

Rachel Male

Nora Ambrosio

DANC 323-01

10/11/2022

“The Teaching of Jazz Techniques: Authentically Representing Jazz History Within a Studio
Context”

While jazz dance is a common genre across many studios, companies, and pop culture, the definition of jazz dance is often ambiguous. There is vernacular jazz dance of the 1920s, the dance competition “jazz” sect full of European aesthetics, and countless other branches of jazz such as tap, hip hop, and musical theater. Some people consider none of these styles jazz at all. With all of this ambiguity, it becomes difficult to access jazz dance roots, and even more difficult to figure out how to translate these findings to students. In this paper, the importance of a comprehensive understanding of jazz history will be stressed alongside the history itself and the methods to convey these ideas in studio spaces. The technical components that constitute authentic jazz dance will also be discussed in conjunction with suggested movement sequences and exercises that embody these components to be used in dance class. The benefits students receive from a comprehensive education of jazz dance such as being represented and becoming lifelong learners, will also be examined and advocated for. In order to shape multifaceted and empathetic dance student leaders, it is crucial to include this conversation within the walls of the dance studio, alongside the physical practice of jazz dance technique.

With jazz dance serving as an umbrella term for such a wide array of techniques, it is important to foster an empathetic perspective to students on the history that has brought jazz dance to where it is today. In the documentary *Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz Dance*, scholar

Melanie George of “Jazz Is... Dance Project” states, “The one thing that I ask of every single person when they are working with this material is: say where you got this stuff from, and if you are not sure, investigate... no one is making up anything that didn’t come from some place” (Wong). The physicality of jazz dance movements did not just one day magically appear, they developed over time from a variety of factors. It is therefore the responsibility of the teacher or choreographer to give credit to the historical and movement influences that resulted in the material they are producing. Dance author Dolores Kirton Cayou explains why this responsibility is important as “there are many problems that will arise when someone outside of a given culture gives definition to expression... problems arise with the realization that they only have a superficial understanding of that expression.” Here, one can see that without a thorough understanding of jazz dance history, the expression becomes misconstrued. This not only prevents dancers from being able to accurately embody the style, but also misrepresents cultural identities.

The first important historical sentiment jazz instructors should make known to students to avoid these consequences is that jazz dance origins lie in African dance. *The Black Scholar* explains that the purposes of traditional African dance are social, utilitarian, and a part of a total way of life (Cayou). Educating students on these purposes allows dancers to embody the feelings and expressions associated with jazz’s African roots as they dance. Another important aspect of jazz history that dance students should be taught is how African dance was brought to the United States, and how this began its evolution toward jazz. Scholar Wendy Oliver uses a tree as a metaphor for jazz history and its related technical styles that followed suit. She explains:

The roots of jazz dance are African, and particularly West African. Enslavement

forced huge numbers of West Africans to the United States, along with their music and dance. During the time of slavery, African dance evolved into African-American dance, influenced by many factors including a mixing of Africans from different tribes and countries, restrictions imposed upon slaves regarding dance and music practices, and incorporation of European based movement observed on the plantation. (Oliver, xv)

This excerpt makes it clear how it was slave trade that initially brought African dance to the United States, and how this occurrence ignited the fusion between African and European dance to eventually result in the first jazz style, “vernacular” jazz. As Lindsay Guiarino and Wendy Oliver progress in their book, the development of each individual style or evolution of jazz dance to follow (known as branches), is explained. Before technical instruction begins in the studio, this general timeline should be explained to students so that they have an understanding of where the movement they are about to do comes from. Students should also be encouraged by their instructors to deepen their own understanding of the process of how jazz dance came to be outside of the classroom through sources such as the book, *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, or the documentary *Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz Dance*. With this historical sentiment, students will be set up for success when it comes to the next step of jazz dance education, technical proficiency.

In order to train students that have technical proficiency, it is crucial they are able to identify and accurately execute the elements that make a style authentically jazz. Artistic director, Billy Siegenfeld of “Jump Rhythm Jazz Project” explains, “what jazz is, is it took this African predisposition to syncopate if you will, to overlay a rhythm different from this ground rhythm, and it made the rhythmic life of jazz dancing filled with surprises” (Wong). When

teaching jazz dance, it is important to emphasize this relationship between the dance itself and the rhythm in the music. Instructors can accomplish this task by using music with a complex rhythm scheme, so that there are opportunities for the movement to contain elements of surprise. In their journal article titled “Valuing Cultural Context and Style: Strategies for Teaching Traditional Jazz,” Karen Hubbard further describes the technical West African elements present in jazz to be included in studio instruction:

As is consistent with traditional jazz dance, the stylistic characteristics of material closely reflect the movement elements of West African dance. Specifically, the center of gravity is lowered; therefore, most actions taught in the course are executed with bent support leg(s). The torso is inclined forward, the spine remains mobile and the limbs are articulated as the entire body is engaged, resulting in movement that is initiated almost entirely through syncopated foot actions. As is evidenced in West African dance, in traditional jazz dance, the limbs, torso, and head work in contrasting rhythms. (Hubbard, 111)

When teaching jazz dance in the studio, students should be made aware that these are the technical components that overlap between African and jazz dance, constituting “authentic” jazz. Depending on the specific branch of jazz being taught to students, it may also be necessary to note that it is these elements combined with either European or other aesthetics that result in the material at hand.

Another important technical component of jazz that should be taught to dancers is the quality or attitude they should apply to their movement. In order to perform with a “jazz state of mind,” dancers should find a balance between adding their own improvised, personal flair, and incorporating the “aesthetic of the cool” to their movement (Hubbard, 111-112). Brenda Dixon

Gotschild describes “aesthetic of the cool” as “an attitude that combines composure with vitality... completed by facial composure... an attitude of carelessness cultivated with a calculated aesthetic clarity” (16). When teaching jazz technique, it is vital for educators to discuss this qualitative insight with students so that their movement contains the stylized quality that makes it authentically jazz.

While the inclusion of the technical components described above is vital, the methods to implement these ideals into classroom exercises can vary from instructor to instructor. While instructors should find out what they personally feel works best through the process of trial and error, associate professor of dance Karen Hubbard provides a general outline of what to include in a jazz dance studio class. Some methods that can be used include interactive exercises, stylized walks, call and response with the music, isolation sequences, rhythmic exercises, historical jazz sequences, and exercises that pertain to the specific branch of jazz being taught (Hubbard, 112-115). Because jazz has such a wide array of interpretations and related styles, it is important to begin with these basic tenets of jazz and then branch out into the details of the more diverse subcategories to ensure that students do not lose sight of embodying jazz authenticity.

Educating students on the importance of historical and physical authenticity in jazz dance encourages students to be lifelong learners that always ask questions to reach a deep understanding of their future dance, academic, and life endeavors. As explained in the preceding paragraphs, issues lie within the practice of “training” jazz dancers on solely physical elements versus “educating” them on all of the factors that influence the discipline. When discussing the lack of implementation of this framework into studio confines, dance scholar Tamara Thomas explains:

African-influenced and African-lineaged dances are vast and complicated. Articulating a structure in which to frame them, tracing their origins and contextualizing their impact, purpose, and form, enables dance movers and scholars to discuss...or alternatively, to locate the rich genre of jazz dance within a historically, aesthetically, and somatically accurate framework.

When teaching jazz dance, creating a pedagogy that encourages an understanding and discussion of this lineage is incredibly important. Oftentimes, jazz dance is taught without these sentiments, whitewashing the technique and feeding into a system that “that frames white cultural elements and value systems as superior (white supremacy) stifl[ing] jazz dance’s chance at full engagement” (Thomas). Without these discussions, students will not be able to responsibly engage with the technique or pay homage to all of the cultural implications that have brought jazz to where it is today.

This frequent lack of historical context provided during the instruction of jazz dance is a manifestation of the general trend in American education systems to only shed light on proud moments. Dr. Benjamin Parker, an advocate of critical race theory from Loyola University, explains that withholding the difficult, yet honest conversations about race “undermine[s] one of the primary goals of public education: preparing an informed citizenry. How can we be truly informed if we are only taught one perspective?”. If students are not informed of both the proud moments and humanitarian failures that resulted in jazz dance, the style will be misrepresented, silencing voices that deserve recognition. When these conversations are held freely however, they promote opportunities that foster empathy, opportunity, success, and support for all (Parker). When jazz dance educators recognize the diverse cultural influences, history, and hardships that advise the jazz technique, they are not only teaching about jazz dance. They are modeling an

example that their students will follow for the rest of their lives, encouraging them to be responsible civilians that value understanding diverse perspectives and seek to give credit where credit is due.

In conclusion, jazz dance is rich with culture, stories, music, and movement that have enabled it to be a part of such a wide array of disciplines. Jazz dance instructors have the huge responsibility to ensure that these stories get told. Through gaining a thorough understanding of jazz dance history and the methods to be used to convey these ideas to students, instructors can authentically represent cultures to the best of their ability, encouraging their students to do the same. By tapping into the components that make a dance style “authentically jazz,” students will be able to synthesize the relationship between jazz dance history and physicality, enabling them to embody the technique to their fullest potential. With the desire to raise equitable, empathetic, and responsible dance students, instructors can help the world become a better place by fostering the discussion of diverse perspectives. By including these conversations within dance studio walls in conjunction with the practice of physical technique, dance instructors can raise student leaders dedicated to the authentic representation of the jazz technique.

Works Cited

- Cayou, Dolores Kirton. "The Origins of Modern Jazz Dance." *Taylor & Francis Online*, The Black Scholar, 10 Nov. 2015,
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.5816/blackscholar.42.2.0008>.
- Gottschild, B. D. (1996). First Premises of an Africanist Aesthetic. In *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (pp. 11–19). Chapter, Greenwood Press.
- Guarino, Lindsay, and Wendy Oliver. *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*. University Press of Florida, 2014.
- Hubbard, Karen W. "Valuing Cultural Context and Style: Strategies for Teaching Traditional Jazz Dance from the Inside Out." *Taylor & Francis*, Journal of Dance Education, 18 Mar. 2011,
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15290824.2008.10387371?casa_token=19cBosYQh7kAAAAA%3Aqdp-uveNpKWjzBb5OA4Osy9K7pJhFyBQFBeRID5xsF5jLCMq88yc0N-9tIbD0z8LheQEHg--rtgM4w.
- Parker, Benjamin, and Christine Mahandy. "Why You Should Care about Critical Race Theory as a K-12 Educator." *Critical Race Theory - School of Education - Loyola Maryland*, 2021,
<https://www.loyola.edu/school-education/blog/2021/critical-race-theory-educators>.
- Thomas, Tamara. "Making the Case for True Engagement with Jazz Dance: Decolonizing Higher Education." *Taylor & Francis Online*, Journal of Dance Education, 2 Aug. 2019,
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15290824.2018.1451648>.
- Wong, Khadifa, director. *Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz Dance*, BizBudding Inc., 20 July 2020,
<https://www.hbomax.com>. Accessed 23 Aug. 2022.