

Staging Dance



Susan Cooper

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To Norman Morrice and Maria O'Connor

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Foreword by David Wall CBE

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Cover photos

Front Main photo by Pete Jones is of Cyn Dee Too in *Pleasant and Correct* by Kazia Rudewicz for Royal Academy of Dancing College Workshop '95.

Smaller photo (above) by Bhajan Hunjan is of 'fire' section from *Samsara* project 1995, showing the floor painting described on page 126. Smaller photo (below) by Christopher Baines is of the Jiving Lindy Hoppers.

Back Photo by Focus on Dance shows Greasepaint School of Make-up making up a young dancer for *Horoscope* by Gail Taphouse.

FOREWORD

There is of course no substitute for experience, but to be able to share in that of others is invaluable.

As a young dancer, performing the roles of Siegfried in *Swan Lake*, Colas in *La Fille Mal Gardée*, Albrecht in *Giselle*, Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, for the first time, I had the help of not only the choreographers, choreologists and ballet masters but more importantly was able to share in the experiences of Rudolf Nureyev, David Blair and Christopher Gable. Their generosity in imparting their knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm helped me to sculpt my interpretations and gave me the security to become an artist, not just a fine dancer.

It is with this same generosity that Susan Cooper has written *STAGING DANCE*. She has such a wealth of experience and love for dance. She has covered in its pages the full spectrum of expertise needed to stage a performance, a unique book which I know will help and enlighten all who read it.

David Wall CBE

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Introduction

'I never in my life set my feet on a stage without thinking of its magic and my destiny'

Ruth St Denis in *The Art of Making Dances* by Doris Humphrey

My aim is to help you create the magic of dance onstage. Some stages you will encounter may appear, at first glance, to possess precious little magic: a freezing hall with a slippery floor is a typical example. The magic will certainly have to be created by *you*, both as a dancer and in how you adapt and make the most of the unpromising space.

An expressive body performing beautiful and exciting movements can be spellbinding in its own right without the addition of glamorous costumes or dramatic sound effects. However, most audiences expect to enjoy a dance performance complete with even the most minimal staging features: live or prerecorded music or sound, simple but effective lighting, and costumes which enhance the intention of the choreographer. They will expect the show to run smoothly: the dancers to be well rehearsed, the sound quality to be adequate, and the venue to have good sightlines. These expectations will prevail, whether they are watching a major ballet or a modern dance company in a well-appointed theatre with all the resources of regular funding, full-time staff and dancers, or at the other end of the scale, a small youth dance group with no funding or full-time back-up, and existing largely on the dedication and goodwill of its participants.

Compared with the other arts, dance is often treated like the poor relation in terms of recognition and funding, yet as an art form it uses the most basic form of human expression, the body. In its different forms, dance is practised and enjoyed everywhere, whether as a social, religious or theatrical activity, and every culture has its unique dance traditions. Only a few, however, earn a living from it, and for those who do, it is a short career.

One definition of the terms 'professional' and 'amateur' suggests the former has enough training and experience to demand and receive a salary, whereas the latter neither requests nor receives a salary for his or her work. In drama and music there may exist a clear dividing line between these two positions, but in dance there are many areas of work which fall somewhere between the two. A professional or amateur theatre group might produce *She Stoops to Conquer* or *The Mikado*, whereas only a professional ballet company will put on *Swan Lake*. In the specialised world of ballet, there is no equivalent to the tradition of amateur dramatics, so there are no dentists or florists by day who become Odette-Odile by night!

However many activities are being staged in a variety of settings in modern, tap, national and social dance, as well as ballet. Many young people today are engaged

in dance, whether as a hobby, at school studying at GCSE, A and AS Level, or undertaking professional training at a vocational school or on a dance degree. Whilst there is fine writing in books and specialist dance magazines on the individual aspects like choreography, design and music, relatively little has been written on all the staging elements together, in a practical format.

Like all theatre activities, a dance performance is the result not of one person's endeavour, but that of many, so this book is aimed not only at those on the dance side of a production, but also musicians and designers working alongside them, and those involved on the technical and administrative side.

Part One covers the different areas involved in the staging process. The practical suggestions are written at a basic level, and I have suggested sources of further information for more experienced practitioners. These include videos of dance works which illustrate certain aspects discussed in the text and which can give ideas and inspiration for more ambitious projects. Further reading is given at the end, and the names and addresses of supporting organisations.

Part Two gives examples of a number of dance companies and projects. It is hoped that they will show how the elements outlined in the first section work in practice. Every project and company works as a *whole*, with an artistic aim, group identity, and set of practical limitations. No single aspect of staging works in isolation from all the others. The book is concerned with practicalities, as determined by the artistic ideals which underlie them.

It is suggested that you read the whole book through, once, to get an idea of the overall process and the variety of situations in which dancemakers find themselves. Having had a taste of the opportunities and limitations you will encounter, go back and reread Part One, assessing how the information contained there can be adapted to your own situation.

I have assumed that you are without significant financial support for your work. In periods of recession, when the arts are often considered a luxury, the difficulty of finding resources can seem an overwhelming obstacle for many dancers. Excellent ideas and plans are abandoned in the light of problems associated with funding and organisation, and great determination and belief are needed to keep going. Courage, energy and inspiration can be as hard to find as cash! You need to find ways in which the production process can be enhanced, and limited resources used wisely and effectively. In the words of the popular song, you must, 'Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative!'

The most positive aspect of the work of many dancemakers is the passion and joy it engenders, so the first and most vital element to accentuate and nurture is precisely this love. Throughout the creative process, there are pitfalls to discourage even the most dedicated and seasoned creator, so an encouraging and enthusiastic atmosphere is your most precious resource.

I hope the book will be a source of support at moments when the whole venture seems overwhelming. You will ask why you ever thought it was a good idea to attempt a dance performance! Many areas need specific expertise, and you may not possess these skills. Let's assume you are a dancer, choreographer or teacher who is donning another hat, as director or producer, and is responsible for the final result. In other words, the buck stops with you. In the event of a successful enterprise, you will doubtless be delighted to accept the credit, and maybe even a little financial reward. Along the way, you may rue the day you decided to be in charge – after all,

*Students of the Royal
Ballet School rehearse
Matthew Hart's Sleepers*
(PHOTO: Focus on Dance)



you're an ARTIST, and should not be expected to be every other expert rolled into one!

However, reflecting on dance history, it is evident that key figures frequently have been multi-skilled. Look at the achievements of Marie Rambert, Ninette de Valois and Martha Graham. They did not succeed by relying on one talent alone – all were dancers, directors and teachers, de Valois and Graham were major choreographers, and all had the ability to inspire collaborators, publicise their work, find funds, survive the lean times and live to a ripe old age. Their books, *Come Dance With Me* and *Invitation to the Dance* by de Valois, *Quicksilver* by Rambert and *Blood Memory* by Graham make stimulating reading, and the fact that events they describe took place some years ago, when conditions were possibly even more difficult than today, only adds to their value. Marie Rambert commented on 'the blessed poverty' in which the company existed in the early days and from which they learned so much. Referring to the tiny stage at the Mercury Theatre, where Frederick Ashton and Antony Tudor created their earliest works, she considered this to be a 'wonderful hard school for my choreographers: to try to use every inch of space to a purpose, to try to use every artist on the stage to a purpose. The artists themselves had to be absolutely sincere

because the audience was so near one would feel any falsehood.’* A sure example of artistic invention born of necessity.

Areas for consideration include choreography, music and sound, design and lighting – the artistic aspects and, for most dancers, the enjoyable elements. Dealing with funding, payments, booking space for performance and rehearsals, publicity, security, insurance, front of house and other administrative arrangements are at best a labour of love, at worst a chore, or even a nightmare. Expert assistance is necessary in all specialised areas, but it is a great advantage if *you* have some knowledge of the areas, if only to be able to communicate effectively with your colleagues.

When seeking collaborators, the first problem encountered will be financial. How will you pay them, and how much will they expect? Returning to the ‘grey area’ between the amateur and professional worlds, the best advice is to ask around; personal recommendation from other dancers, teachers, choreographers, companies, theatres, arts centres or colleges is one of the best ways to find co-workers. You can, indirectly, get an idea of the likely fee they will want, prior to making contact. Unless you are amongst the most successful members of the dance profession, very few earn much money, so most artists will be flattered to be asked for their services, even if they are unable to help. You simply may not have sufficient funds to engage say, a costume designer and maker, *plus* a lighting designer, technician, and administrator, let alone a composer or musician. So you must decide who is absolutely essential, who you can do without, and who could act in several capacities. How you can get round such seemingly impossible limitations is the subject of this book.

At the outset, let your artistic imagination have full play, and your logical mind think through the practical areas thoroughly. It is well worth making contact with organisations which offer support to dance workers, like the National Dance Agencies, The Foundation for Community Dance and Dance UK. Addresses at the end of the book.

**Ballet Rambert – The First Fifty Years*, BBC TV 1976

PART ONE

1. The Venue

There are no purpose-built theatres for dance in the way that there are theatres for the dramatic arts, concert halls for music and opera houses for opera. Even the national companies have to share performance spaces with other users. There is, as yet, no Dance House in London ... Dance needs more and better spaces. Appropriate space makes a significant impact not only on the safety and welfare of dancers, but also on the quality of experience of the audience. These needs are often poorly understood. One of the main purposes of this document is to state those needs more clearly.

Mark Foley in *Dance Spaces*

Finding a suitable place to dance is one of the biggest challenges facing a dancer or administrator. Venue managers, also, should consider the needs of any dance group they wish to book.

Dance needs space

Of all art forms, dance is the one most in need of space. This may seem like a statement of the obvious, but it is amazing how little non-dancers appreciate the amount of space needed. A 5ft 4in dancer in *arabesque* spans 1.7m–1.8m (5ft 6in–5ft 9in) from fingertip to toe tip. Multiply this by twelve, and you get the width needed for a small *corps de ballet*. Depth is another matter, as only with sufficient depth can dancers really build a series of jumps *en diagonale*, and the ceiling must be high enough for partner work with lifting involved.

In all venues the basic elements are the same, although the details may differ. There will always be:

- the performance area
- the audience area
- the backstage area
- the front-of-house area.

The shape, dimensions, atmosphere and facilities are what make the difference. You have to ensure that:

- the space is used in a way which will most enhance the dance
- the audience can see it clearly
- performers and public are as comfortable as possible.

Performance spaces for dance today include theatres, community centres, village halls, school halls, gymnasiums, art galleries, museum, open-air venues and site-specific locations. A theatre generally has a fixed layout of performance and audience areas, whereas a non-theatre venue such as a gymnasium may have a degree of flexibility regarding the layout, with the final arrangement being dictated by electrical outputs and audience entrances and exits.

In all venues, whether theatre or alternative, the dimensions of the performance space and the placement of any wings should be considered before choreographing a single movement. Studios, school halls or gymnasiums can be converted up to a point to resemble a theatre; they can work well if judiciously adapted and taken into account whilst the work is being created.

TYPES OF THEATRE

The design of theatres has been subject to fashions in architecture, with facilities onstage, backstage and front-of-house varying considerably.

However, the arrangement of performance area and audience generally falls into one of several categories: proscenium, end stage, thrust, in-the-round or arena. See diagram on page 7.

Proscenium The proscenium arch acts to separate audience and performance areas and creates most people's idea of a theatre space (which may include an orchestra pit).

End stage Here performers and audience are contained in the same space, with the stage area undefined architecturally. The audience may be level with the stage or, preferably, on raised seating, which is often erected on rostra.

Thrust stage A thrust stage has the audience on three sides, as at London's Young Vic. Dance in this space needs to consider the three-sided placement of the watchers, adjusting or specially adapting the choreography so as to avoid a sideways view of essentially fronted action.

In-the-round or arena As the name suggests, the audience is on all sides, such as at London's Roundhouse. Like a thrust stage, this presents an interesting challenge to the choreographer: where and how to focus the action in relation to the surrounding public.

Traverse form The audience can be arranged on two sides. Fergus Early has exploited this form with his company Green Candle, discussed in Part Two.