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Should you watch dance documentaries? Only if you want to be inspired and informed about the dance world

*As you graze through the good, the bad, and the ugly dance clips on YouTube, consider the benefits of watching Paul Taylor's company in *Dancemaker*—it's one of the ways you find out about the past and your possible future*

by Savannah Reach

Should dance documentaries be required for dance majors to watch? Some students say that documentaries are useful in learning about choreographers and leading figures in the dance field. Others think they are boring and a waste of time when there are numerous “popular” choreographers available on YouTube. After considering it, I strongly believe that documentaries should be required for dance majors to watch. In particular, I am advocating for *Dancemaker*, which is a tribute to Paul Taylor. One of the prominent artists of the 20th and 21st Centuries, Taylor has choreographed over 140 dances and helped shape the art of modern dance in America. Taylor is an important figure in the dance world, and *Dancemaker* gives a unique insight into his significance.

Documentaries can be long and students might not understand how they relate to what they want to do in the future. They would rather spend hours on YouTube watching the coolest competition kids or the newest tricks to achieve over-splits. These students struggle to find the reasons documentaries are required in class and lack motivation to watch them. What they don't understand is that dance documentaries can provide a deeper understanding of choreographers, such as Paul Taylor, Martha Graham, and Pina Bausch. By watching their choreography, students can learn what has been successful in the past and compare it to their own work.

Even though YouTube provides a vast amount of options for the dance student, the quality of videos on YouTube is often bad, with amateurs posting as many dance videos as professionals. It can take hours searching through mediocre dancing to find an inspirational video. Plus, there are annoying ads on YouTube and multiple distractions of other videos popping up on the side. Documentaries provide a well-developed story with potential to catch the eye of aspiring professional dancers for long enough to follow the narrative arc. It creates an outlet for students to understand another dance culture, follow a dance company on tour, or see a dance style they have never heard of before. These perspectives are important for the dancers to become well-rounded individuals in the art of dance so they can not only dance, but can also have meaningful, intelligent conversations about their field.

For serious dancers, *Dancemaker* shows what makes Paul Taylor the recipient of nearly every honor and award given to artists in the United States. The details are shown throughout the documentary, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. If students are interested in creating dance for film, this documentary is a perfect source to learn about techniques such as transitions, camera angles, and interview methods. The documentary also gives students insight on what is required to be in a dance company or to run one. It follows rehearsals, traveling on tour, auditions, and the choreographic process. Taylor's money management team is also filmed to give an idea of the funding fluctuations that affect dance productions and salaries.

When I watched the documentary, I started to feel that I knew Paul Taylor based on all the interviews. Instead of thinking of Taylor as person far away in my dance history textbook, I was able to relate to his choreographic process, see how he led rehearsals, and understand the decisions he made. The documentary provided multiple layers of knowledge in a relatable way. Why is it important to relate to Paul Taylor? Choreographing since 1954, he is continuing to shape modern dance, and he is currently commissioning a new generation of choreographers to make dances on his company. He is advocating funding for modern dance and has been for a long time. His story can give inspiration and valuable insight to dancers who are serious about their future.

Even if dance students do not want to join a company, *Dancemaker* contains numerous topics that are relevant in the dance world. As a dance major, it is important to pay respect to the famous choreographers in the field. Since Taylor's works are still being performed, students will have a better understanding of how to talk about his dances and company. For all these reasons, I believe *Dancemaker* is a high-quality film that should be required for dance students to watch because documentaries provide knowledge that is not as accessible from a textbook.

Savannah Reach is scheduled to receive her MFA in dance from the University of California, Irvine, in June, 2017. Originally from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, she plans to be certified in Laban Movement Analysis after graduation and pursue a job as a university professor.
