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Forced to move virtually

What will the dance world's transition to videoconference technology mean for the field?

by Carl Sanders

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the entire dance community into virtual overdrive with mandatory quarantine restrictions and measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Finding an adequate means of continuing visual interaction to keep the art form alive suddenly became a necessity and live streaming via the internet was the answer. Not since the Great Depression of the 1930s has the dance community made such a unified and technological leap forward.

“The American social world deeply changed during the Great Depression, affecting the world of dance existing in the United States,” dance writer Carol Bender has pointed out. “Film media allowed dance to prosper and live on. Dance was no longer confined to the dynamic of a static theatrical stage and limited audience size. Development of new social and theatrical dance styles transferred to film media” (Bender, 2010).

It was during this time that audio technology became available for Hollywood films. The industry capitalized on this new sound capability by making a complete transition from silent movies to “talkies,” which ushered in the age of big-budget musicals. The dance community saw a rise in performance opportunities, worldwide notoriety, styles of choreography, and different perspectives of viewing movement. This sparked the field of dance cinema with film pioneers like Busby Berkeley leading the way. Fast forward almost a century later and the dance world finds itself in a similar predicament. What new opportunities will emerge from this era of dancing through hard times? How will technology help to redefine the way we learn, perform, and experience dance?

One widely accepted alternative to personal contact was the implementation of live videoconferencing. Interestingly, this technology has been known since 1968, when the commercial product *Picturephone*, by AT&T, was first introduced at the World's Fair in New York. It would take over 30 years after that for portable videoconferencing to become a mainstream consumer product; *Skype* launched their online video telecommunications system in 2003, and in 2010 Apple Computer's *iPhone* smart device appeared, equipped with *FaceTime*, a camera system capable of transmitting live video. But virtual interacting did not play a pivotal part in the dance world until 2020, and it all happened very suddenly. From university institutions and professional dance companies to theatre venues and private studios, it seems as if dance education, performance spaces, and movement itself were being reshaped and redefined at an unprecedented rate. The new video chat company *Zoom* had miraculously launched their robust meeting systems just in the nick of time. Now, it is the “new norm” for student classroom environments and studio practices, with all of us in small portal windows onscreen, often providing an unprecedented glimpse into someone's personal life.

With the whole world of dance embracing this digital model, pedagogical possibilities have started to emerge. Resources like *eLearning Learning (eLL)* provide strategies for teaching with

technology to enhance the experience, including third-party shared learning elements, customizable curriculums, interactive engagements, and contextualization of learning as it relates to the real-world on a global scale. Popular dance publications like *Dance Magazine*, *Pointe*, and *Dance Spirit* have quickly started to compile information and advice about how instructors can navigate successfully through virtual classes. These tips include attendance protocol, reinforcement of proper attire, virtual background usage, audio management, video monitoring, chat feature abuse, and the incorporation of nonverbal communicational skills.

As a dance educator, I find that movement on a communicative scale has been naturally heightened in the age of Zoom. Instinctively, both my students and I often use such universal signals as the thumbs up, okay sign, and hand to ear gestures to indicate progress or malfunctions, all of which has increased interactive engagement in class. Techniques for maximizing classroom and studio time via videoconferencing have developed through trial and error on a mass scale, offering new challenges and learning curves for all participants. For example, obtaining the proper meeting link can quickly turn into an urgent scavenger hunt, while entering a virtual classroom with the mute button on has quickly become a universal practice. As time goes on, it seems clear that there is a lot more to discover about the virtual dance world.



Zoom—the new normal, encouraging creative use of gesture, even in a graduate seminar. Author is top left.

Technical difficulties such as audio glitches, screen sharing complications, and loss of video connections, have been frustrating, but not enough to hinder communication or workflow. Software limitations, because the platform is designed for business engagement and not necessarily tailored for artist performance, have caught the attention of many users. Discovering tactics of correcting problems involving privacy issues like “*Zoom Bombing*,” illegal participant entry of a meeting session, has been a concern. Also, computer vision syndrome, which refers to severe optical complications derived from excessive digital screen viewing, is affecting many.

Despite these challenges, the transition from physical to virtual has been a success and the model for online learning is being set. The mind, body, and spirit of dance contributors are being altered and remolded. Perceptions of how efficiently learning dance virtually can be, is being changed and new doors for educators are opening. No longer are classes limited to participant size and their location. Now, it is an acceptable practice to teach anywhere in the world from the comfort of your home. With this comes the transformation of what was once the living room, kitchen, and garage, into a personal dance studio or office.

Movement exploration in space can be both challenging and inspiring—are you feeling confined by being at home? Or free by dancing outdoors? The switch from traditional studio spaces to more pedestrian settings—and the current political scene—has seemed to encourage the creation

and consumption of more social content and exposure for dance. Social distancing forces people to observe their surrounding environment more closely. It's possible that their personal connections and spatial awareness has enhanced performance pieces when dancers and choreographers create functional movement to suit real life settings.

As imaginations grow during this intense level of confinement, people are experimenting with cinematic ways of performing together while maintaining safe separation. Along with this spark of creativity comes the importance of dancing for the camera. Finding the perfect smart device or webcam angle and lighting takes more effort than just creating a great selfie shot; it has become a mandatory skill set. Unlike the days of old, when movement was filmed by specialized directors, videography has been placed in the hands of the independent artist. Embracing the technology of today is the most efficient and effective means of communicating concepts and developing one's artistic voice.

With popular social networks like *Instagram* and *Facebook* offering live video communications on their public platforms, artists can now interact with their own audiences in real time. This technology allows artists to "break down the fourth wall," which shifts the traditional performer-spectator relationship to a more conversational experience, filled with written comments and emoji reactions. This new approach of engagement has widened dance viewership, which can turn into monetary gain and worldwide recognition. Social platforms often pay their creators for obtaining high numbers of views, so the term "going live" brings along with it a new wealth of opportunity for the independent artist and the dance world.

Even though there is so much dance activity online, I still wonder—where does this leave those that have suffered significant loss due to the pandemic? As if being physically isolated from people is not difficult enough, personal and social circumstances may be seriously affecting the spirit of individuals. What state will they be in when the public emerges from this twilight zone of uncertainty? Although the light may be dimmer for some during this time, the loving hearts of the community have often answered the call to brighten days. Many volunteers, institutions, nonprofits, and support groups have started reading out, like the Dancers Virtual Emotional Support Group, operated through the ODC (Oberlin Dance Collective) Healthy Dancer's Clinic. The program focuses on providing all movers with a virtual safe place to express their emotions with the help of professionals in the field of psychology and movement therapy. Obtaining physical and mental help using video technology is certainly a much-needed addition for artists and the community.

What's next for dance? There is no doubt these are trying times for all of us, but there is hope. The journey of dancing virtually is here to stay. I think it will continue to open new opportunities for the expansion of the art form and digital spaces, such as virtual studios and theaters. Startup companies like my own, *Stagebow*, which is in development, are working to create platforms that will accommodate the rapid growth of the new online industries surrounding the arts, constantly striving to improve productivity, increase connectivity, and expand creativity. Virtual dance is the wave of the future, and I feel as though it can assist in catapulting new ideas and businesses into the dance world.

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