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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

UNIQUE CONSIDERATIONS FOR CREATING HIGH  
SCHOOL MUSICAL THEATRE CHOREOGRAPHY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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December 2020

This Thesis by: Tahlia Remer

Entitled: *Unique Considerations for Creating High School Musical Theatre Choreography*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Masters in Arts in the College of Performing and Visual Arts in the School of Theatre and Dance, Program of Dance Education

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## ABSTRACT

Remer, Tahlia. *Unique Considerations for Creating High School Musical Theatre Choreography*. Unpublished Master of Arts thesis, University of Northern Colorado, 2020.

The purpose of this research study was to identify what unique considerations should be made when choreographing for high school musical theater. In this study, both directors and choreographers of musical theatre at the high school level were surveyed regarding the research questions. Research questions for this study were: 1) What special considerations need to be made when creating choreography for musical theater at the high school level? 2) What do directors of musical theater at the high school level expect of their choreographers? 3) What strategies do directors and choreographers of musical theater at the high school level use to divide responsibility for directing movement? There were a total of eighteen directors and fifteen choreographers who participated in the study with a variety of training and experience. Survey responses were then analyzed for common responses. The information gathered in this study can serve as a helpful resource to both directors and choreographers of musical theatre productions at the high school level as they navigate the process of collaboratively directing movement for their productions.

## AWKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of so many family and friends. I would like to thank the following people:

My husband, Hayden Remer

My parents, Ron & Heidi Sill

My Grandma Marla Blackburn

The rest of my extended family

Christy O'Connell Black and Sandra Minton

My UNCO Cohort

My Friends and Colleagues at Marcos de Niza High School

My Undergrad professors and mentors at BYU

My Research Participants

And finally, my daughter, Zoe Remer, for bringing me so much joy and inspiration through this entire process.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Goal of Thesis**

Choreography presented in a musical is unique from traditional concert dance choreography. A main source of distinction between the choreography of a musical and that of other concert dance is that the movement must work in unison with all of the other elements of a staged musical show. Choreography is a unique element within a musical because it is one of the few components that is original each time the musical is restaged. In her article “Anything Doesn’t Go: A Critical Look at Dance in Musical Theater,” renowned Brigham Young University Professor, Rebecca Wright Phillips, makes a statement that is commonly endorsed amongst researchers, stating:

Each time a musical is mounted there is one artistic element that is almost invariably original—the choreography. While dialogue, musical notes, and even set design can be recreated the dances cannot [...] This inability to replicate [...] has not only contributed to the struggle many face in creating solid choreography, but has contributed to the lack of written material surrounding the subject of dance in musical theater. (116)

Although research suggests that there is an understanding that choreography in a musical holds this unique position, there seems to be a lack of adequate knowledge and training on how to accomplish quality musical theater choreography. The goal of this thesis was to design and

implement a resource for those tackling the task of musical theater choreography, particularly at the high school level.

The essential questions addressed in this study were:

- Q1 What special considerations need to be made when creating choreography for musical theater at the high school level?
- Q2 What do directors of musical theater at the high school level expect of their choreographers?
- Q3 What strategies do directors and choreographers of musical theater at the high school level use to divide responsibility for directing movement?

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research study was to identify what unique considerations should be made when choreographing for high school musical theater. Many dance educators are requested and hired to create musical theater choreography in their school or community; however, training in musical theater choreography is not consistently required as part of dance teacher certification programs. Additionally, there is very little current research or literature on the topic for teachers or choreographers to reference. Many higher education programs do not require any training in musical theatre specific choreography. This study was aimed at identifying practical tools and suggestions for high school musical theater choreographers to consider when successfully creating movement for musical theatre productions.

### **Significance of Study**

In his book, *Musical Theater Choreography: A Practical Method for Preparing and Staging Dance in a Musical Show*, author Robert Berkson states that “The mounting of a musical comedy is always a complex undertaking because there are so many elements that must be coordinated” (5). The complexities of staging a musical are also what makes its impact so far reaching. Choreography is just one of the many elements that is involved in the process of

staging a musical. When each of the elements are equal in quality and consideration there can be strong, lasting, and far reaching impacts. By providing high school musical theater teachers with the tools needed to create quality musical theater choreography, the students, school, and community benefit, as well as the professional community.

Quality high school musical theater productions provide students with meaningful and challenging experiences where they can learn and grow. Students are given the opportunity to practice skills and work ethic in an authentic environment. The experiences these students have will be their foundation as they go on to seek careers in the professional world. For some students, these skills may apply directly to careers in the world of professional musical theater such as performers, directors, choreographers, technicians, producers, and many other career possibilities. For students who pursue other professions, the life skills learned through authentic theater experience can also be useful such as skills in effective communication, personal motivation, cooperation with others, and many more.

Musical theater productions of an excellent caliber also reflect well on the school. Schools are evaluated by various criteria to demonstrate effective education of students and strong musical theatre programs can directly impact scoring in several areas, including participation in the arts, participation in after school activities, and community involvement. Additionally, effective musical theatre programs teach students life skills which they can apply in other areas of learning and which can also help positively impact overall school ratings. Many 21st Century skills encouraged in schools can be developed through participation in musical theater such as creativity, problem solving, collaboration, communication, flexibility, and leadership. These skills can be used throughout a lifetime of activities, careers, volunteering, and hobbies.

Musical theater productions are also a tremendous opportunity for the surrounding community to view the work that is happening in the schools around them. Many subject areas taught in a high school setting are too often only observed by those on the school campus. After-school activities such as sports and performing arts allow community members a chance to interact with the students and faculty, and to view school accomplishments firsthand. When the surrounding community has a positive image of what is happening in the schools around them, they are more likely to support those schools. Community members can serve as volunteers on a school campus, make financial donations, and make choices to support schools when they vote on policy in local elections and ballot initiatives.

As the quality of musical theater choreography improves at the high school level, both students and choreographers will be better prepared to work in the field of professional musical theater. Not every high school theatre student will pursue a professional career in musical theatre, but these students can take many of the skills learned from participating in musical theater throughout their life in whatever avenues they pursue. For those students who do go on to become professionals in musical theatre, their experience at the high school level will provide valuable training and a vital foundation for their future. High school provides meaningful opportunities for students to pursue their passions, and positive musical theatre experiences can enrich students' lives.

CHAPTER II  
LITERATURE REVIEW  
**Concert Dance Choreography**

Choreography that is created for the dance concert setting can vary widely in its genre, style, setting, and presentation. Concert dance uses the elements of staging, costumes, sets, props, music, and lighting to help support the overarching intent or meaning of a dance, but the movement itself is the primary medium of communication. While the additional elements can help support the overall intent of a dance piece, the mark of a good choreographer is the ability to create a piece where the movement can stand on its own, independent of all the other elements, and still convey its meaning or intent. The other elements of a performance stand to enhance that foundational element of movement that communicates.

The inspirations for concert choreography can vary widely. Several books on choreography, including two highly popular textbooks, *The Art of Making Dances*, *Choreography: A Basic Approach Using Improvisation* by Doris Humphrey and Barbra Pollack and *The Intimate Act of Choreography* by Lynn Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, enumerate countless sources for inspiration of choreography. Some sources of inspiration for choreography include experience, music, legend, history, ritual, social conditions, abstract (Humphrey and Pollack 32), visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, imagined, and memories (Minton 5-6, 8). “Many things come into play in the integration that results in the creation of a dance. The choreographer’s whole life, personality, and education form the matrix from which she creates”

(Bloom and Chaplin 216). This array of inspiration, along with variety in genre, style, setting, staging, and presentation allows for freedom of expression of the choreographer.

## **Musical Theatre Dance Choreography**

### *History of Dance in Musical Theatre*

Dance has not always been an integral part of musical theatre. The addition of dance to musical theatre was a slow process. At first the focus of musical theatre in America was on the song and storytelling, but it did not include dance. The first musical theatre production to include dance was *The Black Crook* in 1866. Dance was used for visual interest but was not necessarily considered an essential element (Ambrosio 129). The musical *Peggy Ann* introduced the idea of connecting dance to the other elements of the production such as the script, music, and lyrics in 1926. At the time, dance became a more essential element of the stage musical (Ambrosio 129-30).

In 1943, Agnes de Mille choreographed the musical *Oklahoma!*, and for the first time, dance became a critical role in the story of the musical. Not only was the dance a critical part of the storytelling, but de Mille's choreography also elevated the status of the choreographer and the quality of dance in musicals. The dances that de Mille created for *Oklahoma!* could stand on their own, separate from the rest of the musical, as artistic works with stories of their own. For the first time, the dance played a critical role in propelling the story of the musical (Ambrosio 129-30).

Over time, more choreographers began to specialize in musical theatre choreography and developed their own signature style. Prominent musical theater choreographers who developed signature dance styles for musical theater and established codified choreography for the musical theatre genre were Bob Fosse, Jerome Robbins, and Gower Champion. The signature style of

these choreographers set a high bar for the skill and artistry of the dance in the American musical. Their choreography continues to influence musical theatre choreographers who are creating movement for the modern musical.

### *Differences from other Musical Theatre Elements*

Movement and dance hold a unique position when it comes to restaging the American musical:

While the director has the given script to look from, and the musical director teaches music and songs already written, the choreographer must undergo a specific process to first create his material, structuring his dances to suit the dramatic context, and finalizing the steps to be used even before they can be taught to performers. (Berkson 1)

Trained actors can learn lines, stage directions, and music from the libretto, which gives the director and music director the opportunity to spend most of their rehearsal time fine tuning the intricacies of the acting and the music.

The musical choreographer, on the other hand, spend additional time before the rehearsal process even begins to prepare the movement to teach the performers. In addition, the choreographer must consider the music genre, physical location where the musical takes place, time period, character development, and plot development, to ensure they are creating movement appropriate to the setting. All these elements interweave to create complex requirements of the movement and of the choreographer.

### *Differences from Concert Dance*

There are several reasons why musical theatre choreography must differ from the choreography created for concert dance. One of the main differences is that the movement

created for a musical must work equally with the other elements to carry the plot, as the dance itself does not carry the entire plot:

While there are several models for critically discussing concert dance, the choreography in the interdisciplinary art of musical theater is a unique craft that cannot be addressed in the same manner as isolated dance works. While the aesthetic principles of form are vitally important in both dance genres, the choreography in the musical differs from concert dance in its objective as it is wedded to book, lyric, and music. (Phillips 115)

The dance must support and be supported by all of the other elements of the musical. This is why it is critical that the choreographer work closely with the director and music director to ensure continuity of style throughout.

It is also important to note that the dancers for a musical are often the actors and singers. While the dance should be visually interesting and dynamic, it must also realistically allow for the actors to speak and sing in order to tell the story.

Generally speaking, dance for musicals needs to have pace, rhythm, and drive. It must be neat and produce clear designs. It must be precise both temporally and spatially. The movement vocabulary can be very varied stylistically, but it is limited by the need to leave sufficient breath to sing loudly! Movement must not restrict the vocal cords.

(Novak 11)

Dealing with these complex physical demands can be particularly difficult for more inexperienced or unprofessional actors like those in the high school or educational theatre setting.

### *The Purpose of Dance in a Musical*

Although dance did not start out as an essential component of musical theatre, it has gained importance as a critical component in the storytelling of the American musical. A good musical will engage the audience in not only believing the story, but also experiencing the emotion of the story. The dance plays a critical role in being able to convey the authentic and believable emotion:

[...] steps that are acted, displaying human elements of feeling, will carry the audience to the purpose of the piece. The viewers will share whatever the performer is experiencing-tenderness, loneliness, or silliness-if the steps are appropriate and if emotion brings color and depth to their delivery. (Berkson 14)

When this level of performance and emotion is incorporated with dance, it allows the audience to connect to that emotion and immerse themselves in the story.

Choreography should play an integral role in carrying the plot, setting the mind, developing the characters, or communicating ideas and that this must be done in a creative way that takes into account the technical abilities of the actors, singers, and dancers in the cast. (Phillips 115)

The need to account for the technical abilities of the actors, singers, and dancers in the cast is of utmost importance in the educational setting. These novice performers typically do not have the abilities or the skills needed to perform all of these elements well. In this case, since the music and the script are typically already set, it can fall heavily on the choreographer to make accommodations for varying skill levels while still ensuring that the dance is authentic and aesthetic.

## **Director Collaboration**

“The mounting of a musical comedy is always a complex undertaking because there are so many elements that must be coordinated” (Berkson 5). The collaborative relationship between the director, musical director, pit director, choreographer, set designer, costume designer, and prop designer is of critical importance to the success of the musical. All of these elements must work together flawlessly to create a cohesive story for the audience. This unified approach can only be achieved when each of the contributors conscientiously plans to interweave their own component with the rest of the elements. When one piece is missing or out of place it can degrade the entire production.

One of the most essential collaborative relationships that the choreographer must develop is with the director. The director of the production can give clear vision for the design of the show. Much of what is created for the sets, props, and costumes will be based on the director's vision for the design of the show. “Because the potential of the choreographer's work will be determined by the possibilities and the restrictions of the surrounding physical realities, he must be absolutely certain of conditions such as space availability, set pieces, costumes, lighting, and props” (Berkson 15). Throughout the choreographic process, the choreographer will need to consider and incorporate each of these other elements.

Another essential collaborative relationship for the choreographer to develop is with the music director. One of the most difficult aspects of performing in a stage musical are the physical demands of being able to dance and sing, or speak, at the same time all while making it seem natural and effortless:

The choreographer must formulate the proper combinations for the dancers' abilities and potentials, helping them to look their best. [...] He must consult with the music director to

ensure that the choreographic demands are physically possible in conjunction with the vocal requirements of the scene. (Berkson 14)

When the music director and the choreographer work together to address the potential difficulties of the physical demands of the show they can help the actors to look and sound their best.

The choreographer must also work well with a variety of other contributors on the production for several reasons. The collaboration with the pit band Conductor is important to understanding the instrumentation specific to the staging of the production, preparing recordings of the music for the performers to rehearse with, coordinating rehearsals with live music, and establishing appropriate tempos. Collaboration with the costumer is key to making sure that the movement of the choreography is appropriate to the movement limitations of the footwear and clothing that the performer will be required to wear. Understanding of the set design is critical to the process so that the choreographer can relate the space and setting of each scene and can plan for the size and range of movement appropriately. Communication with the props department is an important consideration to understand how, when, and what props performers can and should be using in each musical number. Successfully combining all of these elements can be challenging for a choreographer, but the job is made easier when the choreographer has a collaborative and communicative relationship with the other individuals involved in the process.

### **21st Century Skills**

According to the glossary of education,

The term 21<sup>st</sup> century skills refers to a broad set of knowledge, skills, work habits, and character traits, that are believed—by educators, school reformers, college professors, employers, and others—to be critically important to success in today’s world, particularly

in collegiate programs and contemporary careers and work places. (Great Schools Partnership)

The process of being involved in the myriad of components involved in a musical theatre production addresses a vast array of these 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Students preparing for a musical production must develop the skills of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity, and social skills. The development of these broad skills is not only applicable to future careers in theatre, but also to a wide variety of secondary education programs and modern careers and work places.

### **Educational Theatre**

Most high school musical theatre productions are housed within the school's theatre department so educational theatre is an important part of musical theatre at the high school level. In his forward to the book *Places, Please*, American film director, Ron Howard has this to say about educational theatre:

There is something about the intense preparation and sustained coordination required to present a production to an audience that provides remarkably useful training for all kinds of real world circumstances the students may face in their lives. Preparation, teamwork, and coordination *are* rewarded in very tangible ways in a high school theater production, whereas in athletic competition for example, despite all the conditioning, teamwork, and sacrifice, the difference between success and failure often comes down to luck, poor officiating, or a sudden act of superior athleticism from a single player that affects the outcome. (Varley vii)

In his forward, Howard eloquently identifies some of the benefits of a theater education at the high school level. In her first chapter of this same book, Varley herself states, "The high school

program is often the first step in training an actor or technician student who aspires to a professional career” (1). A student’s experience in musical theatre is an important opportunity for students to develop both skills and experience not only for a professional career in theatre, but also for a variety of real-world circumstances.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Institutional Review Board Process**

Before beginning this study, the researcher submitted a narrative to the University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board for approval. This narrative included the purpose of the study, research methods, risk/discomforts, and benefits. Research instruments and consent forms were submitted for approval alongside the narrative. After the initial review, the Review Board requested a sample of participant recruiting materials and revision of both participant consent forms. Sample email and social media posts were added to the submission along with revised participant consent forms to allow for online consent. Once the application was accepted and approved, the study began.

#### **Instruments**

This study used two different surveys with two different sets of participants to gather data: one survey for musical theatre director participants and one survey for musical theatre choreographer participants. Each participant could respond to one or both surveys depending on their personal experience. The survey was administered using google forms and participant emails were not collected.

Each survey was divided into four sections. Section one included the participant statement of consent that continued to part two of the survey, indicating consent to participate in the study. Participants could discontinue participation in the study at any time without any

repercussions. Section two consisted of short form response, qualitative questions regarding the participants personal training and experience. Section three consisted of quantitative rating scale responses regarding the participant's experience in musical theatre. The final section was an optional request for personal contact information for any participants interested in receiving information regarding the results of the study. The director participant survey focused on questions regarding their experience and training, collaboration with their choreography directors, and their expectations for choreography in their musical theatre productions. Questions on the choreographer participant survey focused on their experience and training, their collaboration with their musical theatre director, and their opinion on the most important considerations for creating high school musical theatre choreography.

### **Participants**

Participant recruitment occurred by means of personal invitation, text message, email, and social media posts. An email request for participants was also sent through the Arizona Dance Education Organization email database list. Survey completion was voluntary and survey participants were not compensated in any way for their participation.

There were two categories of participants for this study. The director participant survey was administered to musical theatre directors who had experience directing musical theater at the high school level within the last five years. There were eighteen director participants from a variety of school districts and states with a diverse background in musical theatre. Participants were from Arizona, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. All director participants, except one, had at least a Bachelors and many had a Master's degree.

The choreographer participant survey was administered to musical theatre choreographers who had experience directing musical theater choreography at the high school

level within the last five years. There were fifteen choreographer participants in this study with a wide variety of musical theatre experience. Choreographer participants were from Arizona, Louisiana, Minnesota, Utah, and Wisconsin. Most choreographer participants had a BFA, BA degree, or higher.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected in this study using the two Google form surveys. Google forms organized responses by question and by individual participant. The Google forms platform also had the ability to create pie chart representations of quantitative data. The qualitative questions on both surveys asked participants to provide their opinion based on their training and experience in the field and also asked about the director choreography relationship, director expectations for choreographers, and priority considerations for creating musical theatre specific choreography. The quantitative questions on both surveys asked participants to rank various director/choreographer experiences as well as their confidence in choreographic training and abilities. Qualitative data were analyzed for common or similar responses, which were then organized to generate aggregate quantitative data.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to provide a resource for dance choreographers interested in creating movement for musical theatre at the high school level. The focus was to gather information about what special considerations need to be considered when creating musical theatre choreography for the high school level. This study also looked at what high school musical theatre directors are expecting of their choreographers and what trainings are currently offered regarding musical theatre choreography at the collegiate level.

Separate surveys were developed to elicit responses from both musical theatre directors and choreographers with experience at the high school level. The director survey asked how they go about dividing movement direction responsibilities with their choreographer and what they prioritize when they are deciding which choreographers to work with. The choreographer survey asked about what training in musical theatre specific choreography was available in their collegiate studies, how they go about dividing movement direction responsibilities with their director, and what they consider to be the most important considerations when creating choreography for musical theatre that are different from traditional concert dance choreography. This chapter will summarize the results of those two surveys.

#### **General Information**

Initial questions in both the director survey and the choreographer survey asked participants about location, training, and experience. Directors were from Arizona, Minnesota,

Ohio, and Wisconsin. Choreographers were from Arizona, Louisiana, Minnesota, Utah, and Wisconsin. Both directors and choreographers worked in a variety of school districts in each state. The directors and choreographer participants also had a variety of training, experience, and degrees.

Director participants had degrees from a variety of colleges and universities across the United States. The higher education degrees earned by director participants included six percent associate's, forty-four percent bachelor's, forty-four percent master's, and six percent had earned two master's degrees. Seventy eight percent of director participants had a degree directly related to musical theatre education; including degrees in theatre, musical theatre, dance, and education. Directors had anywhere from one to over twenty-three years of experience directing musical theater. Thirty five percent of directors had one to four years of experience, six percent had five to nine years of experience, six percent had ten to fourteen years of experience, twenty-four percent had fifteen or more years of experience, and twenty nine percent did not identify their number of years of experience. Directors had directed several different musical titles during their years of experience.

Choreographer participants also had degrees from a number of colleges and universities across the United States. The higher education degrees earned by choreographer participants included thirteen percent associate's degrees, fifty-three percent bachelor's degrees, twenty-seven percent master's degrees, and seven percent had a PhD. Eighty-seven percent of choreographer participants had a degree directly related to musical theatre or dance education; including degrees in theatre, musical theatre, dance, and education. Choreographers had between one and twenty-two years of experience. Forty percent of choreographers had one to four years of experience, twenty percent had fifteen or more years of experience, and forty percent did not

identify their years of experience. Choreographers also had experience creating movement for several different musical theatre productions.

### **Musical Theatre Directors and Choreographer Collaboration**

An important aspect of the musical theatre production process is the division of movement direction responsibility between the director and the choreographer. There are many ways to divide this responsibility that were identified by both director and choreographer participants, but there were also a few commonalities.

One commonality among the responses to the survey question that asked how to divide the responsibilities was that a meeting occurs between the director and the choreographer at the start of the production process. The participants agreed that it is important to have this conversation early in the production process so that director and the choreographer can be on the same page about vision for the production. Choreographer participant number eight summed it up this way saying “It is crucial for the choreographer to see the directors’ vision before beginning and also having a very good working relationship with shared creativity and ideas makes the production so much smoother for all involved.” Another important reason for the director and the choreographer to meet early on, is so that the choreographer can create movements that will also work well with all of the other aspects of the show. A director participant who also has choreography experience explained it this way: “I don’t think a choreographer can be expected to begin until the director has decided on staging, space available, set, and some idea of costuming. [...] The director and choreographer need to work in tandem as the director is staging the show.” Once the choreographer understands the vision and the logistics of the show, the actual process of dividing responsibility can happen.

When discussing dividing the responsibility for directing movement it seems commonly agreed upon, that overall, once the movement is divided, the choreographer has creative license to create what is appropriate for the production, but the director has final say. What was not as commonly agreed upon, was how much responsibility goes to the choreographer. Much of this decision seems to depend on the director's experience with dance. Director participants who had more dance experience and training tended to respond that they would choose the musical numbers that they wanted to do themselves and then give the rest to their choreographer. Directors with less dance experience and training responded that they expected their choreographer to be responsible for all movement to music. Most directors seem to share common experience explained by director participant number two who said,

[I] give mostly music to the Choreographer and dialogue to the Director... however, many times there are "Blockography" songs that do not require dance or much movement and those fall under the director. Sometimes, songs have a dialogue break that require both to collaborate during a mixed rehearsal.

Several choreographer participants agreed that they usually take on the larger production numbers, collaborate on in between numbers, and are not expected to create and set movement for smaller numbers and dialogue. Director and choreographer participants agree that there should be a conversation early in the production process and then the division of songs and movement really depends on the training and experience of both the director and the choreographer.

## Musical Theatre Director Expectations for Choreographers

One of the survey questions for director participants asked them to identify what they felt was most important when considering who to hire as a choreographer for their productions. There were a few commonalities that came up in several participants responses. Figure 1 shows several common responses with the number of director participants who identified these same qualities. The most common responses included a desire to hire choreographers who were team players or collaborated well, love of or ability to work well with high school aged students, availability, experience, and ability to adjust to performer's ability. Some other qualities that are important to directors include positivity, flexibility, storytelling, dance and choreography experience, passion, cost, ability to work with inexperienced singers, knowledge, patience, and knowledge of music. It would be important for musical theatre choreographers to develop these skills and qualities to make themselves more marketable.

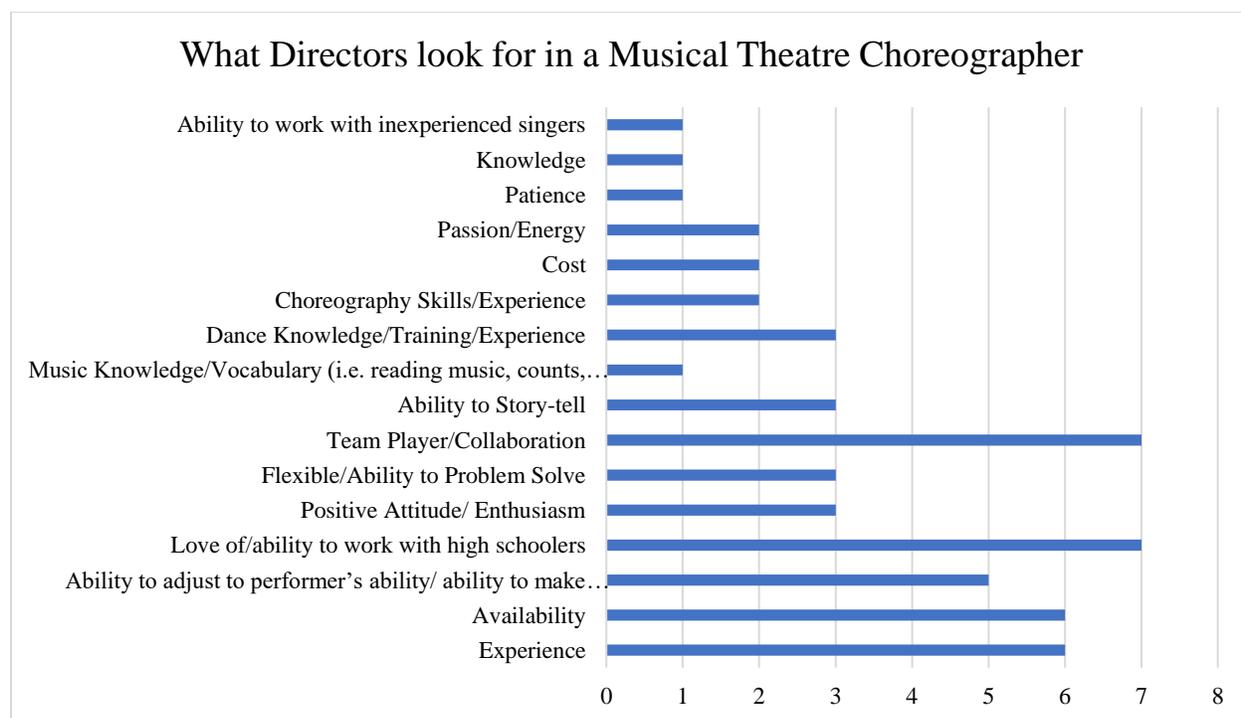


Figure 1: What directors look for in a musical theatre choreographer

## Considerations for Musical Theatre Choreography at the High School Level

There were many unique responses to the choreographer survey question, “What are some fundamental considerations that you consider when creating high school musical theatre choreography which you would not typically consider when creating choreography for a more traditional dance performance setting?” These unique responses were analyzed for similar and common responses in order to find which were most frequent.

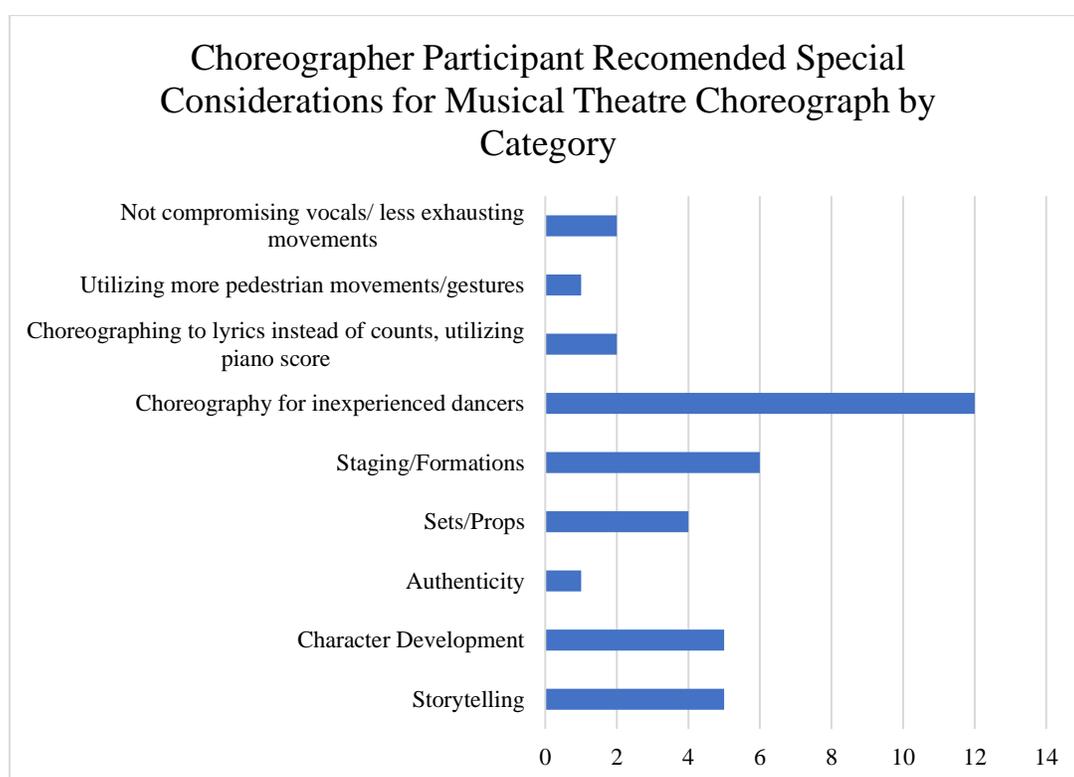


Figure 2: Choreographer participant responses re: recommended special considerations

By far the most frequent response, with eighty percent of participants identifying this same consideration, was that musical theatre choreographers at the high school level need to consider that they will likely be creating movement for performers who are inexperienced dancers. Choreographer participant eight worded this sentiment very eloquently:

Many of these kids have the heart and desire to perform but lack the training. Don't rule out a student just because they have no dance experience. I have witnessed amazing transformations with students appearing to have two left feet. I would say expect modifications and be prepared to teach nontraditionally. Also, don't assume that you will need to dumb down your creation- if the bar is set high many times these kids will put in the extra time and effort to rise to the challenge. Especially if you offer practice videos on social media.

Choreographer participant ten put it this way, "You need to make the choreography easy enough for all to learn but still hard enough to ensure growth in dance technique for every student involved. It is, at its core, a learning experience." Although many student performers in high school musical theatre productions are inexperienced dancers, choreographers can and should still create movement that is interesting and appropriately challenging.

The next most common response was to pay special attention to staging and facing. This is important for a few reasons that were brought up by various participants. Four choreographer participants brought up this consideration in relation to the size of the cast in comparison to the size of the space. Often, high school level musical productions have a large cast and limited stage space. The stage space can be further limited due to large sets and props used in musical productions. Choreographer participant thirteen, brought this up in relation to creating an overall look or aesthetic for the dance. Finally, choreographer participants one and four specifically mention facing so that performers can be seen and heard when speaking and singing. This is important because both dialogue and singing are vital to the storytelling of a musical theatre production.

In regard to the importance of storytelling, thirty-three percent of choreographer participants identified storytelling and thirty three percent of choreographer participants identified character development as important considerations for musical theatre specific choreography. While these may be important components in some traditional concert dance pieces, these are crucial to the function of dance in a musical theatre production.

Choreographer participant nine explained it this way:

I also think about the story - dance performances are not the same as musical theatre performances. The story needs to be addressed and considered, as well as the background of the piece. A story like A Chorus Line or Anything Goes has a lot of dancing that doesn't necessarily relate directly to a character or their individual story, but have dance "breaks" that are a part of many numbers. Something like Little Women is very different, where the moves should come from the characters and should involve movement that their characters would know, and be able to complete in their "daily" life."

Choreographer participant five also emphasized storytelling and character development noting, "Absolutely 100% the story itself: the character development, motivations, and arcs, awareness of the overall themes of the entire musical and when they can be layered into individual pieces, etc. if applicable, the historical influences or realities." As a choreographer works to develop story and characters through movement, authenticity should be considered.

Twenty seven percent of participants brought up sets and props as an important consideration when creating musical theatre choreography. Due to the storytelling nature of musical theatre productions there is also typically a high use of props to help with that

storytelling. It is important to incorporate these props into the dance as well for continuity within the production.

A response that was not mentioned as often, but is still an important consideration for musical theatre choreography at the high school level, is a specific attention to the score and the lyrics of the music. Choreographer participant five had this to say,

I dive into the music much more deeply than when choreographing in other spaces... recurring motifs, canons, melody progressions, musical instructions like “falling off a log” are all taken into account and serve to motivate movement choices. I have to choreograph to the piano score in order to make sure I deeply understand and can visually see the story being told by the music before I can add the visual movement layer to the piece.

Participant five describes using the piano score which can be very useful to the choreographer if they understand how to read music. If the choreographer does not know how to read music it would be useful to learn the basics of understanding a music score before beginning choreography for a musical. Important basics to learn for a choreography would include time signature, note value, and the relationship between counts and measures. It would be useful to work closely with both the music director and pit director of the musical (if a live pit orchestra is being used) to be accurate about tempos, and any discrepancies that may appear between the script, libretto, and score.

Choreographer participant two responded, “I also use the lyrics instead of counts when working within a section that they would also be singing during and further I consider not compromising the vocals when I am creating [so] the dance less intense and exhausting for the actors/singers.” Having performers practice singing their parts during choreography is great

for a number of reasons. One is that it gives the performers additional practice with their vocals. Many times, high school musical theatre productions will have separate rehearsals for music, dialogue, and dancing so it is important to find opportunities where performers can assimilate and practice all the components of their performance in the rehearsal process. Another reason to use lyrics while teaching movement is that for many performers, including less experienced performers, they may find it easier to use lyrics instead of counts when learning movement. In her section on preparing a musical, Joy Varley points out, “There are often many discrepancies found in a musical script and all of them should be resolved before the production packets are assembled and the rehearsals begin” (23). However, these discrepancies are not always identified in their entirety before the rehearsal process begins so it is important to recognize them as they arise and address them with the director. Finally, practicing with the vocals allows the choreographer to make sure that the dance does not compromise the vocals.

One final consideration that was brought up by choreographer participant fourteen was that, “[...] it doesn’t always have to be “dancing,” movement around the stage or choreographed interactions with others can also be just as visually beautiful.” This sentiment is supported by director participant five who mentioned that “Choreographers tend to ‘over choreograph’ numbers that should be dramatically staged.” It was widely acknowledged that choreographers remember that the dancing is there to work with and support the other components of the production. Choreographer participants indicated that the movement should always serve a purpose. Movement for the sake of movement does not work as well in a musical production as it might in a traditional concert dance piece. More pedestrian movements and gestures are appropriate for the storytelling nature of a musical production.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### **Research Question and Methods**

The goal of this thesis was to design and implement a resource for those tackling the task of musical theater choreography, particularly at the high school level. The essential questions addressed in this study were:

- Q1 What special considerations need to be made when creating choreography for musical theater at the high school level?
- Q2 What do directors of musical theater at the high school level expect of their choreographers?
- Q3 What strategies do directors and choreographers of musical theater at the high school level use to divide responsibility for directing movement?

#### **Interpretation of the Findings**

This study found that there are several considerations that should be taken into account when choreographing for musical theatre at the high school level. Some of the considerations included creating movement for less experienced dancers, staging and formations, character development and authenticity, storytelling, use of sets and props, movement that does not compromise vocals, choreographing to lyrics instead of counts and using more pedestrian movements and gestures. Many of these considerations were brought up by multiple choreographer participants and supported by statements made by director participants when identifying what they expect from their choreographers.

Even if they have dance experience, most high school musical theatre production directors will hire a choreographer to create movement for their productions. The expectations of the director participants of this study varied, but there were many commonalities among their responses. Some of the most common expectations that directors have for their choreographers include ability to collaborate, love of and ability to work with high school students, ability to work with students of various levels of experience and ability, availability for the rehearsal schedule, experience in dance, choreography, and musical theatre, positive attitude, ability to problem solve, and storytelling. All these skills and characteristics are important for choreographers to develop if they would like to be considered for jobs working on musical theatre productions at the high school level.

Musical theatre productions typically involve several directors and leaders, each with a specific responsibility for different aspects of the production. All the directors and leaders have to be able to collaborate and work well together to create a cohesive production and provide meaningful experiences for their cast, crew, pit, and audience members. This study identified that it is vital for musical theatre directors and choreographers to meet early in the process to establish design, vision, and individual responsibility. The actual division of movement direction between director and choreographer will vary depending on several factors including the musical selected, the experience of the director, and the movement experience of choreographer.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The scope of this research study was very limited. The questions developed for this study were deliberately open ended and allowed for participants to be as detailed as they wanted. Some participant responses were longer and had greater detail in their explanations. These responses provided substantial context for the purposes of this study as a reference. However, there were

also some responses that were very concise and did not provide much explanation. Survey questions also were worded such that participants were encouraged to only respond with their top considerations or expectations which means that this study is not an exhaustive resource of special considerations or director expectations for choreographers of musical theatre at the high school level.

A few other limitations of this study were related to the participants. There was only a total of thirty-three participants. Additionally, the participants were only from a handful of states and school districts. Better results could have been achieved with a larger sample size and a more diverse group of participants. Participants were also asked to self-identify as directors or choreographers of musical theatre at the high school level. Participants were asked about their experience within the last five years, but they were not required to provide proof of scope or legitimacy of training or experience.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

It would be interesting to conduct further, more detailed research on this topic, but this study did identify some suggestions in response to the research questions. It would be beneficial to identify a more exhaustive list of the special considerations for creating high school musical theatre choreography. It would also be beneficial to include a description of why each consideration is important in the musical theatre setting at the high school level and how to go about implementing those considerations effectively. Additionally, further research could solicit responses from a wider variety of participants.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are many considerations to take into account when working as a choreographer for high school musical theatre productions. Individuals planning to embark on

the task of musical theatre choreography at the high school level must acknowledge the unique circumstances of dance in this setting and create accordingly. In the experience of the researcher, being the choreographer for a high school musical theatre production can be overwhelming and exhausting, but also incredibly rewarding and fulfilling.

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APPENDIX A  
INSTIUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DOCUMENTS



*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: December 20, 2019

TO: Tahlia Remer

FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1514786-2] Unique Considerations for Creating High School Musical Theatre Choreography

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: December 20, 2019

EXPIRATION DATE: December 20, 2023

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

Hi Tahlia,

**Thank you for your revisions. Your project has been approved, however, prior to starting your research procedures, please be sure to remove the signature lines from the informed consent documents. In addition, if you will be recruiting participants via their school email addresses, please be sure to seek permission from the school principal or district first.**

**Thank you and best of luck with your research!**

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Morse at 970-351-1910 or [nicole.morse@unco.edu](mailto:nicole.morse@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

APPENDIX B  
CONSENT FORMS



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

**Choreographer Participant Consent Form**

Project Title: Unique Considerations for Creating High School Musical Theatre Choreography

Researcher: Tahlia Remer, BFA., Dance Education Phone:

E-mail:

Research Advisor: Christy O'Connell-Black Phone:

E-mail:

Purpose and Description: The purpose of this research is to identify some practical tools and suggestions for high school musical theater choreographers to consider when creating movement for musical theatre productions. You will be asked to complete a survey using google forms. The survey will ask you questions regarding your personal training and experience with high school musical theater choreography, your experience with directors you have worked with, and your opinions on the differences between choreography for high school musical theatre and other types of dance choreography. The survey will take approximately twenty minutes to complete.

The potential risks or discomforts to you should be very minimal. You may experience some level of discomfort due to the quiz/test-like nature of completing a survey. The benefits of participation in the survey include better knowledge and resources for others in the field. There are no costs to you to participate in this study.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please take your time to read and thoroughly review this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate, your completion of the research procedures indicates your consent. Please keep or print this form for your records. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

**Director Participant Consent Form**

Project Title: Unique Considerations for Creating High School Musical Theatre Choreography

Researcher: Tahlia Remer, BFA., Dance Education Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Research Advisor: Christy O'Connell-Black Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Purpose and Description:** The purpose of this research is to identify some practical tools and suggestions for high school musical theater choreographers to consider when creating movement for musical theatre productions. You will be asked to complete a survey using google forms. You will be asked questions regarding your personal training and experience with high school musical theater choreographers. The survey will take approximately ten minutes to complete.

The potential risks or discomforts to you should be very minimal. You may experience some level of discomfort due to the quiz/test-like nature of completing a survey. The benefits of participation in the survey include better knowledge and resources for others in the field. There are no costs to you to participate in this study.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please take your time to read and thoroughly review this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate, your completion of the research procedures indicates your consent. Please keep or print this form for your records. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

### Choreographer Participant Survey Questions

1. In what state do you choreograph high school musical theatre productions?
2. In what school district do you choreograph high school musical theatre productions?
3. What degree/s do you currently hold and from what school/s, if any?
4. If you completed a degree, in your collegiate studies, were you *required* to complete any training or courses in musical theater choreography?
5. If you completed a degree, in your collegiate studies what, if any, musical theater choreography trainings or courses were offered?
6. What high school musical theater choreography experience do you have? Please list number of years, and production titles for the last 3-5 years.
7. How do you and your director go about the process of dividing the movement responsibility?
8. What are some fundamental considerations that you consider when creating high school musical theatre choreography which you would not typically consider when creating choreography for a more traditional dance performance setting?

Please rate the following statements in regards to your level of agreement: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree or disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree[co9]

9. I feel like my director and I work well together to achieve a common goal.
10. I feel confident in my current ability to choreograph high school musical theater well.

11. I feel like my collegiate studies prepared me well to choreograph high school musical theater.

### **Director Participant Survey Questions**

1. In what state do you direct high school musical theatre productions?
2. In what school district do you direct high school musical theatre productions?
3. What degree/s do you currently hold and from what school/s?
4. What high school musical theater directing experience do you have? Please list number of years, and production titles for the last 5 years.
5. When you are looking for a choreographer for you high school musical theatre productions what are the top three things you consider?
6. How do you and your choreographer go about the process of dividing the movement responsibility?

Please rate the following statements in regards to your level of agreement: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree or disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree

7. I feel like my choreographer and I work well together to achieve a common goal.
8. I feel confident in the ability of my choreographer to successfully choreograph high school musical theater.
9. I have found it easy to identify and hire good/experienced/well trained musical theater choreographers for my productions.