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Those Dancing Feet! Musical Theater Dance as an Ethnographic Identifier

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ABSTRACT

Commercial dance forms, specifically musical theater dance, remain highly marginalized within higher education research. This article presents the need to establish more scholarly research in musical theater dance and points out the ethnographic identity of the genre in our global society. Ethnographic study can be useful in validating musical theater dance and the way it reflects American culture back to itself, while also blurring the lines between dance forms that traditionally carry the “high art” designation and those that are more commercial in nature. Establishing a stable platform to research and preserve these commercial forms situates musical theater choreographers, dancers, and their art within academic and artistic history.

KEYWORDS

Musical theatre; theatrical dance; ethnography

Commercialized artistic programming has taken our world by storm. *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and the breakout musical *Hamilton* (2017) have established a popular culture phenomenon in how dance is being consumed. Shows of the Golden Age of musical theater such as *Hello Dolly!* (1964) have reappeared on Broadway, a multitude of dance shows and musicals are being broadcast on public and network television, recordings of live productions like *Newsies* (2012) and *Holiday Inn* (2016) are available for streaming on Netflix, and live performances for television are happening with greater frequency. These activities clearly demonstrate that commercial dance forms are alive and well in our culture. But what is the definitive identity of these dance genres, and why is it significant?

These commercialized genres could all be considered some form of musical theater dance. That is, they are dances that are connected to theatrical and entertainment-oriented events where storytelling elements are often a unifying thread. Whether the story is the primary element or not, musical theater dance has the ability to “dramatize, mirror, or challenge our cultural attitudes and beliefs” (Jones 2003, 1). While some commercial dance functions outside of this plot-driven definition, dance as a form of popular entertainment appeals to audiences of television viewers and theater attendees alike. As simple as the dancing dolls of Radio City Music Hall, or the rebel newsboys demanding us to “seize the day” may seem, historically and socially these musicals sought not “just to entertain but also to

advocate a point of view hoping to move the audience to see things their way” (Jones 2003, 1). In so doing, musical theater dance has expanded and grown beyond pre-conceived borders.

While this inclusion reflects much more than barn raising hoedowns and well-executed tap routines of Broadway’s Golden Age, the creation and exposure of commercial dance forms within theatrical settings have shifted our identification of musical theater dance. The dances that exist and the stories they tell are quintessential elements that are easily recognizable as musical theater. However, the choreographers who have created the dances often do not receive the compensation or credit they deserve (Gardner 2016, xvii).

Dance as a Window to Humanity

In its purest form, dance is meant to be experienced as a part of our human and cultural existence. Dance is both esthetic and social, as it contributes and responds to society and culture. Dance is specifically “constructed, in concept and practice” and at the same time is an “interplay of ideas, techniques, and institutions within the lives of the people involved in creating and watching it” (Novak 1990, 13). While extensive scholarship in dance anthropology and dance history have focused on the various ways in which dance creates meaning, little of this focus has examined musical theater dance. Therefore, it is important that we begin to consider how musical theater dance speaks to multitudes of

people from varying backgrounds and actually has the ability to change their world view.

Yet, what is musical theater dance? According to Gennaro and Wolf (2015), musical theater dance inhabits the intersection between choreography and written text, whether dialogue or sung lyric. Dance, as an extended expression of language, exemplifies the collaboration between choreographers and writers (George-Graves 2017, 150). With this stated definition, it would be easy to compartmentalize the genre and establish the parameters of musical theater for scholarly research and inquiry. The irony is that there is little recognition of this line of inquiry within academe. While dance scholarship has continued to expand, musical theater dance has maintained a somewhat marginalized status and often remains unmentioned as part of any fine art equation. As defined in *Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities*, Buckland identifies the greater challenge with placing only some forms of artistic expression as “high art.” Forms selected by the aristocracy or social elite as culturally acceptable meant that such forms were “granted primacy as sources for academic investigation. Accordingly dance forms other than ballet and modern dance were ranked lower in this order of aesthetic values and received less attention” (Buckland 2006, 77).

In his article “Dance as High Art, Dance as Broad Art” in *The Hopkins Review*, Rogoff (2013) presents some insight on dance as an ancient art that has transformed over time into an entertainment form presented to an audience, rather than experienced by a community. By expanding from a participatory model to a performance model, a protocol was established that encompassed the power of viewing dance as opposed to experiencing it. If Rogoff is correct and society has shifted the understanding of dance as something to view and not as something to experience through the body and human spirit, then we must view it to gain an understanding of our fellow human beings who are different from us; this is our window into an ever-evolving global society. This is also potentially why audiences are drawn to musical theater and musical theater dance.

Musical Theater Dance: A Cultural Identifier

Musical theater dance can often be a reliable source of cultural information on how various human behaviors can be understood. For example, a sixty-year-old might have no understanding of the youthful world depicted in *Dear Evan Hansen* (2016) and a generation in which lives are defined by social media pressures. But through this artistic work that brings the challenge of teen suicide and mental illness to the forefront through music and dance, understanding can begin (Rowland 2017). This

type of artistic interpretation allows an “effective venue for culture negotiation and renegotiation” throughout society (Knapp 2004, 284).

In considering Rogoff’s (2013) idea of this observational model as a mode of cultural identity, dance genres that appear related to culture, like some musical theater dance, have not received equal footing within the “high art” distinction. A need exists for a new categorization and a deeper academic inquiry in dance forms that have remained on the fringes of academic acceptance, to encourage a greater inclusivity of all dance art forms regardless of where they are and who they represent.

Art Anywhere Encourages Art Everywhere

Establishing more scholarly pursuits in musical theater dance can begin to blur the lines between current dance forms that carry the “high art” designation and those that do not. Omitting all forms of musical theater dance, the musical theater dancer, and the musical theater dance choreographer from the equation limits the discussion. Musical theater dance can and should carry the same artistic and academic weight as other dance forms. Whether discussing anthropological dance in a tribal community or the musical theater dancer in a Broadway show, the same standards must be pursued to enable differentiation and valuing of these varied artistic ideals (Royce 1977). It is this ability to define the various genres that allows us to discuss dance’s greater impact in its multifaceted forms.

In his dissertation “Choreography in Musical Comedy and Revue on the New York Stage from 1925 through 1950,” Moulton quotes Agnes de Mille:

Some of the best dancing being done is in musical shows. Most musical comedy dance is not considered worthy of appreciation. This is wrong, for in many cases it is stronger in both concept and form than some concert dance. (cited in Moulton 1957, 10)

If some of the best dancing being done was (and is) in musical shows, why does academic scholarship often overlook theatrical commercial dance legends? In her book, *Agnes de Mille: Telling Stories in Broadway Dance*, Gardner (2016, ix, xvii) discusses at great length how de Mille’s “contribution to the American musical was immense and of incalculable importance,” not to mention her advocacy for the equitable inclusion of choreographers and the creation of what is known today as the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society.

Artists like de Mille, Michael Kidd, Bob Fosse, and Michael Bennett are only recently being acknowledged for the pivotal roles they have played in heightening what dance in theatrical shows encompasses. In

academic environments, musical theater choreographers seldom receive the recognition their modern and ballet counterparts do, and the historical information on the latter is decidedly more detailed. For example, Reynolds and McCormick's 900-page dance history *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century* (2003) has one chapter each on musical theatre dance on the stage and in film, but focuses mainly on ballet and modern dance. The space allotted to ballet is 421 pages; modern, 238 pages; and musical theater, 70 pages.

Balancing Historical References

The towering glassed studios on the corner of Ninth Avenue and Fifty-Fourth Street in Manhattan symbolize the legacy of the legendary Alvin Ailey himself, the sixty-plus-year history of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, and the Ailey young artist-training program. In the same way, George Balanchine's legacy has continued well after his death through the long-standing traditions of the New York City Ballet and his iconic ballets performed by a multitude of U.S. and international companies.

If Balanchine's name is mentioned to a group of aspiring ballerinas, almost all would recognize the name immediately. They would know of Balanchine's choreography, and appreciate his legacy as the artistic director and creator of the New York City Ballet. To a young African American modern dancer, membership in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is an artistic opportunity few dancers achieve. Acceptance into either of these companies for a young dancer would signal the ultimate arrival and a career ripe for the making, especially for those who know and value the opportunity placed before them.

Ironically, few ballet dancers would know that Balanchine received high praise and numerous awards for his choreographic work on Broadway with *On Your Toes* and *Ziegfeld Follies* (Green and Ginell 2011). Ailey made his Broadway debut in the musical *House of Flowers* and served as lead dancer in *Jamaica* starring Lena Horne and Ricardo Montalban in 1957 before founding his acclaimed dance company in 1958. Access to such information could empower young commercially-focused dancers trying to find their artistic home. Through a more balanced historical perspective and the interconnectivity of dance and dancers, establishing the value of research within all dance forms, including musical theater dance, becomes possible.

In a course I currently teach detailing the historical significance of artistic advocacy for performing artists, I use a multitude of texts to provide a cross section of historical figures, events, activities, and genres. Cass's

book *Dancing through History* (1993) provides strong detail on ballet and modern, *Jazz Dance: A History of Roots and Branches* by Guarino and Oliver (2014) provides important details on jazz dance, and *The Story of American Vernacular* by Stearns and Stearns (1994) offers historical specifics on jazz and minstrelsy. However, there is no definitive book on musical theater and commercial dance forms that can support academic learning as a parallel to these texts. Gardner's book on de Mille can provide supplemental support but maintains an obvious biographical approach. This approach can be somewhat limiting and is often true for other biographical texts as well.

Validating the Broadway Dance Creators

While there are multiple books on the history of musical theater that carry the reader through details of theatrical histories, minstrelsy, opera, operetta, vaudeville, and more, there are none that definitively focus on dance as the aspect of the artform with the ability to transform the audience's viewpoint. There is also little research recognizing how the lived experience within these dances can transform the performers telling the stories. Bennett's *A Chorus Line* stands as potentially the only musical that is about dancers and their experience with dance. (Jones 2003, 285–6) When dance is often the unifying principle that conveys the story of the musical in ways that the script and score cannot, there is little acknowledgment of this fact.

An example of the power depicted in the dance within musical theater is "If You Could See Her Through My Eyes" in *Cabaret* (1966) where the Emcee performs "with a gorilla ... extolling her talents and charms" (Jones 2003, 241–3). While the audience laughs and enjoys the performance, the final lyric states that "if you could see her through my eyes, she wouldn't look Jewish at all," which is meant to reveal how wide spread anti-Semitism was in pre-World War II Berlin. Hal Prince, the director of the original production, used "analogies, parallels, and metaphors" to align with stories of civil rights movement in America (Jones 2003, 242). To that end, dance has developed as the perfect byproduct of these stories being told; it provides embodiment of human experience and understanding in a way that no other aspect of the arts can demonstrate as succinctly. This is where musical theater histories are missing the mark at times; they are telling the stories on paper and not the stories of the human experience.

The collaborative nature of musical theater should showcase each artistic contributor equally, but rarely does. Many choreographers and the dances they created become either hidden or entangled inside the theatrical

parameters of directorial credit. For example, the iconic film *White Christmas* (1954) gives choreographic credit to Robert Alton. A quick internet search reveals that at least some of the dances in this film were the early and uncredited choreographic work of Fosse (see <https://www.amc.com/talk/2010/12/reasons-we-cant-get-enough-white-christmas>). This speaks to questions concerning who actually did what and when: was the collaboration so strong that the final product is really a little piece of everyone, or was someone assisting in such a way that their contribution outshone that of their mentor? These questions could be answered if we properly verify and validate the people creating the work through academic inquiry, investigation, and re-creation, when possible. Prior to de Mille's pioneering work, not only on the stage but at the negotiation table, these rights would have fallen by the wayside, regardless of a choreographer's prolific legacy (Gardner 2016, 189).

Since much of what is created in the room and in the moment is being responsive to the creative process, once the artists pass on, or are not able to maintain their work, many musical theater forms and choreography are not preserved and/or researched in the same traditional ways as ballet and modern dance. Because musical theater and commercial dance forms have not been recorded systematically by the academy, they have been left to flounder under the apprenticeship model, with few formal academic or artistic records. Without a correction for this problem, we will continue to view only a small portion of our dance history, ultimately the portion that the academy chooses to define as "high art" (Rogoff 2013). Some collegiate programs have made it a priority to employ legendary commercial artists on their faculty. However, these programs are few in number, hard to establish, and even harder to maintain, especially outside major metropolitan areas. Programs such as Pace University in New York City and Oklahoma City University are standouts in their ability to incorporate commercial dance expectations into their curriculum and programming (Miller 2016).

Validation of the Commercial Artist

For the commercial dancer or choreographer, proficiency in jazz, ballet, tap, hip hop, and modern are all inexorably linked for individualized professional success within the field. Because these artists cannot easily be associated with a single artistic style, it can be difficult to categorize them as belonging to one specific genre of dance.

When dancers attend a Fosse repertoire class, the iconic isolation and pelvic-based movement is prevalent and easily recognized as the Fosse style. Jeff Shade, dance captain of the 1996 Broadway revival of *Chicago*, said of the "Rich Man's Frug" dance from *Sweet Charity*, "[the arms] are like upside down seaweed. It's easy (as he demonstrates the movement)" (Shade 2016). Many dancers struggle with what Shade describes as "easy" and marvel at the casualness of his demonstration, yet these commercial dancers are perfecting the same quality of skills that ballet dancers work on during petit allegro in their classes at the School of American Ballet. They are just doing it in different ways.

There is no doubt that the virtuosic versatility and resilience of musical theater dance artists is staggering. Yet in academic institutions, there is often an assumption that these dancers understand implicitly: professional experience in the commercial field does not equal professional experience in the concert or ballet company world. This maxim is felt regardless of any personal or professional success the individual may have realized and creates a circumstance of second-class citizenry, or feelings of being the "red-headed step-child of dance," when this could not be less true (Smyth 2016).

From my experiences as a former Broadway dancer, I find that the criteria of professional requirements for a commercial dancer includes many different styles and skills, including:

- A studio tap version of *42nd Street* with clear and specific rhythm as well as performance qualities;
- A contemporary work similar to that of Mia Michael's *Calling You* (bench routine) from *So You Think You Can Dance*;
- A pointe solo with the dexterity and poise of the Black Swan;
- An erotic dance in the style of the film *Burlesque*, where the use of female and male sexualization through dance is a required element of the story;
- And finally, in musical theater circumstances, sing and act as well.

Such professional prowess is only one example of the global artistic versatility required of musical theater dancers (Butcher 2016). As the field continues to expand, mastery of acrobatics, circus tricks, aerial silk work, and advanced partnering is increasingly becoming necessary for a successful career where previously these more advanced skills would all have been considered "special," and required only by a few within the larger talent pool. While extreme versatility does make performers more marketable, there is really no other

possibility for a dancer who wants to work. They must continue their pursuit of extreme excellence, regardless of challenges to maintaining the body at peak performance level.

Musical Theater Dance: The Companion Art Form

As stated previously, dance is part of a collaborative effort in musical theater, and there is a lack of recognition for dance as separate from the theatrical or commercial environment in which it thrives. This can include being part of a triad in musical theater (singer, dancer, actor), or in commercial venues, being the backup support for a pop music star, selling a product in a televised commercial, or a dancing a *divertissement* in a movie. In a theatrical setting, it can be challenging to identify who is actually responsible for the creation: Is it the director or choreographer? This is especially true when the collaborative work appears seamless and the overall product makes a strong artistic statement. These interdependent artistic endeavors come to life through a collaborative effort, and the success or failure of one is dependent upon the other.

One example is the continuing collaboration of Lin-Manuel Miranda and Andy Blankenbuehler on the hit musicals *In the Heights* (2008) and *Hamilton* (2015). In this creative team, neither could succeed without the other, nor would either one want to create without the other (Miranda, 2016). Ironically, according to Miranda (2016), audiences love that they cannot tell where the acting and singing end and the dancing begins. This is ideal in the realization of musical theater and its artistic intent.

In their second collaboration, *Hamilton*, there is a thematic element in script, score, and dance of the representation of a bullet (see <https://www.broadway.com/shows/hamilton-broadway/>). Quite literally, it is a gunshot: the movement of a metal projectile from a gun. This thematic element appears in various songs. Choreographically, the dancers move forward and backward as the dancing tells the story of how this bullet moves throughout time while creating the story of the characters' collective lives. Then, in an ingenious choreographic moment that retraces the bullet's trajectory so that the audience might see the entire moment from a different character's perspective, a flashback is created. The retrograde of the artistic statement is magnetic, underscored by the fact that the dancer credited as "the bullet" in the playbill is a significant character and primary part of the story. It is significant that an inanimate object, like a bullet, is given life by a director and choreographer; this shows the impact of

dance in musical theater, and dance's ability to reflect society through artistic interpretation. Knowing this, how could anyone argue that this type of work does not carry as significant a meaning as Mikhail Fokine's *The Dying Swan*, or Ailey's solo *Cry*?

Artistic Evolution Requires Inclusion

Today's emerging artistic creators are innovative in their modes of artistic creation. While musical theater dance fits within this evolution, it has maintained a precarious relationship with academia and formalized academic inquiry. In a culture where inclusion and diversity are terms that require actionable approaches, the challenges of including musical theater dance in academic programs can be problematic for many reasons: programmatic funding requires dedicated donors in order to be sustainable; potential commercial faculty do not always hold the desired academic degrees; and the silo nature of academic institutions often sustains the status quo. These ideas all speak to academia being a place to take risks and support something new, or at least potentially when financial support was stronger.

This reframing of what dance and theater programs can be in academia requires an evolution in approaching dance training and how we view theatrical productions. In *The Nature of Dance*, Lange states that "... dance culture of any society forms a specific complex, and only against this background can it be properly understood" (1976, 106). Therefore, to require a comparison of musical theater shows through the same lens with which we have framed concert dance or ballet previously is no longer adequate. The academy must begin to broaden its perspective on dance to become more inclusive.

The benefits of inclusion far outweigh the challenges. In a climate where big musicals earn big money for departments, musical theater dance can help departments survive in an economically challenging time. They can simultaneously elevate the experience of the students, the faculty, and the audience. Musical theater by its very nature provides a window into humanity. By developing a culture of belonging in collegiate programming, departments will reap the benefits of an artistically inclusive environment and thus all arts rise. Through the inclusion of musical theater dance within the greater "fine art" definition, three facts become clear: 1) greater understanding of what musical theater dance offers is established, 2) academic validation of these forms are achieved, and 3) inclusion is not only beneficial, but necessary for our continuing artistic and human development.

Dancers as an Ethnographic Group

Anthropologists and ethnographers have exhaustively investigated human movement, yielding principle ideas that ritual aspects involving dance solidify a culture (Royce 1977). However, within this extensive research, the idea that a commercialized form of dance, and the people creating it, are worthy of investigation has rarely been considered. The idea that ethnographic groups could be defined by the art they create or by the product being solicited through their physical artistic creation is somewhat new.

In her book *Nutcracker Nation*, Fisher (2003, xi) puts forward the idea that “ballet should be studied in relation to its social, institutional, and culture context.” In her ground breaking work on the ethnographic study of ballet dancers, their association with, and their participation in the iconic ballet and classic Christmas tale *The Nutcracker*, Fisher concludes that people who have participated in *The Nutcracker* are in fact part of an ethnographic group, while simultaneously solidifying and expanding the definition of ethnic dance and dancers (2003, xi). Through her extensive fieldwork, lived experience, and documented research, the dancers’ individualized ownership over this artistic and life-affirming experience becomes a specific ethnographic identifier, because dance is a product of the culture in which it is created.

Ethnographic Dance in Musical Theater

The same identifying details Fisher presents in *Nutcracker Nation* holds true for the American musical theater dance, as well as other commercial dance forms. Dance is a uniquely unifying entity and can reflect historical significance, represent a rite of passage, establish a familial custom, and define a sense of belonging for the artist and the artistic community that is creating the story.

Through musical theater dance, audiences can conceptualize a heightened awareness of humanity’s cultural experience through a theatricalized interpretation. There are a multitude of examples in which theater provides a window toward empathy for and understanding of the human experience, much of which occurs through human movement and/or dance. American musical theater has been teaching ethnographic identity through artistic interpretation and human movement for decades and continues to help society to understand the disparity between cultures through these artistic theatrical experiences (Knapp 2004).

Ethnographic Identity in Musical Theater Dance

Musicals that provide a window into a cultural or ethnographic identity through dance, along with examples of their impact, are not hard to find. The iconic and game-changing musical *Oklahoma!*, first produced on Broadway in 1943, provided a window into the land rush of the Old West and the generational differences within this territory that was not yet a state. The script and score conveyed patriotism and individual pride in a new nation as a place to belong: A place where the “farmer and the cowman could be friends.” Audiences could discover what the Old West felt like by experiencing the wide-open spaces, a barn-raising dance, a country wedding, and generational differences among the young folk and the elders of the territory (see <https://www.playbill.com/article/broadways-oklahoma-revival-announces-extension-into-2020>).

Through de Mille’s groundbreaking artistic contribution, her choreographic work allowed audiences to envision the ideas that the country was founded upon, not to mention the choreographic anomaly that a ballet inside a theatrical setting could further the plot of the musical in a way that song could not. De Mille’s work promoted the value of dance as an equal contributor in musical theater and seemingly changed the future of what musical theater would become. That is, the ability to tell stories through dance became an expectation of any musical theatrical dance sequence.

West Side Story (1957) places U.S. racial relations front and center at a time when civil unrest was rampant. The production opened in 1957 and many audience members could not appreciate the intimate world view presented onstage, nor their own participation in it. Ballet legend Jerome Robbins built on de Mille’s ideas to use dance as a new form of communication. Dancing became the language for a generation who did not have the maturity to express its frustration and lack of understanding for its societal predicament. Robbins utilized an athletic outlet for a population that could not find the words to identify the pain and judgment they felt from an inequitable society. The dancing itself was also dynamic, specific, personal, empowered, and defined this group of individuals, often with the simplicity of a repeated finger snap.

In the Heights (2008) further expanded the voice of the immigrant in musical theater in 2008, providing not only a new cultural landscape of inclusion, but a sincere representation of the idealized American dream. By using hip hop vocabulary in *In the Heights*, choreographer Blankenhuebler provided a cultural perspective on this community, and brought new audiences to Broadway. Through the integration of a dynamic and diverse cast, musical score, and choreographic vocabulary, a reflection

of the American melting pot is illuminated in the upper tip of Manhattan known as Washington Heights. In this show, unlike previous works of musical theater about immigrants, every cultural identity is represented without cultural difference being a key factor in the plot line. *In the Heights* is not about two gangs at war. Rather, it is about groups of people living in peace and harmony despite their cultural differences. What had been previously presented as an ethnic identification resulting in cultural conflict is now simply various individual character's cultural identity. The creative team of Blankenbuehler and Miranda and their collaborative process is now considered a turning point in musical theater history for the inclusion-based model it provides.

Through the depiction of the Broadway show *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), along with its revivals, the use of dance as an ethnographic identifier provides a window into the Orthodox Jewish community. Although never blatantly stated, this story depicts the forced relocation and its associate cultural upheaval surrounding this community during World War II. The implications are easily recognizable when the ensemble of characters we have grown to care for is forced to disband and abandon their homes to escape further persecution, while attempting to hold onto their religious traditions. Herein lies the correlation: the dancing, the music, even the fiddler himself are physical representations of these traditions. "Tradition" is the source of their cultural identity and binds this community together. The upraised arms and chin are immediately recognizable as an iconic symbol; it is this body shape that becomes the signifying image of the show.

Even when dance is not traditionally ethnic in form, it can still be an ethnographic identifying commodity. In the Broadway musical *Kinky Boots* (2014), a young man takes over his father's shoe factory and discovers the likelihood of having to close the factory, putting many employees and friends out of work. Instead, he partners with a group of drag queens and begins to create shoes that are comfortable for these men to dance and perform in. Through using dance as an integral part of storytelling, we discover a sense of personal humanity and acceptance for our fellow humans; being gay is no longer something to fear but something to understand. In the finale of the show, every actor from the overweight, middle-aged, white male factory worker to the young female ingénue enters dancing and singing, "... Never let'em tell you who you ought to be. Celebrate yourself triumphantly!" in thigh-high red patent leather platform boots. There is no doubt that this is a cultural and ethnographic identifier when audience members participate in a celebration exemplifying a Gay Pride parade onstage (see [\[kinky-boots-lyrics/2057-raise-you-up-just-be-lyrics.html\]\(http://www.themusicallyrics.com/k/261-kinky-boots-lyrics/2057-raise-you-up-just-be-lyrics.html\)\).](http://www.themusicallyrics.com/k/261-</p>
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These examples of ethnographic identity allow audiences to view the world that has always been right in front of them, and yet somehow hidden in plain sight, or simply misunderstood. Shows like *Spring Awakening* (Deaf West version, 2015), *On Your Feet!* (2015), and the recent revival of *Oklahoma!* (2019), also utilize dance in a way that can expand society's understanding of ethnic minorities and/or persons with disabilities. For example, by using the Latin music and dance forms, *On Your Feet!* provides a specified view of Latinx Americans and their identification within the larger American culture through the biographical story of Gloria Estefan's rise to fame. In the revival of *Spring Awakening*, presented by Deaf West, utilizing deaf actors provided a new way to present the communication challenges that the story is based upon (Ross 2015). These kinds of ethnographic identities are situated throughout society, and their inclusion within theater is how we as a society move forward to create the kind of art that has yet to be imaged, while also identifying clearly what we have known and loved for years.

The identifiers: a finger snap; upstretched arm placement with a regal chin; the representation of a bullet that changes the world; and a drag queen in thigh-high red boots are all physical embodiments of how musical theater dance is an ethnographic identifier. None of these shows would have had the same impact without dance as a component of their creative and collaborative experiences.

Musical Theater Dance: A Change Agent

In her article "On Dance Ethnography," Sklar (1991, 6) states that dance ethnography "is unique among other kinds of ethnography because it is necessarily grounded in the body and the body's experience rather than in texts, artifacts, or abstractions." If ethnographic groups are established through and by the cultural standards they keep, then American musical theater's ability to change hearts and minds through storytelling and dance provides a window into ourselves. The collaborative process of discussing ideas, re-writing scripts, editing music, re-working choreography, and more come to life through the artists onstage and the way they interpret this developing work. This is how musical theater dance becomes grounded in the body, as Sklar states, and how audiences then receive it as a reflection of community and participation, in the way dance was originally intended to be experienced. When dance is used as a theatrical device, it provides a lens through which a person may view these lived experiences and

begin to relate and understand them in new and profound ways.

Musical theater dance is a tradition of inclusion in and of itself, and should be viewed, recorded, documented, and archived with this specific function in mind. Artistic communities are groups of people that create art with other like-minded individuals, as well as find a sense of belonging and purpose. If ethnography is itself an instrument of perception, then there is no better way to gain perspective on the world than to live these traditions alongside dancers/actors.

Honoring Those Dancing Feet!

The need for more definitive research and clarification of musical theater dance is clear. In addition, the need for more commercial dance genres finding support through academe is necessary to supporting the changing dance environment. Institutions of higher education need to establish commercial and musical theater dance forms as signature entities within their dance programs. By hiring more tenure track faculty who have participated in the genre, and by including hip hop, non-Western dance forms, and aerial work in the curriculum, the spectrum of artistic possibilities will expand. Through hiring commercially specialized guest artists for limited contracts, students can begin to see that there are more possibilities than what may seem unattainable: a position in a modern or ballet company. Through such exposure, young artists can learn that the things that make them unique—like their height, skin color, or body size—are actually the things that make them castable. In a society that continues to redefine and seek inclusivity, creating an environment where these forms of dance can be recognized for their merit is a requirement for our advancing global artistic society.

Simultaneously, the academy can begin to develop a springboard for future investigations, scholars, and connections necessary for the preservation of an ever-evolving dance society. We owe it to the artists who enabled our dance careers to validate the form artistically and academically and preserve it for future generations. Perhaps this is what Bennett was seeking when he began research into the life of the Broadway gypsy, which is simply a more elegant name for the chorus dancer. Bennett's research, which culminated in the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning show *A Chorus Line* (1975), continues to give audiences the world over an ethnographic view of the life of the Broadway dancer (Frommer and Frommer 1998). For those of us who had the grand opportunity to live on

Bennett's line for even a short time, it is so simple: in seeking to understand, we are understood.

Documenting the Form

In response to the above findings, I am developing an online database to investigate, preserve, research, and provide access to the academic study of musical theater dance, its choreographers and dancers. By building upon these findings as dance continues to evolve, this database can provide validation for those dancing feet, as well as become a resource for academics, graduate students, and young Broadway hopefuls seeking clarity in a field. Doing so would provide these dancers and the art they contribute their rightful place in academic and artistic history.

In *The Anthropology of Dance*, Royce suggests that all dance is worthy of inclusion:

We must apply them [our techniques for collecting data] and ourselves to the end of filling this gap . . . we cannot afford to cease exploring the realm of theory. To do so would be to stop growing as a discipline, to fall back to the collection of data as an end in itself . . . in short, we would lose sight of our ultimate goal, which is to document dance as an aspect of human behavior (1977, 217).

In gathering and defining the ethnographic groups of these commercial and musical theater artists, we can tell the stories of our lives and ultimately develop a stronger and more inclusive dance community. The culmination of this work can provide the validation for commercial dance forms and their creators as artistic communities continue to evolve. It is our job as informed citizens to leave the world a better place than we found it. Only then can we begin to see that perhaps we are more alike than different. The beginnings of this database can be found at www.traceybonner.com and all are welcome to participate.

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