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Am I screwed if the choreographer isn't my BFF?

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## **Am I screwed if the choreographer isn't my BFF?!**

*Auditioning may feel like a waste of time when choreographers only cast the dancers they already know. Given current casting biases, maybe universities could teach networking skills along with performance and choreography*

by Jamie Elster

The phrase “it’s all about who you know” is a popular one in the performance world. Networking is highly encouraged for artists to make a name for themselves or seek out opportunities through building relationships with the “right people.” However, for a dance department within the university setting, opportunities should be given more equally, given that the setting is a place of growth and education, not competition. In a dance department, auditions for different performing opportunities are usually held throughout the quarter or semester with the intent to give students performance opportunities onstage. Auditions should be viewed as a neutral process where pre-casting does not exist and everyone has a fair shot at being cast in any of the choreographers works. This, unfortunately, does not seem to be the case at all university dance departments.

Wouldn't auditioning be a waste of time if those holding the auditions already have predetermined casts? How are dancers who are expected to reach a certain amount of performance credits supposed to get the attention they need to be cast without having to “kiss up” to anyone? Knowing the choreographer or establishing a relationship with them prior to any audition process has sometimes seemed to be the dancer's only chance of getting cast in a concert.

My sophomore year in college was my toughest one performance-wise. I found that I was auditioning all the time but rarely getting cast in pieces that made it to the stage. As a dance major, there is a required number of performances you need to be in. In other words, being cast in a piece is not only another performance opportunity but also a requirement to graduate. Not being cast was also very discouraging, especially when you are seeing the same several people constantly being chosen, often by a choreographer they have worked with several times before. When seeking advice on what I was doing wrong or needed to do more of in auditions, one professor told me, “Just get to know them. The more you know them and put a face to the number you wear during an audition, the more likely they might be to want to work with you!”

At first I was excited by the fresh challenge of meeting new people, but then something didn't feel right. I looked up the definition of “network” to see what I was in for and read: “interact with other people to exchange information and develop contacts, especially to further one's career.” I found that it isn't in my moral character to befriend people or colleagues just for the purpose of furthering my own career in dance. That is not how friendships should be started, let alone a way to gain recognition for opportunities to dance. It also made me think about how having performance credits makes it part of my education that I pay a high fee for annually. I am being sold short by not receiving the equal opportunity to be cast when I audition by not knowing the choreographer beforehand.

When asked what he looks for when new students come in for the annual departmental audition, David Dorfman, department chair at Connecticut College says, “I look for someone

who is aware of others in the room. It immediately shows us that they have a sense of community and want to stretch beyond themselves.” Michael Vernon, program chair of Indiana University’s ballet program shares, “There is a certain confidence that comes from a well-trained dancer even if they don’t feel confident. They look as though nothing phases them. People who aren’t as well-trained might look at the person next to them to see if they’re doing the step right.” While each chair may have different qualities they look for when auditioning new dancers, they all share one underlying similarity. They, for the most part, are seeing these dancers for the first time and don’t have any prior relationships to influence their decision making. This makes the audition process less biased and more based on the dancers that fit the attributes a choreographer or administrator seeks. This is the mindset choreographers should have when casting their dancers for a piece. They can have their personal preferences on movement style, body type, or any qualities they think will add to their work. But this doesn’t mean they should always be looking for their best friend in the audition room, or the dancer they have worked with 3+ times already.

A university is an educational setting that challenges us to step out of our comfort zones. This in turn means that it is an educational setting for the choreographer just as much as it is for the student, especially when the choreographer may also be the student. Undergraduate choreographers should want to challenge themselves to work with different dancers, as it could allow them to grow by working with different dancer bodies. By only selecting to cast their friends, they aren’t challenging their ability to work with different learners. Not every dancer moves the same way, let alone learns the same way. If we were to always do the same thing every day in a dance class, we would never gain knowledge or strength in other areas. This same logic can apply to choreographers getting stuck in a routine of casting the same people.

It is always tempting to take the easy route, or to stay in our comfort zones. That does not mean it is the right thing to do. Choreographers tend to favor working with dancers they know or are friends with, to stick with bodies and movement styles they already know. Dance writer Ann Glaviano confirms this when she writes, “Because the scene is so DIY dance-making, it’s typical for choreographers to cast upcoming dance projects with the dancers they already know and trust to be friendly, diligent and professional.” While this may work for a choreographer, it gives many other dancers the short end of the stick by cutting their chances based on a prior friendship.

I talked to several different undergraduate choreographers to try to get an understanding of how the casting process works for them. One undergraduate choreographer at UC Irvine said, “Usually I prefer to work with dancers I already have worked with because I’ve built a close relationship and trust with that dancer.” She went on to explain the difficulties of working with new people, that there can be a resistance to the choreographer’s work or a sense of judgement that can be difficult to cope with. This illustrates a need for trust from both dancer and choreographer, in order to make change a possibility. Addressing the same topic, a recent UC Irvine B.F.A. in choreography said, “I like to have at least one or two dancers I’ve never worked with in my cast, so that I am challenged[and] also add a new element to my work. But for my works that I restage, I usually have my go-to people. The reliable ones.” It is inevitable that trust is one of the main necessities for choreographers, in that they will want to work with people who can properly execute the work that they want to showcase.

Auditions can be a very tedious and stressful process. They require a lot of time, energy and dedication. While they can be very rewarding at times, they can also be very disheartening when one is struggling to be cast in at least one show. A third year undergraduate dance major at UC Irvine said that auditions, “have been a negative experience for me because I haven’t gotten cast, even when I specifically explained to the choreographers that I will need performance credits.” This causes a large gap between dance opportunities and education because the education requires a certain amount of performance units from the dancer, but the dancer is only

offered what those within the educational establishment are willing to offer. When asked if she noticed a casting bias within the department, she confirmed one existed in her opinion. She was also asked if at any point in her performing career she knew the choreographer prior to the audition. For her sophomore and junior year, she knew the choreographers before the audition and had a friendship with each of them. When referring to the casting process for the undergraduate dance concert, she said, “I genuinely think you have to know people, but only because then they know how you move.”

A senior dance major at California State University, Long Beach has a similar point of view. For the university’s student-choreographed shows, students actually had to approach undergraduate choreographers asking to be in their pieces rather than going through the formal in-person audition process. It was up to the choreographer to accept the dancer or decide to hold their own auditions to get to know new dancers. “I did notice a casting bias with one faculty member,” she said. “It seemed she’d always cast the same people and had talked to them before the audition, asking them to be in her piece.” She went on to say that “students would usually use the same friends in their pieces,” which again confirms there is an issue of taking a chance on the dancers that may be overlooked too often.

This “comfort zone” that choreographers seem to be stuck in raises the question, “Are auditions a waste of time if I don’t know the choreographer?” Dancers audition for different reasons other than getting into a show—for exposure, networking, or even just to get used to the audition process. Depending on the purpose of the audition for the dancer, it may or may not be a waste of time. While knowing the choreographer beforehand has proven to have its perks, there are choreographers who are willing to stray from the same select group of dancers. Any choreographer should be careful not to use the same dancers over and over again. Repetition can either have positive or negative effect, yet when it comes to the concert stage, it can get very boring very fast. As a dancer in a university dance department, I now find myself not looking forward to works from certain choreographers, because they always feature the same one or two dancers, doing the same movement they always do.

Networking is a crucial tool to have under your belt both in a dance department and in the real world. It’s a way of life that isn’t going to be changing anytime soon. It might be useful if dance departments could establish networking workshops early in the year to help dancers not confident enough to approach a choreographer asking to be cast, or just to improve the dancer-choreographer relationship. Changing the way in which auditions are held could be an equally strong alternative or addition. Perhaps there could be a dance database website where dancers could upload videos of their talents, so choreographers could watch an individual dancer, rather than a room of several moving at a time. Dancers would be responsible for constantly keeping their profiles updated and wouldn’t have to go through an audition process that can take hours on end. Since dance departments may require a certain number of performance units per student, I think limiting the number of times one student can be cast would also help. After a certain amount of shows, dancers would have to petition to be able to audition for more shows, and, based on the pool of dancers that still need performance credits to graduate, the decision would be at the discretion of the faculty.

There is no steering away from the fact that people like to work with people they know. This is a trend that has gone on for years both in and outside the university setting. While many choreographers will choose the people they know, it’s not always the case. By putting yourself out there, and stepping out of your comfort zone to continually expose yourself by auditioning, you may make yourself more known in a department. As networking remains a universal trend and a necessity in the concert dance world, I think it’s important to get to know the people around you. You never know what opportunities they may bring you.

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