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VOICING LYRICAL DANCE: (RE)CONSIDERING LYRICAL DANCE AND DANCE HIERARCHY

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ABSTRACT

Lyrical dance intertwines fluid movement aesthetics, emotional narratives, and musicality within competition and commercial dance contexts. However, dance scholars tend to criticize lyrical dance, both directly and indirectly, perceiving it as over-the-top yet underdeveloped. When making such statements, they implicitly contrast lyrical dance with “high art” values that privilege a particular mode of “meaning-making” as rooted in the canon of concert dance forms, such as modern and ballet. However, lyrical dance does not prioritize elements of “high art,” meaning that these scholars critique lyrical dance more for what it is *not*. My research, in response, challenges such hierarchical biases by understanding lyrical dance from the perspectives of those who practice it. With IRB-approval, I conducted interviews with ten lyrically trained dancers from both private-sector, competition dance studios and collegiate dance departments in Southern California. My findings assess lyrical dance’s values regarding expression, “freedom,” connectivity, and affirmation of skill—focusing on the latter for the sake of this article—recognizing that lyrical dancers actively shape each value through their dedication to lyrical dance practices. By voicing the lyrical dancers’ perspectives and their reasons for embracing the practice, I aim to show the need to reconsider lyrical dance on its own terms, challenging persisting critiques within scholarship.

KEYWORDS: *Dance; Lyrical Dance; Hierarchy; Critique; Culture; Value; Interviews; Identity*



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Julia Zumaya studies dance at UC Riverside, exploring movement practices, dance making, and critical dance theory. Through the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program, she has researched lyrical dance and dance hierarchy for the past two years with the mentorship of Dr. Anthea Kraut. As a fourth-year senior, she looks forwards to joining PhD programs in Dance Studies, aspiring to publish more works on lyrical dance and relevant dance practices.



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INTRODUCTION

Percussive yet fluid, emotional yet narrative, lyrical dance moves within a complex division between competition/commercial and collegiate/concert dance frameworks. My research analyzes persisting criticisms of lyrical and its relevant dance contexts to explore a prevailing valuing of “high art” over “othered” dance forms. With the incorporation of self-led interviews, I provide alternate ways of perceiving lyrical dance that are more specific to its own practitioners, institutions, and culture.

DEFINING LYRICAL DANCE: BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Lyrical dance combines fluid movement aesthetics, personal emotional displays, narrative arcs, and intricate musicality. Lyrical dancers move fluidly, like water, “flowing seamlessly from one move to another” (Bedinghaus 2019) through smooth bodily articulations, particularly of the limbs and torso. Lyrical’s artistic intents—or the purposes behind training, choreography, and performance—stem from its etymological “lyric” root. “Lyric” describes both a genre of poetry that “expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet” (EEB 2017) and the words of a song, which, in ancient Greece, accompanied the lyre (OED 2019). Thus, “lyrical” describes dances that express both musicality and deep, personal emotions. Most commonly, people assume lyrical is dancing to the lyrics of a song, the more frequent use of “lyric.” However, lyrical dance also considers the “rhythms and instrumental...cues” (Weisbrod 2010, 104) and the “tone of the music” (103). As for emotional expression, lyrical dance concentrates on intense and personal sentiments, “oriented toward the dancer’s emotional responses” (Bedinghaus 2019). Lyrical dances contextualize such strong emotions within a story, adding narrative intents to the genre. Furthermore, lyrical’s relationship with a song contextualizes all artistic intents between musicality, emotion, and narrative.

Critical to defining lyrical dance are its artistic genealogies and contexts. Before becoming “lyrical,” it was known as “lyrical jazz,” a form of jazz that arose when ballet (and, to a lesser extent, modern) entered Broadway, a venue for vernacular and popular dance, in the mid-twentieth century (Netting 1995; Kraut 2015). With the rise of media and private-sector dance competitions in the 1980s, lyrical jazz entered private-sector studios, where ballet has reigned as foundational. With another large wave of ballet’s influence, lyrical became the fusion of “ballet with a particular evolution of jazz dance that removes the Africanist aesthetics” (Weisbrod 2010, 326). To a lesser extent, lyrical incorporates influences from modern, pantomime, acrobatics, and possibly Bharatha Natyam (Weisbrod 2010; Fisher 2014). Particularly with modern’s influence

in competition and commercial dance spaces, “lyrical” evolved into “contemporary” in the 2000s (Weisbrod 2014).

Lyrical dance persists within competition and commercial dance contexts. Competition dance exists within the private sector, where dancers ages four to eighteen perform in front of a panel of judges to win prizes and awards (Schupp 2019). Commercial dance is “the use of dance in the service of selling a product” (59), whether it be a physical product or an experience, to a lay audience. I consider competition and commercial dance together because lyrical dance also aims to impress judges and entertain audiences, goals that together influence lyrical dance’s aesthetics. For example, lyrical dancers train to display precise, “super-human skills” (Weisbrod 2020, 97-98) to impress their audience. Lyrical dancers also convey deep emotions to engage and *move* their audience (Garafoli 2007), using explicit storytelling, gesturing to lyrics, and popular music to help lay audiences understand the performance. Lyrical, developing within competition/commercial dance contexts, reproduces shared values around entertainment and audience.

HIERARCHICAL ISSUES

Despite recognizing lyrical’s artistic aesthetics and intents, some scholars critique lyrical and its competition/commercial spaces for being “over-the-top,” “unstructured,” and “underdeveloped.” I particularly reference Jennifer Fisher (2014), whose article criticizes lyrical dance for not measuring up to “high art” characteristics and values. Fisher’s article is the only scholarly publication to date that solely focuses on lyrical dance; so not only is attention to lyrical limited within scholarship (Weisbrod 2010) but lyrical’s only considerable presence is through a devaluing of the practice. More common within scholarship, relevant critiques of competition and commercial dance exist that fixate on the absence of “meaning-making” and movement agency, which are artistic intents of “high art,” concert dance practices.

Fisher (2014) and other scholars critique lyrical, competition, and commercial dance (lyrical, etc. dance) for valuing virtuosity and spectacle rather than “meaning-making” (Fisher 2014; Netting 1998; Elswit 2012). Additionally, they reduce lyrical, etc. dance to simplistic pedagogy (Fisher 2014) and a mere display of fast movements and poses (Foster 2017). Fisher (2014), Elswit (2012), and Foster (n.d.) critique the emotional expression of lyrical, etc. dance as “over the top,” arguing that the movement agency itself does not sufficiently contextualize the emotions. Lastly, scholars present an idea of lyrical as “rootless” (Fisher 2014) or as a “style” rather than an established “technique” (Weisbrod 2010, 105). Instead of valuing lyrical, etc. dance aesthetics and foundations, these scholars focus more on how lyrical, competition, and commercial dancer are not “art dance,” concert dance, or “high art.” For this reason, I

question to what extent these scholars critique lyrical and its relevant practices for what it is *not* rather than what it *is*.

Reading Fisher (2014) and other scholars, I examine how their criticisms and critiques stem from an implicit comparison of lyrical to “high art,” a category of elite dance under which lyrical does not fall. “High art” is subjective because it relies on comparative definitions of what it is “higher” than, prompting the “othering” of arts forms deemed “lowbrow” (Dixon Gottschild 1996; Kealiinohomoku 2001). “High art” institutions of the United States—those with the power to assign cultural value—associate with privileged social categories (Wesibrod 2010), deem themselves “artistic” over other forms, and separate “high art” from capitalist frameworks despite inherently existing in those systems (Dodds 2011). However, lyrical dance is not “high art,” nor is it quite “low art” like the vernacular and popular dances of marginalized peoples; instead, lyrical is “middlebrow.” The “middlebrow” positionality of lyrical dance in particular, and competition/commercial dance more broadly, is perhaps why scholars can easily critique it while simultaneously supporting a rising movement in Dance Studies to attend to traditionally “low art” dance. In this sense, scholars, as “high art” practitioners, can critique lyrical for not being “high art” without the awareness to also attend to its marginalized cultural values. While lyrical exists between complicated hierarchical stances, I focus on the dichotomy between competition/commercial dance and concert/collegiate dance, spaces of “high art” institutions, practices, and values.

As lyrical waivers between “high art” influences—mainly from ballet, modern, and the middle class—and competition/commercial dance values, lyrical constructs its own cultural values, i.e. aesthetics, intents, training structures, performance contexts, etc. So, to break from a “high art” perception of a non-“high art” dance, I research lyrical’s cultural values as embodied, reproduced, and shaped by its practitioners. I question how lyrical dancers’ perceptions, experiences, and beliefs further complicate dance scholars’ understandings of lyrical dance.

VOICING THE LYRICAL DANCE PERSPECTIVE: METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

With Institutional Review Board approval, I recruited lyrical dancers enrolled in undergraduate dance departments and local dance studios within Southern California. My participants have five or more years of experience with lyrical, contemporary, studio, and/or competition dance training (what I call “relevant dance experience”). Within an approximately 30-minute interview, I asked my ten volunteer participants questions about their understanding, experiences, and perceptions about lyrical in addition to

their dancer identity. My interviewees were (at the time of their interview):

Isabel: a third-year undergraduate, previously a dance major and now minor, with 13 years of relevant dance experience, 8 years with lyrical, all years at or affiliated with dance studios and competitions

Zana: a graduating senior undergrad, dance major, with experience at five other collegiate dance programs, 26 years of relevant dance exp., 12 years with studio dance, and 1 dance experience with lyrical choreography

Christine: a second-year undergrad, dance minor, with 16 years of relevant dance exp., 13 years with lyrical, all years at or affiliated with studios and/or competitions

Silvanna: a first-year transfer, junior-standing student, dance major, with about 9 years of relevant dance experience, 4 with lyrical, 1 year with competition dance, 1 year with studio dance, a few years affiliated with studio dance

Samantha: a first-year transfer, junior-standing student, film major, with 18 years of relevant dance exp., 11 years with lyrical, all years at or affiliated with studio dance

William: a graduating senior undergrad, dance major, 15 years of relevant dance experience, 13 years with lyrical, about 10 years with competition dance, all years at or affiliated with studio dance

Langston: local dance studio student, 4th grader, with 6 years of relevant dance experience, about 3-4 years with lyrical dance, 4 of which with competition

Clara: local dance studio student, also a third-year undergraduate, with 14 years of total relevant experience, about 14 years with lyrical, all at or affiliated with studio and/or competition dance

Maho: first-year undergraduate, psychology major, pursuing dance minor, with 7 years of relevant dance experience, 2 years with lyrical, 3 years with competition dance, all at or affiliated with studio and/or competition dance

Sophia: local dance studio student, 7th grader, with 6 years of relevant dance experience, 3 years with lyrical, 3 years with competition, all years at or affiliated with studio dance.

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Julia: third-year undergrad, dance major with creative writing minor, with 6 years of relevant dance experience, 4-5 years with lyrical, 1 year affiliated with studio dance.

As part of my interviews, I also include some autoethnography as a lyrical dancer myself.

Before continuing, I first acknowledge that my research and interviews do not wholly represent lyrical dance. Instead, I incorporate my interviews and reflections to begin to represent the broader community of lyrical dancers and their cultural values. I also acknowledge my bias as a lyrical dancer, which may influence me to focus on beneficial aspects of the practice/culture and minimize lyrical's faults to contrast criticisms and critiques. My purpose is not to prove scholars "wrong" by showing them "rights" but, rather, to show the need to broaden their interpretations and arguments by offering different, more dancer-centric perspectives. I have condensed my findings into four topics: expression, "freedom," connection, and affirmation of skill. For the sake of this article, I will very briefly summarize expression, "freedom," and connectivity before focusing in more depth on affirmation of skill.

To summarize, given lyrical's personal emotive depth, dancers can explore their emotional range, providing potentially cathartic and therapeutic experiences to help my participants as adolescents and young adults navigating new realities. Lyrical dance also provides my participants "freedom" within the structures of lyrical choreography and studio and ballet influences. In effect, dancers take agency in interpretation and movement variation within performance. Lastly, lyrical provides dancers with a medium of connection with people (classmates, instructors, teammates, and audience members), community (studio, competition, and commercial dance contexts), and music (song). Dancers achieve such connectivity through lyrical's emotive and interpretive depth within competition and commercial dance environments.

AFFIRMATION OF SKILL

My participants and I, from our lyrical dance practices, recognize the affirmation of skill through a sense of comfort and confidence. Firstly, we prefer to move our bodies through lyrically informed ideologies, providing us with a sense of comfort. For example, Samantha commented, "for the life of me, I cannot make sharp movements anymore. It's so hard. I just want to make everything seem flowy and flowing to the next move." Christine similarly noted that she is "not a very hard-hitting dancer." For Samantha and Christine, they struggle with sharp movements—the seeming opposite of lyrical fluidity—so they maintain fluid, lyrical undertones to their movements. Additionally, Isabel appreciates lyrical's smoother, calmer energy in comparison to jazz, for example,

explaining that "I love jazz music, upbeat music. It's just harder to tap into that 'cause it's more energy." Despite her love for jazz, she prefers lyrical's energy levels, finding it easier for her to embody. William introduces an idea of naturalness with lyrical, stating, "I just choreograph easily, like it just fits my body. It just comes more natural to me." Acknowledging the complex understanding of what "comes naturally," I reinterpret William's statement as an emphasis on his personal inclinations to move in a lyrically informed manner. I similarly appreciate how I feel that I am meant to move in a lyrical-esque form, giving me a sense of belonging and comfort. Christine further recognizes that "my experience with lyrical has always been like it's my comfort zone, and it's my safe place." Christine's comment along with my participants' lyrical predilections suggest that lyrical provides some with a reassuring comfort zone that encourages them to continue practicing and cultivating skill.

Lyrical dancers also value lyrical because it is something they have embodied and mastered, so it is something they can excel at, which informs the dancers' self-confidence. For example, Isabel values the opportunity to succeed through lyrical:

And it's something that I think—this will sound kind of cocky—but I'm pretty good at. I am good at teaching and I'm good at explaining it. It's something I don't feel like I'm failing at.... It's nice to be able to do something that other normal people can't do. Like, yeah, I can put my leg here. Yeah, I can jump in the air. Yeah, I can do this.

I argue that Isabel's feelings should not be perceived as "cocky" but, rather, met with encouragement, for she has found, in lyrical, a source of confidence despite other experiences with failure. Maho and Sophia mentioned how they can see self-improvement and growth overtime when looking back to when they started, so they find confidence knowing that their efforts pay off through constant progress. I appreciate how lyrical gives me the space to engage my skills. As a choir and drama student in high school, I learned additional levels of conveying emotions in performance. As a creative writing student in college, I can incorporate my love for stories into lyrical. Through lyrical, I actively engage with practices I master, boosting my confidence. For Clara, lyrical "it's just one of the things I can do," which reflects how her dedication to training paves the way for mastery. Overall, the confidence and comfort that dancers achieve through lyrical dance practices affirm the value of their skillsets, encouraging dancers to dedicate to lyrical dance practices and mastery.

SHAPING IDENTITY: IMPLICATIONS

As I have found, lyrical provides expression, "freedom," connec-

tivity, and affirmation of skill for its dancers. However, I must also recognize the role lyrical dancers play in reproducing and shaping lyrical dance values. To demonstrate, I present a quote from Samantha:

Out of every dance form that I've ever danced, "ever" being from three to now, I've danced lyrical or contemporary more times than anything else. So, to me, it's more, I guess, natural, and it also has a lot more significance to me because it's what I like to do.... I mean it like I have more training in that, and I've connected with it more because I've had more time with it. Like, for example, people who do more jazz, to them, their values set towards jazz. Mine is more lyrical and contemporary 'cause that's what I've grown up with, that's the path I chose when I did dance.

The time Samantha has spent with lyrical informs the extent to which she connects with the practice and embodies its values. However, her ability to connect with lyrical values depends on her active choice to practice lyrical dance. Because Samantha and other dancers *dedicate* their time to lyrical dance, *the dancers* reshape that time into connection, value-setting, and embodied knowledge—the sets of skills, ideas, values, and everything else learned through a physical practice. So, yes, lyrical offers dancer the space to express personal emotions, to find freedom from structures, to connect with various people and platforms, and to affirm their skills. However, lyrical dancers only gain these benefits through their decision to commit to the practice. In this sense, the lyrical dancers shape their own embodied knowledge and value sets, giving *themselves* the space to express, be free, connect, and affirm.

Through their reproducing and shaping of lyrical dance, the dancers help cultivate their sense of identity, supported within cultural frameworks and values of lyrical. When I asked my participants if lyrical and/or contemporary are a key part to who they are as dancers, Samantha, Isabel, Christine, Silvana, Clara, and Sophia agreed enthusiastically; and I concur. Silvana even gave me a, “Oh, hell yeah!” Through intense, personal expression, lyrical dancers explore their states of being to work through issues and habits, learning about themselves in the process. By valuing freedom from structures, lyrical dancers learn how they generally value agency and, therefore, value their ideas and decisions expressed through such agency. As for connectivity, lyrical dancers learn about themselves through their relationships, valuing the support systems they find through these points of connection. Moreover, by affirming their skills, lyrical dancers learn how they want to move and how they can move. Through a dedication to lyrical dance practices, lyrical not only gives dancers a sense of identity; dancers cultivate their own identities within dance and, potentially, life.

While scholars devalue lyrical dance, almost expecting it to be

“high art,” lyrical dancers continue to value lyrical’s aesthetics, intents, practice, performance, genealogies, and contexts. Instead of dismissing lyrical as “over-the-top,” “unstructured,” or “underdeveloped,” dancers, through their self-initiated dedication to their practice, find significance in lyrical’s expressive, freeing, connective, and affirmative qualities. As shown by the lyrical dancers’ voices, dance scholars’ critiques fail to make space for a more detailed, dancer-centric understanding of lyrical. And, as my participants and I move onto higher education, where scholars critique lyrical and where “high art” continues to reign, we are essentially told to “not do that,” which feels like being told “forget everything you know” or “don’t be who you are.” These negative views of lyrical dance leave dancers feeling stripped of their agency, identities, and worth as they struggle to conform to a new, privileged philosophy in hopes of making it far in the dance world. Moving forward, I hope my research opens space for dance in higher education to move away from hierarchical biases and work towards inclusive approaches to value all dance, including the “middlebrow” lyrical dance.

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