom numbers throughout the show.

Introduction: My Immersion into the Ballroom Dance Scene

When I arrived at Tufts University, the last thing on my mind was ballroom dancing. I was an aspiring actor in rehearsal for over twenty hours a week. Performing, directing, stage managing, and lighting were all on my radar, but my overall goal was to become a theatre professional. It didn't matter what role I had, what play I was in, or what I was learning, for as long as I was in some kind of show, I was happy. As a supplement to my theatrical training, I planned to study film and English to give myself a more well-rounded education. I had no interest in anything else. I had to be cast in every play I auditioned for, because rejection meant that I was somehow unfit to be an actor. I craved the approval of my peers, because I equated my success as an actor with how others perceived my work. I could not connect to the fundamental idea of storytelling in theatre because I was too preoccupied with my own upward mobility in the industry.

I stumbled upon ballroom wholly by accident. When I was out walking one day, I happened to see a flier for an exhibition and lesson later that night. I was always fascinated with ballroom dancing from watching it on *So You Think You Can Dance*. I found it to be a fun, energizing, and creative way to interact with another person. I had nothing planned for that night, so I decided to attend. I was mesmerized. All of the dancers seemed so confident, so secure with themselves that they could make even the most difficult moves look easy. I wanted to move with another person like they could. I wanted to perform for my peers in a way that showcased my skill and my individuality. At the end of the show, we all stood up to learn the basic moves of East Coast Swing. I learned the moves, and someone even asked if I could help them. Little did I know that would be the first time I would teach another person how to dance.

Even though I had a great time at the event, there was simply no way I could join this group. I was already overcommitted with the plays I was working on. I asked the team captains if I could attend their events sporadically, and they had no problem with it. I signed up, and the next week I was attending group lessons. This initial sojourn into ballroom had a profound effect on me. In all of my years in theatre, I had never connected to the material the way I was able to in dance. I was given concrete, tangible criticism that allowed me to track my progress. It was so much easier to tell when I was improving because I could see it in the physical moves I was doing. Dancing at that time was objective. It was concrete, it made sense, and it inspired me to give it my all because the rewards actually seemed to be within my grasp.

Meanwhile, in play practice, I continued to feel insecure about my acting ability, my script analysis, my choices, and my voice. I could not find any tangibles, any direct methods of improving my skill because of my fear of failure. It was these contrasting sensations of acceptance and rejection, confidence and insecurity, and hope and despair in ballroom and

theatre respectively that gradually redirected my interest from theatre to competitive ballroom dancing.

Ballroom became my new performance outlet. I trained daily through group classes, private instruction, and open practice. By my junior year, my partner and I were able to execute the basic movements in the Latin division with clarity, ease, and precision. As such, we began to receive notes about the importance of our performance *as a couple*. Our job was to communicate something with our unified movements. We were asked to work together in a way that required trust, collaboration, and a common goal. By this time, however, our partnership had become strained, and it proved impossible to incorporate these qualities into our dancing. My partner was primarily interested in perfecting the physical technique behind the moves we were competing. I was also interested in that aspect of dancing, but by this point in my college career I had taken several acting classes and was eager to incorporate that new knowledge into our dancing. I wanted to use my theatre education to broaden my possibilities in ballroom and shape my dancing in a way that most other dancers at my level were unequipped to do. However, our deteriorating partnership prevented such collaboration from occurring.

Dance and Sport

The conflict between the willingness and refusal to act in ballroom dancing was the initial catalyst for my academic exploration into the subject. I had found the first of many diametrically opposed “characters” to which the form adhered. The technique and the acting. The physical movements and the performance of those movements. The importance of technique in ballroom was not my concern. I agreed wholeheartedly that the development of technique provides dancers with the cleanest, most refined quality of movement possible. However, my

concern was with pursuing that technique as end goal, for that is what an athlete aspires to do. An artist, on the other hand, seeks to use their technique as a tool to share their voice and create something. In my research, I learned that the ballroom dance industry is widely split on this issue with its two primary governing bodies at odds over whether ballroom dance is art or sport.

The World Dance Council (WDC) and the World DanceSport Federation (WDSF) could not be more ideologically and systemically opposed. The World Dance Council, originally known as the International Council of Ballroom Dancing, is both an amateur and a professional organization, offering competitions in the Amateur Youth, Adult, Senior, and Professional categories in the International styles. According to its mission, “the WDC is committed to their goal of encouraging and promoting dance through its broad world membership.”¹⁰ The Blackpool Dance Festival, held annually in Blackpool, England since 1920, is the most prestigious ballroom competition in the world.¹¹ It is hosted annually by the British Dance Council, a member organization of the WDC.¹² The couples who win Blackpool are the celebrities of the WDC. They represent the pinnacle of current professional ballroom dancing across the world.

The World DanceSport Federation is primarily an amateur, athletically oriented organization. Founded in Germany in 1957, its mission states that the WDSF “seeks to establish itself as the cohesive force between different stakeholders in the sporting activities which involve dance and to promote the sport on the strengths of a greater constituency, of the broadest demographic appeal, and of benefits arising from economy of scale.”¹³ While its professional

¹⁰ “General Council.” WDC Dance. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

¹¹ “Blackpool Dance Festival History.” *Blackpool Dance Festival*. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

¹² “Organizations General Council.” *Members*. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

¹³ “Vision.” *World DanceSport Federation*. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

division lacks the prestige and history of the WDC, the WDSF became the sole Olympic recognized governing body for Dancesport in 1997.¹⁴

The politics behind whether or not ballroom should be considered a sport are multifaceted. In her book From Ballroom to Dancesport, Caroline Picart begins her chapter on the history of ballroom's incorporation into the Olympics with a series of complaints made by dancers at the 2000 Olympics during a DanceSport exhibition who felt underappreciated and highly mistreated because they were not considered "real athletes."¹⁵ Those in favor of ballroom as sport seek recognition for their physical prowess and fitness, for it requires incredible strength, agility, and stamina to compete at the highest level. They also seek the incredible financial support that accompanies any major, international sport in a culture where the arts are incredibly undervalued and receive minimal funding comparatively.¹⁶

Those who advocate for ballroom dance as an art form, considered to be "traditionalists" by the "progressive" DanceSport advocates, take issue with the pursuit of technique as the only merit of the form.¹⁷ Former World Champions Christopher Hawkins and Hazel Newberry captured this sentiment by calling into question the hypothetical "awarding of an Olympic gold medal to dancers who in Quickstep run *faster*, hop *higher*, or hold each other together *stronger* that is devoid of artistic considerations."¹⁸ These dancers do not condone flashy choreography designed to woo a judge or an audience into favoring them out of a sea of couples; they advocate for the pursuit of technical mastery to provide dancers with the freedom to *choose* how they wish to dance.

¹⁴ Picart 70.

¹⁵ Ibid 69.

¹⁶ Ibid 84.

¹⁷ Ibid 74.

¹⁸ Qtd in Ibid 77.

As a competitor and a performing artist, I do not personally believe that ballroom dance is a sport. I maintain a high level of physical fitness in order to perform my choreography well. The muscles in my back, shoulder, and ankles have developed as a result of my training. I cherish my body as my instrument, as my toolbox, but I do not consider the competitions I strive to win a sport. I compete to demonstrate that my *art* is the most refined, the most dynamic, and the most complex. I execute basic moves like Feather Steps, Natural Turns, and Rumba Walks on a daily basis. My end goal is to master these movements so that I can *use* them to create art. Perhaps I will choose to dance a Foxtrot that is indicative of its social origins in early 20th century Vaudeville.¹⁹ Perhaps I will dance a Rumba that tells a passionate story of romance and betrayal. I seek to master a technique that allows me to make artistic choices like these and infinitely more, for the movements themselves are *not* my end goal.

To illustrate the conflict between art and sport in *Character of the Dance*, I began with an eight-person ensemble number that, in part, satirized the technical structures and codifications in ballroom dancing that are held up on a pedestal throughout one's initial training. These includes the "T-Line" frame that is formed between the horizontal line of one's arms and the vertical line of their spine as well as the "shape" or curve of the lady's spine when she dances "in contact" with the man. I choreographed a sequence of staccato positions for each dancer to "hit" in unison, but separately as individuals, to demonstrate how fixed and artificial these positions can become without an adequate understanding of their function. I sought to indicate that these fixed positions are something we *perform* as dancers, especially when "keep your frame up, lower your shoulder blades, and shape more" are some of the most common directions given in ballroom lessons worldwide. These directions, or notes, are so over-emphasized that the

¹⁹ Julie Malnig, *Dancing till Dawn: A Century of Exhibition Ballroom Dance*. (New York: Greenwood, 1992) 2.

intermediate portions of training often have to correct the problems these initial notes create in the first place.

I also wanted to demonstrate the extent to which the WDSF advocates for dance as sport and for the pursuit of physical perfection to achieve that goal.²⁰ To do so, I included their commercial for the 2021 World DanceSport Games and spliced in images of spray tanning and the Swarovski crystals that adorn DanceSport costumes.²¹ Both of these elements enhance the physical glamour of a couple and help draw attention to them in a positive manner.²² Dancers have gone beyond the stylistic forms in which the dances were created in order to come out on top. Immediately following this clip was the first of three numbers that satirized the technically incorrect and artificial, yet aesthetically pleasing, elements of a successful, low-level competitive routine. Each number was danced to an overplayed song that most competitors have danced to on more than one occasion. I also added a cheering section of spectators to motivate the couple to mirror the common practice at ballroom competitions and at major sporting events. The more we cheer and yell and scream for our favorite couple to *beat* the other couples, the further away from creating true art we find ourselves.

Theatrical Technique

The increased drive to please judges and audience members has significantly increased the spectacle of competitive ballroom dance. Moves are flashier, more “outside the box” than ever before. However, as competitive choreography becomes directed to the audience rather than

²⁰ While I primarily focus on DanceSport in the WDSF, the competitive drive in both the WDSF and the WDC has promoted a continued exaggeration of physicality and style that constitutes a major departure from social dance.

²¹ DanceSportTotal, "The World DanceSport Games | Promotional | DanceSport Total", Thomaifilm. SwarovskiCommercial I Had the Pleasure of Producing", "Professional Competition Spray Tanning with Pro Tan®."

²² McMain's book, Glamour Addiction, criticizes the artificial and cosmetic aesthetics of competitive ballroom that do not have anything to do with the actual technique of the form.

within the actual partnership, the act of *entertaining* a crowd is often misinterpreted as *performing* for them. Former World Champion Louis Van Amstel defines entertaining as leaving the world you have created with your partner and entering the world of the audience, pandering to them for their approval and disregarding the *actions* you should be focused on executing. While your awareness of the judges and audience prevents you from being small and insecure, your sole focus on their presence is detrimental to your ability to truly perform. Amstel's analogy for performing properly is to imagine that you are hosting an Open House. While you invite various guests to attend your event, it is still your house, your world, your environment.²³

For the audience that does not dance, there is a tremendous fascination with the emotional output and expression of two dancers moving together in a flirtatious or romantic manner.²⁴ They do not care how those emotions are created or portrayed, only that they exist. They do not care if those sentiments are genuine or artificial as long as the couple demonstrates a level of charisma and interacts with them as if they are truly pleased to see them. Ericksen's chapter entitled "Feeling the Dance, Showing the Magic" does not once address any concept or theory of acting technique in the production of these sentiments. Rather, she fluctuates between discussing some couples with romantic relationships off the floor and others who do not in an attempt to analyze where these "emotions" come from.²⁵ What Ericksen and audiences who do not dance, or act for that matter, ignore is the fact that feeling an emotion is a state of being, and the portrayal of a state of being is not an active choice in acting. To "have" an emotional response is passive. It is a reaction to the various physical verbal *actions* that we strive to execute as well-trained actors.

²³ Louis Van Amstel. "Three Genres of Ballroom Dancing." Personal interview. 2 July 2015.

²⁴ Ericksen 98.

²⁵ Ibid.

It is no wonder that so many viewers watch ballroom competitions and find the “acting” to be generalized, painted on expression that tells no real story and is indicative of no real character development or preparation on the part of the dancer. I understand now that the type of acting I wanted to do with my former partner was indeed performing, not entertaining. I wanted to interact with her based on the characters we were taught for each dance. But even still, these characters were merely generalized, watered-down caricatures of what had the potential to tell a gripping story through dance. For ease of teaching and consistency in judging, each competitive dance is often simplified to one basic character. For example, the rumba is considered to be the dance of love, passion, romance. The male dancer plays a character who is in constant pursuit of his female partner. Her character may choose to embrace him, break away, and return to him on a dime, for no competitive routine is watched from beginning to end. There are multiple couples on the floor in any given round, and the judges’ attention must be split in order to rank each couple. As such, the vast majority of competitive routines contain sharp contrasts in movement quality, tone, and gesture every few seconds to provide couples with the best opportunity for attracting the attention of the judges. A quick sequence of leg movement might be juxtaposed with a slower contraction of the upper body. A high, vertical line could be contrasted with a lower, more horizontal extension. While one action or sequence might directly impact the composition of the next one, there is no sense of continuous narrative, thematic development, or repetition in these routines.²⁶ The full 90 seconds of a routine are not maximized to create the most coherent narrative arch possible, because to do so would be a risky choice in receiving good marks if the technique behind that story was not impeccable.²⁷ Any “acting” or

²⁶ McMains 172

²⁷ A distinct genre in the competitive ballroom world is Theatre Arts, a style that consists of “exhibition dances in which the couple performs to music of their own choice. The context invariably permits a thematic form with a

“storytelling” that is added to these routines is an afterthought; the final one percent of work required before putting the routines on the floor, especially in Standard. General, unmotivated emotions are plastered onto the dancers’ faces to make them seem more engaged, interested, and versatile. These emotions are not results of specific beats in the dancers’ choreography, let alone from living truthfully in the present moment.

While truly theatrical ballroom routines that incorporate a solid understanding of acting technique are few and far between, it is absolutely possible to create a story in a dance like rumba that is about more than the follower “suddenly covering her feminine jewels after inviting contemplation of her inner right thigh.”²⁸ An engaging and developed example of theatricality in ballroom dancing is the Show Dance work of Zoran Plohl and Tatsiana Lahvinovich. Their work is a breathtaking example that once a degree of technical mastery has been achieved in ballroom, the dancers obtain the ability to demonstrate versatility, creativity, and ingenuity in their work. Their technique is not placed center stage. Rather, it becomes the tool through which these dancers become great actors and transcend the medium they have trained in.

One of many tools that Plohl and Lahvinovich use to theatricalize their dancing is to incorporate the technique of narrative framing with an introduction and conclusion. In their Rumba, performed to Sara Bareilles’ “Gravity,” the frame consists of Plohl pacing around an otherwise bare stage/ dance floor before Lahvinovich’s entrance.²⁹ As he paces, he pulls a ring from his pocket and inspects it in the light. When he hears Lahvinovich walk in, he hastily hides the ring before running over to greet her. This section lasts approximately 15 seconds and

beginning, middle, and end. Frank Regan and Gary Spencer, Championship Ballroom Dancing. (Minneapolis, MN: EAB, 1994) 72.

²⁸ McMains 124.

²⁹ Cristi Birlle "TIDC 2011 Tatsiana Lahvinovich and Zoran Plohl Best Rumba Ever!!!!" YouTube. YouTube, 11 Apr. 2011. Web. 15 Dec. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MnBeXKKT44>.

contains no dancing whatsoever. Its purpose is not to demonstrate Rumba technique. Rather, it serves to establish the world of the scene: the audience knows that Plohl is in love the woman who is about to arrive and intends to propose to her as soon as she does. When Plohl tries to embrace her for the first time, she recoils from him and has a troubled expression on her face, indicating to the audience that this proposal will not go smoothly. Something is clearly wrong between the two, and with that fact established, the dancing portion of the piece begins. Plohl tries desperately to win Lahvinovich back... Lahvinovich tries to escape. Lahvinovich comes back to Plohl...Plohl brushes her aside. After a climatic lift and dramatic pause, Lahvinovich slowly exits the space while Plohl, distraught, collapses to the ground and stares at the ring he was never able to present, the ring that Lahvinovich likely never knew he had. By framing the dancing, the primary “action” of the piece, with these narrative bookends, the audience is able to understand that there is a reason these characters *had* to dance a rumba. Their relationship was falling apart. At different points both characters wanted to escape from the other, and at others, both wanted to reconnect with each. They experienced feelings of passion, sexual tension, and fierce connection because of the narrative context that they were placed in. While rumba is the dance that most readily captures those emotions through movement, it is not that Plohl and Lahvinovich chose to perform dance. Rather, it is that their characters were compelled to dance a rumba because of what was at stake in their relationship.

The same technique of narrative framing is also present in Plohl and Lahvinovich’s Paso Doble Show Dance. Set to La Perla’s “Indissoluble,” the piece begins with Lahvinovich sitting at a small table for two at a nice café.³⁰ There is a red table cloth on the table as well as an

³⁰ Prodance2000. "Zoran Plohl - Tatsiana Lahvinovich SHOW Paso Doble."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQ2cGcNx4_A.

assortment of coffee cups and silverware. Lahvinovich sits and waits impatiently for Plohl to arrive. It is clear she is impatient by the way she taps her foot and by her facial expressions as she stares off into space. Plohl finally arrives, but instead of greeting Lahvinovich, he darts his glance away from her every time she looks at him. She reciprocates in kind until Plohl repeatedly taps his spoon against his cup. Lahvinovich moves to take the cup away from him fails when Plohl answers his cell phone to take what seems to be a work call. Lahvinovich impatiently waits for the call to end and eventually stands up and rips the cell phone out of his hands. Once again, this narrative frame gives way to an actual dance of Paso Doble, the dance best suited to enacting a deep-seeded, directly aggressive emotions of the couple. The transition between the two consists of Plohl grabbing the red table cloth from the table, symbolically holding it as his cape, and wrapping it around Lahvinovich's waist to create her Latin dress. Only now can the Paso Doble can begin in full force. After quite the battle between these modern day gypsies, the two dancers return to their table exhausted.³¹ Plohl replaces the tablecloth, and both dancers sit with their arms crossed, not looking at each other. Their fighting has solved nothing, and nothing has changed. The audience is left to assume that they will continue taunt one another until another fight ensues. Just as their characters were compelled to dance a Rumba in the previous number, the intense frustration and desire to challenge each other in this piece compelled their characters to dance a Paso Doble. As dancers, Plohl and Lahvinovich's chosen medium of emotional expression is through their bodies, but it was their incorporation of theatrical constructions, stakes, and given circumstances that compelled their characters into movement in these pieces.

³¹ At the 2015 Blackpool Professional Latin Championships, Lorraine Reynolds commented that International style Paso Doble has shifted from a depiction of a matador and his cape to a more gender equivalent battle between two gypsies. "Blackpool Dance Festival History." *Blackpool Dance Festival*.

As an acting student for several years, and based on the systems of acting I have studied, the system that seems most complimentary to the creation of backstory and the implementation of given circumstances I observed at work in these numbers is that of Stanislavski. My understanding of the Stanislavski school of acting is that it works from the inside out, utilizing techniques like the magic “if,” emotional memory, and the creation of backstory to prepare an actor to engage with a text and create a truthful performance internally and externally.³²³³³⁴

When delving into character work or an intricate script, working from the internal out has been my tactic of choice. However, as a dancer I have more fully studied the art of working from the outside in, especially when it comes to partnering. I have dialed in an awareness of my partner, the space, and the other couples to externally affect what actions I need to internally execute. Perhaps a more accurate description of this process would be that I have learned how to *react* to the external through my study of dance. The importance of a heightened sense of awareness bears great similarity to both Meisner acting technique and Somatic dance theory. From my study of Meisner over the course of a semester-long class, two of my biggest takeaways were that “the foundation of acting is the reality of doing” and that truthful observation of your partner yields the most truthful responses to what they are doing on stage.³⁵ In both of these cases, there is required a heightened sense of awareness of the inhabitants and world in which you act in order to live truthfully under the Meisner’s famous imaginary circumstances. In Somatic dance

³² Stanislavski writes that “the secret of the effect of *if* lies first of all in the fact that it does not use fear or force, or make the audience do anything. On the contrary, it reassures him through its honesty and encourages him to have confidence in a supposed situation.” Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*. (New York: Theatre Arts, 1948) 50

³³ Stanislavski also describes of emotional memory that “time is a splendid filter for our remembered feelings – besides it is a great artist. It not only purifies; it transmutes even painfully realistic memories into poetry.” Ibid 188

³⁴ Morgenstern writes that “the actor constructs a backstory for his character, which includes a detailed portrait and history of the character before the play’s start and then chooses actions that further his objectives. This enables the actor to imagine in detail the circumstances of the play.” Leora Morgenstern, “A First-Order Theory of Stanislavskian Scene Analysis.” IBM T. J. Watson Research Center. <<http://www-formal.stanford.edu/leora/strev.pdf>>. 1

³⁵ Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. (New York: Vintage, 1987) 16.

theory, there is an emphasis on the “re-education” of your mind-body awareness.³⁶ In other words, there is a keen sense of self in relationship to the forces around it and to its own structure so that the mind can alter a movement quality of the body as a reaction to its awareness of that quality in the first place.

As I began to research the variety of ways theatricality could be incorporated into ballroom dancing, I soon realized that my original desire to use “acting” in my dancing was rather general. Instead, I gained an appreciation for the fact that *different* styles of acting might benefit different pieces in different way. For numbers where I wanted to emphasize either the characterization or narrative of the piece, I chose to incorporate the aforementioned Stanislavski techniques into our rehearsals. In the same vein, I utilized Meisner and Somatic theories for the numbers where awareness of the space, the ensemble, or the partner were of utmost importance.

To demonstrate Stanislavski technique, I choreographed two similar rumbas to the same song, “Slip” by Elliot Moss. In the first, I created a plot in which the male dancer attempts to perform his attraction to his partner while she refuses to engage with him theatrically. The only connection they maintain is of their hand, for she attempts to avoid eye contact at cost because of her lack of interest in him. The act of her staying disconnected prompts him to stop dancing with her and call her out on her lack of theatricality. In the second number, a same-sex piece, the concept was that the dance was one of the ladies’ fantasy of which the other happily participated. At the beginning of this number, we utilized the same choreography but with very different eye contact and body language as a result of these latter dancers’ increased sense of connection and intimacy. In both numbers, I asked all dancers involved to separate themselves from the reality of whether or not they are attracted to their partners in real life and proposed that they ask

³⁶ Glenna Batson, "Somatic Studies and Dance." (International Association for Dance Medicine and Science, 2009)

themselves the question: what *if* they were? What would ensue? I also asked the primary dancer in the same-sex piece to create a backstory for the character which she maintained throughout the entire show. After a sequence of questions I asked her to learn more about the world she had constructed for herself, I asked her to imbue that backstory with emotional memory; to feel in the dance how she had felt at similar points in her life. I found the Stanislavski method, or at least my knowledge of it, to be a useful tool in bringing these dancers closer to a genuine acting performance, as opposed to a caricature of one.

To demonstrate Meisner and Somatic technique, I immediately gravitated towards West Coast Swing, a form that is as much a conversation between two partners as any scene from a play. West Coast Swing is primarily danced socially, and it is fully improvised. As such, I eventually decided to have this number be completely improvised during each performance to really capture the essence of the movement and the truthful awareness maintained within each partnership and throughout the space. To prepare my featured dancers who were cast to dance to the first half of the song, I initially led them through repetition exercises to become more aware of each other in the space at that moment. Both of these dancers were already skilled West Coast Swing dancers, so teaching them the technique of the dance was not a concern of mine. Rather, my goal was to make them even better in WCS not by working on their dancing, but by improving their awareness of one another in the space. I led them through exercises where I would whisper a prompt to one of them, such as “try to never lose contact with her,” and then ask them to dance with that *objective* in mind. The need to focus on such a specific movement concept in relation to their partner significantly improved their ability to dance West Coast not only with each other but with others as well. I also strived to have them correct issues as they would come about. Giving notes such as “notice when you are pulling her off balance” or “make

sure your weight is directed back” allowed them to somatically correct these issues I wished to solve and to become more aware of their bodies in the process.

While I found Stanislavski acting technique, Meisner acting technique, and Somatic dance theory to all be effective means of communication at different times throughout *Character of the Dance*, there is an incredible range of opinions on the role of theatricality in ballroom dancing, even among former World Champions. As previously discussed, Louis Van Amstel views true performance as distinct from insubstantial entertainment. Within performance, he believes that movements can either have the intention of conveying a narrative based objective, such as conveying love, or an abstract objective, such as moving your arms horizontally in a strong and direct fashion.³⁷ He finds that both can be valid modes of expression given the circumstance. Eugene Katsevman, on the other hand, believes firmly in the role of formalist technique in dictating the character of each dance. For example, when I asked him about the character of Cha Cha, whether it was cheeky or flirty, he responded that “the character of cha cha is Slow Slow Quick Quick Slow.”³⁸ When I asked him about incorporating narrative into competitive routines, he looked at me and said that “running away from an imaginary bull while wearing glitter and rhinestones is ludacris.”³⁹ To have two former champions with incredibly different background; the former a protégée of Rudd Vermey and his Laban approach to ballroom, and the latter a Russian formalist, provide two very different opinions on the role of acting in ballroom is indicative of the same systemic lack of consensus on identity that plagues the battle between dance and sport as discussed earlier.⁴⁰

³⁷ Amstel.

³⁸ Eugene Katsevman, "Characterization in Latin Dance." Personal Interview. 6 Feb. 2016.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ McMains 180.

Cultural Appropriation

If the goal of competitive ballroom dancing is to determine who is creating the best art, what are the qualities of that art that are evaluated? To evaluate any form of art requires an understanding of the character of that art. In a tribute to his mentor Walter Laird, considered one of the most influential men in the development of International Latin, former World Champion Donnie Burns states that Laird warned him that, “you must look after the characterization of each dance because it’s in danger of being overlooked. You must make sure that people know the story of the movements, the characterization of each dance.”⁴¹ Even though Burns acknowledges the importance of characterization in dancing, he does not proceed to describe *what* that character is and why it is so essential. McMains discusses a “pan-Latin fantasy that was propagated by the West” that profiled all Latinos as exotic, passionate, and overtly sexual.⁴² Such a racist and inaccurate portrayal of Latino culture proved most marketable for Western dance teachers to sell not only “Latin dancing” but an escape to an exotic culture and way of interacting with the opposite sex. Perhaps it is this pan-Latin character that dance teachers like Walter Laird sought to capture and disseminate.

The act of white, upper-class, British men traveling to Latin American countries like Brazil and Cuba with goal of learning the “authentic” versions of dances like the Samba, Cha Cha, and Rumba is a continuation of Western imperialism in the Latin American region. McMains states that “the very existence of a category called ‘Latin dance,’ in which dances from different countries with radically different histories and physical practices are lumped together, reveals the Eurocentric perspective of this discourse.”⁴³ For example, the fifth dance competed in

⁴¹ Oleg Astakhov, "Donnie Burns MBE - What Wally Wanted - A Tribute to Walter Laird."

⁴² McMains 113.

⁴³ McMains 132.

the Latin category is the Jive, a style originally known as the Lindy Hop first danced by African Americans in Harlem. What connected the Jive to the other four equally disassociated dances? McMains asserts that it was the process of taming the “perceived wildness, primitiveness, and blackness” in its whitening from Lindy Hop to Jitterbug and finally to Jive that turned it into a Westernized “Latin” dance.⁴⁴ Its similarity in character to the other Latin dances was nothing more than the facelift it received at the hands of the British.

When I first researched the history of each dance to understand the development of its technique in its cultural context, I latched onto any new information I could find. Over time, however, my eye became attuned to the inconsistencies and blatant inaccuracies that made up many of the Western histories of the Latin dances I could find. Before writing her book, McMains worked at a major ballroom studio franchise and discovered many of the tactics that are used in the industry to not only boost clientele but to increase sales.⁴⁶ As such, she became wary of the ways in which the Latin dances were marketed because they only served to further exoticize and stereotype Latino culture to a white market base. In Glamour Addiction, she calls into question the unreliability of the histories of Latin dancing published by Western ballroom studios or in instructional manuals because they are marketed to sell the pan-Latin character.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ McMains 126.

⁴⁵ Over the course of two film clips, the process of cleaning up the Black Lindy Hop becomes quite apparent. In the first film clip, *Doctuldi2*. “Whiteys Lindy Hoppers. Hellzapoppin,” we see a style that is free, energetic, and acrobatic. In the second, *Britishpathe*. “Jive Dance (1943),” we see a satirical representation of the jitterbug, now danced by white Americans at a dance hall in Britain. While this quality of movement is still frantic and loose, the “blackness” of the Lindy Hop has been subdued with most of the frenzy being redirected to the feet and facial expressions. Two British dancers come on stage to demonstrate their prowess in their new proper, rigid, and codified version of the form. Their quality of movement is more vertical, their clothing is more conventional and of higher quality, and their energy is far lower than their jitterbugging counterparts. The clip concludes with the male British dancer partnering the female American dancer, and vice versa, calming the Americans’ movements and effectively re-colonizing the United States.

⁴⁶ See McMains preface to her book that follows her journey as a competitive dancer.

⁴⁷ *Ibid* 112.

Once aware that this less than accurate trait may have very well been present in the sources I had already researched, the examples of it were easy to spot. In Allen Dow's Official Guide to Latin Dancing, he introduces his section on rumba in the following manner: "Warm, tropical nights spent dancing under the stars. Soft, romantic music accentuated by the steady beat of claves, maracas, and bongo drums. These are the sentimental images that come to mind when one visualizes the rumba...originally an erotic, arousing dance that found its way from Africa to the Caribbean."⁴⁸ In a 2006 manual, Wainwright calls the samba "intrinsically simple with rhythmic patterns of the music that are full of syncopation as we expect from *all* Latin dances."⁴⁹ While these texts claim to provide information of the cultural heritage of the dances in question, all they really serve to do is cement the role of Western imperialism in dictating how Latino culture should be perceived by the rest of the world.

I combated the topic of cultural appropriation in many ways throughout *Character of the Dance*. To start, I remixed a clip of Walter Laird and Lorraine Reynolds demonstrating the newly popular "Brazilian samba" in England with shots of more "authentic samba" as it was danced in Brazil.⁵⁰⁵¹ I sought to contrast these two forms to demonstrate how different they were, even when the International version was first formalized upon what men like Walter Laird supposedly learned in the dances' native countries. I also combated the issue through a theatrical in which Monsieur Pierre Margolie, one of the original teachers of Latin dance in England, traveled to Cuba to take rumba lessons with renowned dance teachers Pepe and Suzy Rivera in 1947. In the scene, I staged a parodic version of Monsieur learning that his method of counting rumba was incorrect and choosing to bring that knowledge with him back to England to

⁴⁸ Allen Dow and Mike Michaelson, The Official Guide to Latin Dancing. (Northbrook, IL: Domus, 1980) 15.

⁴⁹ Lyndon Wainwright and Lynda King, Latin Dancing. (London: Collins, 2006) 19.

⁵⁰ "Walter Laird and Lorraine Reynolds - Latin Show."

⁵¹ Britishpathe. "International Dance Festival (1952)."

completely reform the existing system.⁵² In the subsequent narration, I called into question the expertise of Laird and Pierre as well as the reputability of Pierre's teachers:

For Brittons to study these dances with confidence requires the validation of Walter Laird and Monsieur Pierre, both white, upper-class, men, as "the experts" on Latin American dancing. Think about that. Two "foreigners to Latin culture, tasked with [transmitting] the choreographic and social essences of centuries of multicultural history."⁵³ It's like if I was an American chef who went to Korea to study their cuisine, returned to America, and marketed myself as an expert in "authentic" Korean cuisine. What makes me an expert? The fact that a nice Korean couple told me one of my recipes was wrong? How can the technique, the art, the culture of Korean cuisine be transmitted across the world by an upper-class white man with no greater ties to Korea than the month he spent eating their food?!⁵⁴

Through this analogy, my goal was to unpack the reputability that Laird and Pierre shared in contrast to the reception they may have had today. With that being said however, the degree of cultural appropriation in Latin has only recently come under scrutiny, and it is still widely ignored or hidden to most DanceSport competitors.

I also incorporated the character of cultural appropriation into the aforementioned character of dance vs. sport in a segment where my character actively pursued every conceivable path to winning a competition of Paso Doble, the Spanish and French matador march. The narrator described the Paso Doble as having "an ambiguous history," reflective of the lacking credulity of documented histories of the dance published by Westerners.⁵⁵ My character, an avid competitor, was confused by these contradictions and asked the narrator point blank, "What do I have to do to win the comp?"⁵⁶ In response, a clip from *Strictly Ballroom* portrayed a Spaniard teaching an ignorant Aussie what "Paso Doble" was all about.⁵⁷ Throughout the clip, my character attempted to copy these movements in the hopes of improving his own dancing.

⁵² McMains 122.

⁵³ Ibid 114.

⁵⁴ Greenhouse.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *Strictly Ballroom*. Written and Directed by Baz Luhrmann. By Baz Luhrmann.

Without the cultural background that this man had, my character's movements looked false and incomplete. I even tried to dance with a cape, to no music and with no partner, because the narrator suggested that capes were indicative of the Spanish bullfight that I was attempting to recreate. As I fell to the ground after achieving nothing with the cape and enduring the narrator's humiliating comments, I ended the scene by throwing my cape on the ground and storming off the stage. My character's attempts to *take* supposedly authentic choreography and incorporate it into my existing, International style routine, represented a further act of colonialism as I "imported techniques from other (culturally) Latin dance forms" and claimed them as my own in my Western dance form.⁵⁸

Sexism and Heteronormativity

Regan states that "ballroom dancing is, by definition, a man and a woman moving as one."⁵⁹ More specifically, it is a male leader and a female follower moving together as one. As the leaders, men dictate which move will happen at what time, how that figure will be counted, and the location on the floor where the couple will stand. Followers, on the other hand, are expected to be receptive and fluidly execute the leader's intentions. The distinction between men and women in ballroom dates back to early 20th century when every facet of social life was dictated by strict, traditional gender norms. Just like it was common practice for men to ask women on dates, so too was it proper for men to ask the ladies to dance, not the other way around.⁶⁰ The ballroom industry became obsessed with portraying the ideal, romantic

⁵⁸ McMains 155.

⁵⁹ Regan 6.

⁶⁰ *Dancing Program 3: Sex and Social Dance (DVD 4): Dancing: Sex and Social Dance*. Produced by Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyer, and Rhoda Grauer. 1993.

relationship between a man and a woman, so much so that couples would commonly be marked down if they did not appear to adequately tell this heterosexual story of white, male conquest.

The power dynamic between leaders and followers has created an inherent character of sexism that characterizes the industry without fail. Like other dance forms, there is often a lack of capable male dancers in ballroom. This disparity often provides men with more options when it comes to finding a partner and leaves women at the mercy of whether or not men will choose to dance with them. With more male professionals and female students in the industry than female professionals and male students, male professionals often feel that they are in charge of their partnership because they teach so many other women to dance on a daily basis. I shed light on this issue in *Character of the Dance* by showing a clip from Sally Porter's *The Tango Lesson* of an argument between two partners about the importance of maintaining the follower's passivity in dance so as to maximize the male's liberty.⁶¹ The man's anger and unyielding attitude further supported my claim regarding the presence of such overt sexism across the ballroom industry. In line with this sexist ideology is the notion that two women who dance together at the low levels of competition are simply not good enough to have found a male leader. There is virtually no recognition that they may have chosen to dance together for any number or reasons. As such, female-female couples face far more obstacles in achieving success than do male-female couples. To combat this character of heteronormativity, I included the Stanislavski inspired same-sex rumba to provide an example of a routine with story, theatricality, and artistry that promoted the traditional "character of rumba" *without* its heterosexual mandate. I thought the number was quite successful and quite political, for the very act of including it on

⁶¹ *The Tango Lesson*. Written and Directed by Sally Porter. Adventure Pictures, 1997.

stage, as opposed to theorizing about it, made it clear to the audience that such a number could not only exist but be met with positive support.

Methodology

I began this project with a vague understanding that ballroom dance and theatre were connected and that I wanted to demonstrate that connection through live performance. I had no concrete concepts, or numbers, or scenes in mind to demonstrate this similarity, but I knew that I wanted to meld these two genres together. The first iteration of the project was to be a combined capstone between Drama and Dance, but I soon incorporated my CMS minor capstone to the mix. Because I had already begun planning for the Drama and Dance iteration, I found myself at an incredible loss for how I would incorporate film into this project. I began to research the role of media representation of ballroom with the intent of shooting and editing my own footage. I soon realized how unrealistic filming my own material would be and shifted gears into using clips from movies and competitions to demonstrate an argument; what that argument consisted of was still to be determined.

One of my original guiding questions for the piece was “How does ballroom lend itself to more traditional forms of narrative structure, storytelling, and performance?” I spent months grappling with that question as I slowly accumulated more and more textual and cinematic research. Every few weeks, I would recompile everything I had found that was noteworthy, almost like the sorting process of editing. I gradually realized that I was accumulating a plethora of information that I wanted to share with my audience through live dances and clips, but I still did not have a way to tell that story that sparked my creativity.

In one session with my advisors, after dodging questions about why I really was interested in this topic, I finally blurted out that I felt frustrated at my former partner that we were unable to dance the way I wanted to. My advisors were thrilled! This was the first time my project actually entered the realm of the dramatic because I was now personally invested in it. It was around this time that I held auditions for the piece. I cast all dancer roles from the Tufts Ballroom Team and set out to begin rehearsals. We rehearsed twice a week for two hours apiece over the course of the semester. As I choreographed, I began to incorporate thematic elements such as repetition, musicality, and ensemble awareness into the structures I developed. I would repeat the use of vocabulary when needed. The style of Viennese Waltz lended itself well to the different characters of ballroom I was trying to portray, so I used it throughout the show. I choreographed to the music at hand, for I wanted the unique structure of each song to influence the arch of our movement. I also played with utilizing ballroom vocabulary in groupings other than of two people to demonstrate ballroom's potential for greater collaboration on stage.⁶² Over the course of the semester, I had three showings to track my progress. Along the way, we decided to add a narrator to the mix and turn the production into a performative lecture, for the transitions I provided from clip to dance and vice versa were simply not working. Two notes I received along the way were to overlay clips and narrations to speed up the run time and increase audience interest and to add action on or around stage wherever possible. These two elements really came together during the last week of rehearsal and going into tech. I also participated in weekly production staff meetings to help plan and coordinate all of the technical aspects of the show. My production staff consisted of a stage manager, costume coordinator, lighting designer,

⁶² One incredibly inspiring show dance was Brooklyn DanceSport Club's current ensemble rumba piece. The number utilizes group choreography in a breathtaking manner and creates true artistry in a group setting. In conversation the choreographer, Eugene Katsevman, he told me that his studio choreographed that number as a response to the death of one of their friends, which was they put so much passion into it.

and projectionist. My own responsibilities the month leading up to the production included coordinating the capture and editing of all media with my advisor, directing my cast theatrically, cleaning choreography, and rehearsing my own numbers.

Reflections

Looking back on this process, I am incredibly proud of the content I was able to produce in a relatively limited time frame. I could have spent an additional year compiling research and another six months in rehearsal. Given that the scope of my project had not really been undertaken before, I was relieved to have a large committee to advise me throughout the process. I do wish that all departments had offered similar planning resources for the thesis process. I think that all departments should offer colloquiums for their thesis candidates to encourage collaboration and development. Had it not been for the CMS Colloquium last fall, I know that I would have been quite behind at the start of this semester.

The research that I found most helpful at first was anything that discussed the history of ballroom dancing. Dance manuals and histories of social dance became sources of choice. However, as my project became more and more specific, I began to gravitate towards books and films that discussed ballroom in light of some sort of cultural issue. For example, the film *Take the Lead* addressed the role that ballroom could have in the education of underprivileged youth.⁶³ It was midway through second semester that I finally found academic scholarship on competitive ballroom dancing. These sources were integral components of my research, and I wish I had come across more of them earlier because they would have helped me reign in the scope of my project at an earlier date. In-person conversations and interviews throughout the past year with

⁶³ *Take the Lead*. Directed by Liz Friedlander. New Line Productions, 2006.

colleagues I met in the ballroom industry also proved invaluable examples of current thought and perspective in the industry.

It took a long time to get out of the “general brainstorming” phase for this project. While I would have benefitted from more time working on the project once I narrowed its scope, I know that all of the time I spent in that general phase was absolutely necessary. Perhaps if I had commenced with initial research and planning at the beginning of the summer, I could have backed the whole process up by a few weeks.

One major lesson that I learned throughout this process was the importance of delegating tasks. At first, I was quite reluctant to sign on a large production staff because I thought it would actually result in *more* work for me to do. On the contrary, the more people I signed on to assist me with this project, the less I had to manage. I wish I had recruited a scenic charge and an editor, because doing so this past fall or at the beginning of the spring would have saved me a trip to furniture stock and dozens of hours in the editing suite when I was concerned with my directorial and performance responsibilities. That being said, I am incredibly grateful for the production staff members I did have on hand. They were professional and creative throughout the entire process.

Another major lesson I learned is how beneficial it is to have actual theatre people working with you in the theatre. While my cast was composed of excellent dancers, only one of them had theatrical experience at Tufts. I erroneously assumed that I would not really need my stage manager present at rehearsals in the beginning because all I would be doing was choreographing. However, because I was working with a cast of my friends, and because the first several rehearsals consisted of a great deal of trial and error, I lost a fair amount of the attention and presence that I could have had if the stage manager, who was outside our friend group, had

been there from Day 1 to set the tone of rehearsal and keep everyone in check. Because this project was a devised work, I made several changes to scene dialogue, casting of individual dances, and choreography as my vision for the project developed. Some members of my cast who did not have a theatrical background found that process to be a waste of their time, or an indication that I was unprepared. However, I do not regret those changes for a second. Many of them, like adding a narrator to the structure elevated the project to incredible new heights. What I do regret is not introducing the fact that as the director, I had the ability to implement changes when I saw fit. Furthermore, had my stage manager been present, she could have addressed these cast members' concerns and assure them that the process was going smoothly.

In the last week of rehearsals, I unfortunately had to kick one of my dancers out of the cast. He informed my stage manager and I of a conflict during tech only two days before. I knew that if I kept him in, I would definitely not have been able to do a full run with everybody present. I also knew that I had announced the date and time for tech with about a month's notice, and nobody had a conflict. I made a difficult decision but I am glad that I made the right choice for the sake of my production.

Along with having a large committee came a variety of ideas that I meticulously wrote down to research later. Towards the beginning of the project, I burdened myself with attempting to incorporate every single note into the work regardless of if I wanted to accept it or not. Over the last two months, I realized that at the end of the day, it was my decision of what to include in the project. Just because I received a note did not mean that it had to be incorporated.

I was pleased to have brought together the departments of Drama, Dance and Film to collaborate on this project. Having studied all three for the past four years, I wish there had been more opportunities for cross-curricular study. Throughout college, I focused extensively on the

ways in which these disciplines are interconnected but only rarely got to study those connections in classes like Rethinking the Body in Performance and Dance on Camera. I hope that this project can help bridge the gap between the disciplines and encourage others to create interdisciplinary, performative work.

Conclusion

There are indeed many problematic aspects that color the competitive ballroom dance industry. Its century-old structure is largely sexist, racist and homophobic. Its governing bodies dispute its role as art or sport on a regular basis. Its performance qualities have devolved into pandering for the audience. What can be done to combat these issues in order to maximize ballroom's artistic potential? The first step is to globally recognize that these problems do exist and stop pretending that ballroom is as perfect as it claims to be. The next step is to create an international dialogue; through performance, politics, or any other avenue to discuss the ways in which these problems can be solved. And the final, albeit most difficult, step is to implement those changes through performance, through competition, in competitive routines, in show dances, in practice, in lessons, in adjudicating. *Character of the Dance* may have closed, but this project is far from complete. As I embark on my career in the ballroom world, I will strive to incorporate these message into the ballroom industry to further its artistic potential worldwide.

Addendum

How are you defining "Artistic" and "Aesthetic" in this context? Whose standards are informing the ways in which these words are being applied to what you're discussing?

In this context of this paper, I use the Webster definition of art as “something that is created with imagination and skill and that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings.”⁶⁴ To create art requires a refined knowledge of the chosen *aesthetic*, or set of established principles, that guides the work of a particular artist or artistic movement.⁶⁵ In the paper, I attempt to distinguish between what does and does not constitute “art” within the ballroom industry. My comparisons are largely based on the aesthetic that a select group of white, Western-European dance teachers formalized and published between the late-1920’s and the mid-1970’s. This group included Josephine Bradley, Victor Silvestre, Alex Moore, Pierre Margolie, Maxwell Stewart, Philip Richardson, Walter Laird, and Lyndon Wainwright.⁶⁶ The techniques that they formalized, such as swing, allow for dancers to have a physical experience with one another and to explore the technical possibilities and limitations of the form.⁶⁷ The narratives that men like Monsieur Pierre brought to England about the story of each dance,⁶⁸ such as the passion and romance of rumba, allow for dancers to tell a story with their movements. What this aesthetic does not reference are the result-oriented choreography,⁶⁹ exaggerated costuming, hair, and makeup, solo work, and extreme athleticism that are *all* present in the industry today. Looking at competitive ballroom through the aesthetic lens in which it was

⁶⁴ "Art." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster.

⁶⁵ "Aesthetic." *Oxforddictionaries.com*. Oxford Dictionaries.

⁶⁶ For a more complete list, see Lyndon Wainwright, *The Story of British Popular Dance*. (Brighton: International Dance, 1997) 20-21, 39.

⁶⁷ In ballroom, swing refers to free movement around a fixed point with either acceleration or deceleration. Ashan Samarasinghe, "Standard Training" Ballroom Dance Lessons. Woburn, MA. 2014-Present.

⁶⁸ McMains 112-124.

⁶⁹ Result-oriented refers to receiving high marks at competitions and garnering the applause and adoration of the audience.

originally created, the emphasis of these elements at the expense of sharing a physical experience, technical exploration, and storytelling does not result in artistry within the medium because it does not adhere to the given aesthetic.⁷⁰

Can you give an example or two of the difference between what the dancers may be doing vs. how the audience may be perceiving it? This might be about the difference between narrative and formal/abstract; poor technique versus good technique; or choices that deviate from the formalist criteria.

In Plohl and Lahvinovich's show dance rumba routine, there are several moments when the dancers utilize emotional facial expressions in between their physical movements.⁷¹ Whether the dancers executed these facial expressions through the use of emotional memory, through imagining the pain of breaking up, or through imitating their perception of what it looks like to be sad cannot be objectively determined without interviewing these dancers to learn about their process. Regardless of how they chose to portray those emotions, the audience still views the same facial expressions on stage.

Technique refers to the method of how to execute an intention. When that technique is not adequately developed, it can become difficult to identify what the dancers' intention originally was. For example, if a couple decides to tell a narrative story through the movements of waltz but the dancers are off-balance and tense, those imperfections draw attention away from the story the dancers are trying to create. While the dancers may very well be performing a story they have mapped out and rehearsed, the audience may only see a poorly executed waltz routine.

⁷⁰ If competitive ballroom was analyzed through an aesthetic lens that *did* promote these aspects, there would indeed be room for artistry within the form.

⁷¹ Cristi Birle. See 1:14, 1:46, and 2:02 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MnBeXKkTA4>.

"Character" as defined by Webster's dictionary (a few definitions):

- a) a feature used to separate distinguishable things into categories
- b) one of the attributes or features that make up and distinguish the individual

Staying focused on these ideas of "character", go back to your beginning statement and define your use of the word "character". What is the general physical character of social "ballroom" dance and how does it compare and contrast to competitive ballroom dance? What does it mean that a dance has a particular character? What are the distinguishing physical characteristics? Think of flow, force, use of space, rhythm and phrasing, parts of the body, sequential or simultaneous movement of body parts, use of focus. Lots of choices as to how you go with this.

Ballroom dancing has been repeatedly stylized such that it has lost a great deal of its original character. One of its outstanding characteristics is the art of two bodies moving together as one in time to music while maintaining some form of physical connection through which to transmit or receive energy.⁷² When this characteristic is overshadowed by a combination of flashy acrobatics, crowd-pleasing antics, extreme athleticism, and solo work, the character of ballroom dancing becomes compromised, and we risk losing the essential essence of the form.

There is currently a generational schism on the shifting role of these qualities as defining characteristics of the form. This subject is ardently debated and represents one of the foremost sources of conflict in the industry. On one side lies the “traditionalists,” whose training traces direct lineage to the Western European founders discussed above. The vocabulary these men created, including the use of swing, rotation, pendulum hip action, and hip twist has defined the basis of the form for almost a century.⁷³ Traditionalists advocate for the pursuit of technical mastery to provide dancers with the freedom to choose how they emphasize the core techniques of the form. The “progressives” are a group of dancesport athletes who supported the recognition

⁷² In a group lecture, former Latin champion Eugene Katsevman asked the participants to pinpoint why they dance before concluding that it was the act of moving with another person to music that was the true essence of ballroom dancing.

⁷³ See Moore's *Ballroom Dancing* and Walter Laird's *The Laird Technique of Latin Dancing*. 7th ed. (Brighton, England: IDTA Sales, 2014) for full descriptions.

of competitive ballroom as an Olympic sport in 1997 and advocate for its inclusion in the summer Olympic games.⁷⁴⁷⁵ These athletes seek recognition for their physical prowess and fitness, for it requires incredible strength, agility, and stamina to compete at the highest level.⁷⁶

The physical character of social dance can be described in terms of its contained kinesphere within the couple.⁷⁷ Energy is directed from one partner to the other but not outwards towards spectators or other couples. The flow of movements that the couple executes is bound within standardized positions such as closed, open, promenade, counter-promenade, and fall away. Couples maintain an awareness of space in order to navigate the floor in a counter-clockwise fashion and to avoid other couples.

Originally, the physical character of competitive ballroom was quite similar to that of social dance. The “frame” or structure of the arms was low and contained. Neither movement through space nor volume within the frame were prioritized. Today, the kinesphere has been expanded to direct energy towards the adjudicators and spectators evaluating the performance. Momentum is used more dynamically to create speed, power, and extension. The form utilizes pre-determined, bracketed phrases with little room for improvisation.⁷⁸ In Standard, there is an emphasis on the unity and verticality of the torso moving through space. International Latin allows for more segmentation of the pelvis and rib cage to create rotational torque. Each dance within these categories varies in its rhythmic structure and placement of weight on the foot.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Picart 70.

⁷⁵ Picart uses the terms “traditionalists” and “progressives” to identify and differentiate the two sides of this debate (74).

⁷⁶ Ibid 84.

⁷⁷ Traditionally, the “couple” in ballroom dancing evolved with one male and one female dancer.

⁷⁸ These phrases are only modified to avoid a collision with another couple or to recover when a mistake occurs.

⁷⁹ For example, Cha Cha is counted “Slow, Slow, Quick, Quick, Slow” and is danced on the ankle joint (Katsevman Interview). Waltz, on the other hand, is danced in $\frac{3}{4}$ timing and places the weight on both the ankle joint and the ball of the foot.

Please elaborate on the elements that make any ballroom partner dance artistic, performance-oriented, competitive, and in character -- essentially the ideal ballroom dance partnership as you envision it. Focus on the elements of what you view to be ideal technique both for dancers as individuals & in relation to their partner (connection between the different parts of the body, dynamic tension, fluidity, continuity, eye contact, posture, footwork, frame, etc.), also making sure to include elements like consciousness, thoughtfulness, spirit, emotional connection & content, musicality, drama, composition, use of space, angles, choreography, improvisation, acrobatics, and being in the moment for your partner & you. Provide three or more specific examples of how these elements apply to dance genres like Cha Cha, Rumba/Bolero, Waltz, Foxtrot, Tango, etc. Conclude with a statement/guideline/spirit of the dance for a ballroom couple to achieve the ultimate balance between /marriage of the key elements discussed.

To achieve a more dynamic use of momentum as introduced above requires a high level of coordination between different parts of the body. In International tango, staccato figures such as fallaway whisks require an accurate isolation of the shoulder and hip joints to turn the body reflexively, instead of as one block. To create the smooth fluidity of International foxtrot through footwork requires an understanding that the back heel may not lower when moving backwards until the weight of the hip block passes over the heel. Lowering too early interrupts the flow of movements and appears jerky and off-balance. To fill and balance the expanded kinesphere in International rumba might require one dancer to utilize a low level in a sliding door while the partner reaches into a higher plane and rises onto their toes.

A mastery of understanding and an application of technical qualities such as the three discussed above allows dancers to move beyond the rote execution of anatomical exercises and enter the realm of the artistic, meaning they can use their advanced skill to “create something with imagination that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings.”⁸⁰ Dancers gain an awareness and an understanding that spectators wish to view the ways in which a couple chooses to utilize the techniques they have studied, and their dancing becomes more

⁸⁰ "Art." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster.

performative because its purpose is to be viewed.⁸¹ In this vein, the dancing becomes more competitive because energy is directed to the partner and beyond. They may take into consideration the origins of each dance – the syncopation of rumba which developed into cha cha cha, the role of samba as a celebration of cultural heritage, the lilt of the International waltz that developed after the British slowed down the Viennese waltz – and use that information to inform their understanding of how physical and cultural character varies from dance to dance. To achieve the ability to perform, to successfully compete, and to create art that is greater than the sum of its steps requires an interdisciplinary and multifaceted study of physics, body mechanics, mindfulness, anthropology, musicality, choreography, and performance.

How did you make decisions about which film clips to use?

Throughout the year, I searched for moments, scenes, visuals, and audio content that provided commentary on the history and current issues surrounding the field.⁸² When I decided to shift away from producing original content into remixing this existing content for the performance itself,⁸³ I narrowed the scope of my footage by identifying clips that were particularly engaging through elevated stakes, satire, or spectacle that would draw my audience into the world of my performance. One satiric clip I used at the beginning of the performance was BBC's *The History of the Viennese Waltz*, which presented the history of Viennese Waltz in

⁸¹ Louis Van Amstel argues that the spectator elevates the quality of movement being performed because their gaze prevents the dance from being small or insecure. That being said, he does not favor abandoning the gaze of one's partner to appeal to the audience. Rather, he advocates for remaining within the world of the couple and allowing the audience to visit and take in that world. "Three Genres of Ballroom Dancing." Personal interview. 2 July 2015.

⁸² Source material included films, historic competitions, commentaries, dancesport commercials, and interviews.

⁸³ Because I was already directing, writing, choreographing, and performing in this production, I decided it would be unwise to take on another responsibility as massive as shooting and editing my own media. Come December, I was wrapping up a Media Literacy course that taught me the value of "media remix" as a tool to create new dialogue around existing material.

an over-the-top rendition of 18th century Germany.⁸⁴ I also focused on clips that would further the argument I was presenting through narration that could not be adequately demonstrated on stage with the resources available to me. To demonstrate the development of foxtrot technique over the past hundred years, I did not have any dancers in my cast with the appropriate skill to execute such subtle changes in movement. By creating a montage of former world-class foxtrot dancers, I was able to demonstrate the actual changes without trying to recreate them in someone else's movement. In rare cases, the logistics of production prevented me from including certain clips into the timeline. I initially planned on using commentary from the 2015 Professional Latin Championships at Blackpool, however the cost to obtain said footage would have exceeded the production's budget. I had also hoped to include a sequence about the "whitening" of lindy hop in its transformation into jitterbug and eventually jive, but at this time there was an emphasis on keeping the run time down rather than including additional content.

What was the editing process like? What decisions did you make along the way and why?

The most difficult part of the editing process was learning that footage from different sources must be resized in order to be uniformly projected. I found a great deal of my footage on YouTube with an aspect ratio 640x480. Several factors, including the large size of my projection screen, the native resolution of the projector, the dimensions of clips from HD films, and the importance of projecting clear images, made resizing all footage to 1280x960 a major priority.⁸⁵

With my limited editing experience, I focused on two primary editing techniques throughout the process: cutting on the action and phrasing filmed choreography to music. Both

⁸⁴ *The History of the Viennese Waltz*. Performed by Ian Waite and Karen Hardy. *BBC*. BBC Strictly Gemma Online Team, 17 Dec. 2012.

⁸⁵ Once my team had decided upon the ideal resolution, my editing advisor was able to professionally resize all footage in order to expedite my editing process.

of these concepts proved integral to the foxtrot montage I created. Not only did I splice together sequences of movements that chronologically made sense,⁸⁶ but I found a song with a tempo that matched each of the rhythms these performers were dancing to. In the Viennese waltz clip, I chose to experiment with the technique of repetition and repeat the words “sell the beauty” three times to exaggerate the pursuit of perfection that is endemic to competitive ballroom. In some cases, I also chose to separate audio from video to provide specific information to the audience outside of presenting a formal clip. An example includes Donnie Burns’ narration, “You must look after the characterization of each dance because it’s in danger of being overlooked.”⁸⁷ This voiceover was repeated throughout the show because its message was the basis of the narrator’s intention to unpack the world of competitive ballroom.

Can you address how you had dancers and the narrator interact with the images and on what basis you made decisions about integrating the movement/script with the visual narratives?

The primary basis for integrating movement, narrative, and media was to ensure a continuity of action that would transition seamlessly from section to section without simply having the narrator introduce every dance or clip in the piece. From the beginning, I was asked to vary the ways I had these mediums interact to maintain the audience’s interest throughout. Examples included the narrator speaking over the WDSF World Games commercial to provide critical commentary, dancers practicing foxtrot live while the foxtrot montage was playing to

⁸⁶ With my own understanding of foxtrot technique, I was able to edit this sequence together as if it was one, uninterrupted dance performed by multiple people. For example, I might cut on the beginning of one couple’s heel turn and move to the end of the next couple’s heel turn for continuity.

⁸⁷ Astakhov.

provide contrast, and the narrator speaking while couples warmed up to introduce their dances. As a result, this overlapping of content helped keep the run time down.

Throughout the show, only one dancer interacted with either the narrator or the screen. These mediums were reserved for the audience, who sought to study the issues I was presenting. However, when my character in the Paso Doble became interested in studying the form as well, he also became privy to these mediums. He asked the narrator, “What do I have to do to win the competition?” and watched a clip from *Strictly Ballroom* while the audience watched it.⁸⁸ The voiceovers that interjected between the narrator’s lines also served to “educate” my character in terms of how he should ideally perform his routine.

⁸⁸ Greenhouse; *Strictly Ballroom*.

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