

## **Thoughts on Choreography**

*by April Swenson, Director, Kingwood High School*

Choreography for me is a release. It is how I express or feel at the time. When I approach a project, I naturally choose music that affects me. I usually identify with music that brings out or emphasizes how I am feeling at the time. The music is everything for me. If it blows me away the first time that I hear it, or if I find myself continuously going back to it, then it is telling me to bring it to life!

My best choreography begins when I am isolated from all distractions and alone with only the music at the peak of its volume and strength of vibration. This is a joke among my team members. I must have the music loud and vibrating through the floor and into my body so that I can "feel the piece". Once these elements are in place, I just begin to move and do what comes naturally or the first thing that comes out of my body. If the movement doesn't flow naturally into the next movement then I will leave it alone until something does. I never force anything to happen. **When I don't have to think, only feel, then I know that it is right.** I always emphasize to my students to go with the flow of their weight and let it pull or take them into the next natural movement or progression. Never fight it!

It is also very important to "Think Outside the Box". Take a generic move and add a twist to it. What seems like a "typical" prep or transition will be manipulated so that it takes on a new, innovative look. But it really is just an extension of the original move. An example would be a chassè into a leap. Although I do use chassès periodically, I might find another way to gain the momentum that is required to execute the leap or sequence in an unpredictable way. Or, just when the audience thinks that they know what you are about to do, change it mid-stream to throw them off or to achieve a different result.

When I sit back and listen to the piece of music from start to finish, I totally visualize the general idea or the effects that I am trying to portray or emphasize. Formations, numbers of dancers and strength of movement variations are in my mind prior to the piece unfolding choreographically. I will know when, where, and what type of "feel", not necessarily the movements, that I want as the music progresses. That really helps in the choreography phase. If I know the desired goal that I have in mind before the piece is actually put together, it makes it a whole lot easier.

I also demand that when my students and I are trying to create something together, that they let themselves go and do not worry about how something feels or looks initially. The dancers/choreographers must feel comfortable around each other and an un-intimidating environment must be created in order for our most creative ideas to surface. It is often those very movements that you naturally do without thinking that are most successful. It is the over-analyzed movements that begin looking somewhat robotic and stale. I often do not think about if the movement is going to be "cleanable". Rather, I focus on the innovativeness of the

movement and find a way to get the team to execute it the same or at least close to it. If I see a movement that causes me to do a double take or wonder what in the world that I just saw, then I snatch it up or at least use it as a catalyst for something else to evolve.

One of my biggest points that I like to emphasize is to NEVER waste music! If the music is shouting for attention, then give it what it is asking for! People often laugh and say that they could make 3 dances from the choreography that I use in one of my dances. I do pack in the movements and emphasize detail. But, at the same time, I will not miss the subtle accents, pauses or energy changes in the music. I will also never put movement to something that requires nothing or just stillness. Sometimes only a breath is required or intense stare to pull off the desired effect. Again, the music will determine the choreography, if there is music!

Finally, DO NOT FEAR BEING DIFFERENT OR CONTROVERSIAL! I thrive on choosing music, costuming and ideas that are a little on the edge or controversial. I would rather have people talking, good or bad, than not talking at all! There is nothing wrong with trying something once, within reason, to make a statement or create change. You never know how far you can go unless you try! I am known for allowing my individual dancers to express themselves through their music, style and costuming. I do not feel that just because a dancer might choose to perform to the song "Satan's Little Lamb", that the dancer IS Satan's Little Lamb. The dancer is playing a part and if the maturity level is there and the understanding of what the art form of dance is all about, then I say, try it! Of course, there are limitations in a public school and that is where I, as the director, set those limits without taking away the idea or effect intended. Freedom to express is the common denominator that I share with students. In addition, one must provide a comfortable, safe environment for the creative process to blossom! Allowing yourself freedom of ideas, movement, and expression will pay big dividends.

As a final note, it is very important that all directors and performers respect the creative talents of others and their work. I am a little disturbed to see "plagiarism" in the dance world. All too often, a person's choreography has been copied and packaged as "original". This is no different than removing the author's name from the cover of a book and replacing it with someone else's. Usually, people are glad to share their ideas and assist others in developing choreographic skills. The key is to receive permission to utilize the creative works of others and then, to give proper credit to the real choreographer. It is perfectly fine to watch videotapes of dance championships to get inspiration and new ideas. However, use them as springboards for your own ideas. This philosophy will not only make you a better choreographer but also preserve the integrity of creative talents in the dance world.