

Setting the stage for dance education: Dance performances for young people

Ella Hanson Magruder, Professor

Sweet Briar College, USA

emagruder@sbcc.edu

What is the best way to inspire young people to want to dance? In a keynote address at the National Dance Education Organization (NDEO) conference in 1999, the venerated dance educator Elizabeth Hayes said, “Never underestimate the power of a lecture demonstration.” To experience the power of dance, children need to see *live* dance performances. For nearly two decades, our duet company, Menagerie, toured over 1,000 performances for over 100,000 young people and adults, performing works with educational aspects, such as *Stars and Constellations*, a dance about the night sky, with images of meteors, planets in orbit, and other celestial allusions, as well as *Environs*, a dance of morphing forms with two people in one fabric tube.

My partner, Mark Magruder, and I learned from our successes (and failures) during those years of touring *and* from seeing how other performers danced for young audiences; we discovered what worked and what did not. After decades of performing and observing, I wrote a book about dancing for young audiences,¹ which also includes interviews of 10 successful dance company directors from around the world. Our company’s experiences, and those of others,² suggest that inspiring performances, ones that make children want to dance, contain three basic elements:

1. Performances entertain as they educate (with excellence in both): California’s Dr. Schaffer and Mr. Stern, who have an ensemble that performs math-related dances (with a text³ combining both disciplines), note that abstraction often works better than familiar stories if ideas relate to concrete concepts (Karl Schaffer & Eric Stern, personal communication September 5, 2008). The director of Frequent Flyers™ Productions, Colorado’s aerial dance company, bluntly states, “Don’t dumb it down” (Nancy Smith, personal communication, February 14, 2009). Our experiences have allowed us to understand that it is fruitful to create work that respects children and gives them the quality of art and of educational content that they deserve. Performances that are boring or lackluster will fail and instantly alienate anyone who watches, whether young or old.

¹Magruder, E. H. (forthcoming 2013). *Dancing for young audiences: A practical guide to creating, managing and marketing a performance company*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

²In addition to those mentioned here are Flatfoot Dance Company (South Africa); Jasmine Pasch and Phew!!! Arts (UK); Plankenkoorts (The Netherlands); Dance Imagination (Canada); (from the USA): Kaleidoscope (WA), Co-Motion (MT), Peanut Butter & Jelly Dance (MA); and many others from around the world .

³*Math dance, wholebody math and movement for the K-12 classroom* (Stern, Schaffer, & Kim, 2001 (self-published)) is a great resource for classroom teachers, as is the Math Dance website, <http://www.mathdance.org>

2. Activities that bring young people into the performance: Include children from their seats during the show; take dance into the audience; invite children into the performing space after the show (while the audience watches). Post-performance workshop activities, like “shape maker and shape filler,” deepen involvement and understanding.⁴
3. Choreography with diverse topics across the curriculum that address social issues and/or relate to cultural knowledge and perspectives: For example, lecture demonstration formats often work best for adolescent/teen audiences because they give performers the opportunity to provide a familiar cultural frame of reference; (e.g., to connect to teen interests by demonstrating how dance relates to sports.)

Inspiring performances generate excitement and motivate the child watching to want to dance. Dance education is well-served when it connects the skill and creativity of dancers/choreographers to the learning potential present in young audiences.

Keywords: dance, performing, education, youth, audiences

©2012, Ella Magruder

Ella Hanson Magruder, professor of dance at Sweet Briar College, Virginia, USA, teaches choreography, modern dance, and aesthetics/dance criticism, and is director of the dance education program. Formerly a professor at University of Montana and at Ripon College in Wisconsin, she was a member of the Mimi Garrard Dance Company in New York City. She toured for 18 years with her husband and partner, Mark, in their duet dance company, Menagerie, performing for over 100,000 students and adults. Her book *Dancing for young audiences, a practical guide to creating, managing and marketing a performance company*, will be published in 2013.

All citations of this paper from this source should include the following information:

In S.W. Stinson, C. Svendler Nielsen & S-Y. Liu (Eds.), *Dance, young people and change: Proceedings of the daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit*. Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan, July 14th – 20th 2012. <http://www.ausdance.org/> [Accessed on xx date]
ISBN 978-1-875255-19-1

⁴ For examples, see Marilyn Berrett’s DVD with Brigham Young University’s company Kinnect, available at <http://www.danceisbest.com>; Anne Green Gilbert’s *Creative dance for all ages, a conceptual approach* (1992); and Karen A. Kaufman’s *Inclusive creative movement and dance* (2005).