

# A Study of Choreography Courses for Musical Theater Majors

Yi Gang<sup>1</sup> & Bi Zhang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, 524048, China

Correspondence: Bi Zhang, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, 524048, China.

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## Abstract

Musical theater education in Chinese universities is generally focused on training musical performance talents, and the dance courses involved are also set up to enhance dance performance. The dance styles learned are mainly ballet, modern dance, jazz dance and tap dance, which are common in European and American musicals. However, in the actual musical rehearsal process, the use of dance to create dramatic characters, develop dramatic events, and show dramatic emotions and conflicts requires the skilled creative ability of the musical choreographer. The educational process of musical choreography is a multi-faceted process, which requires the choreographer to have a solid theoretical basis and flexible creative skills. By comparing with universities in Europe, America and South Korea that have musical theater major, this paper studies the advantages and disadvantages of musical theater major courses in Chinese universities in terms of choreography training. Based on the actual situation of China, this study finds the curriculum that conforms to musical choreography through multi-angle analysis of practice, creation, and theory.

**Keywords:** musical, choreography, curriculum

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## 1. Introduction

The narrative of the musical is the comprehensive expression of drama, music, and dance. How to use the body language of dance to tell the story and conform to the drama plot and conflict is the creative direction of the musical choreographer. John Simon once said of *42nd Street* choreographer Gover Champion that he did "more than anyone to break down the barrier between the prose of mere blocking and the poetry of dance." (Samuel Leiter, 1994)

Dance, *The Spirit of a Play* (Zhang Xu & Wen Shuo, 2004), is the most dexterous and vivid stage expression of musical, which embodies the theater aesthetics of musical (Luo Wei, 2013). Dance has a rich stage expression. Body language is an important means of musical drama expression to create dramatic characters, unfold dramatic events, and express dramatic emotions and conflicts. The training of dance creative talents in musical theater is an important link to implement this method. So musical choreography to be able to be

familiar with the different styles of dance, have the ability to professional choreography and requires across arts reserves of knowledge and skills, to have the ability to script interpretation and to the integrated use of knowledge of music, drama and art creating characters, show the plot, and have good communication and cooperation ability (Zhang Bi, 2022). This article will start from this important link, analyze and compare the opening of dance courses in musical theater major in Chinese and foreign universities, and study the choreography curriculum of musical theater major in Chinese universities.

The classical works of the prosperous era of European, American, and Korean musicals have played a role in promoting the development and research of Chinese musicals. The educational model of musical theater talents in universities in Europe, the United States and Korea is also a good example for Chinese university musical theater majors. The choreography course of musical theater major in Chinese university needs to be systematically planned and formulated in the dance course.

## **2. Present Situation of Dance Curriculum in Musical Major in Chinese Universities**

Musical theater education in Chinese universities is generally focused on training musical performance talents, and the dance courses involved are also set up to enhance dance performance. The dance styles learned are mainly ballet, modern dance, jazz dance and tap dance, which are common in European and American musicals. Take the dance classes of the Musical theater major of the Central Academy of Drama, Sichuan Conservatory of Music and Sichuan Normal University as an example, only Sichuan Conservatory of Music offers Chinese folk dance for one semester (Liu Sisi, 2012). In the original Chinese musical works, it is necessary for the actors to master various styles of Chinese dance in order to create in line with the historical background and cultural characteristics of the story, which requires the rich content of dance courses in the musical theater major.

Dance courses are generally offered for 2-3 academic years in the major of Musical theater in Chinese universities, and dance accounts for 22-24% of the total class hours of professional

skills such as line, vocal music, and performance. The number of hours for dance courses in the Central Academy of Drama is 432, accounting for 22% of the total of 1,959 hours for professional skills courses. The number of hours for dance courses in Beijing Dance Academy is 510, accounting for 24% of the total of 2,116 hours for professional skills courses. The number of hours for dance courses in Shanghai Conservatory of Music is 432, accounting for 23% of the total of 1,872 hours for professional skills courses. The required courses of dance in Sichuan Normal University are 256 class hours and the optional courses are 128 class hours, accounting for 284 class hours in total, accounting for 24% of the total of 1,604 hours for professional skills courses. With the development of China's musical theater market, dance courses of musical theater majors in universities have successively added the teaching contents of Chinese classical dance, Chinese folk dance, traditional (Chinese) opera, Tai Chi, sword, etc., in order to adapt to the development of The Times (Guo Yu, 2014).

## **3. Analysis of Dance Courses for Musical Majors in Universities of Europe, America, and Korea**

Korean scholars in the United States, France and South Korea university musical theater major dance courses in the study found that in the United States, in addition to dance theory, musical theater required dance practice classes, such as ballet, modern dance, jazz dance, tap dance and so on. With Missouri State University, The University of Oklahoma, University of Cincinnati, Ithaca College and College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University as examples. Among the dance courses offered by these five universities, jazz dance has the heaviest proportion, ranking first, followed by ballet, tap dance and modern dance. These courses are systematically studied from the superficial to the profound, which is helpful to enhance students' creativity. In France, the dance technology courses are similar to those in the United States, but there are many creative dance courses, which enhance the cognition and application ability of dance through collaborative dance creation in class. In South Korea, Chung-Ang University, Dongguk University, Kookmin University, Dankook University, Keimyung University and other universities offer dance courses for musical theater majors,

including theory of dance art, basic dance, jazz dance, tap dance, hip hop, musical dance, modern dance, Korean dance, theater dance, masquerade dance, physical expression and creation. Dance courses generally involve learning dance from existing musical works.

The musical education model in the United States and France focuses more on creation rather than imitation and encourages students to innovate. In the course of dance, there are choreography and production, improvisation and modular improvisation, as well as dance creation workshop. Through this series of courses, students can improve their practical dance creation ability. In the creation of musical dance, there is often the demand of modern dance choreography, and the existence of improvisation course is very important. There are also aspects of musical education in France that are different from those in the United States. For example, special courses such as physiology and dissection can help students learn more about the body and create more physical expression.

The course of dance choreography in the major of musical theater will not only train the talents of musical choreographers, but also expand the opportunities to cooperate with other fields, which will help them become professional talents such as musical producers, directors, and dance choreographers in the future. *42nd Street* choreographer Gower Champion, for example, is an experienced choreographer with accumulated experience in television and film and sublimates his talent for action as a narrative device, demonstrating a unique blend of narrative and novelty. Gower Champion learns the art of distilling and condensing ideas into the tightest, simplest, and shortest package possible. He knew that novelty and flawless technique were a foundation, but a dance team number had to have a particular spark and chemistry (Payne-Carter David & McNamara Brooks & Nelson Stephen, 1999).

#### **4. Course Setting Direction of Musical Choreography Techniques**

Many universities in the United States have set up majors in musical creation and performance, constantly providing professional creative and performing talents for Broadway (Luo Wei, 2013),

which reflects the trend of optimizing musical courses. Through the analysis of choreography courses in Europe and the United States, dance practice courses and theoretical courses can improve students' understanding of works and creative ability in a progressive way. Through practical education, creative education and theoretical education, students' practical application ability can be strengthened.

##### *4.1 Practical Education*

The practical education phase requires learning different styles of dance. European and American musical choreography teaching mainly study ballet, jazz dance, modern dance, tap dance and hip-hop dance, in addition to representative folk dance. In addition to the above content, Korean choreography courses must also master Korean traditional dance, so Chinese musical choreography courses also need to learn Chinese folk dance and classical dance, and if conditions permit, folk dance and popular dance can also be learned. For example, the combination of the Yangko dance and the duet *Renzin in the Piano of Steel* is exactly the dance of the public. These are targeted and regional characteristics of dance teaching content.

In European and American countries, a single dance is studied from elementary to intermediate level and then to advanced level. In the same grade, people can be exposed to different styles of dance at the same time and make personal comparison through personal experience, which is more conducive to mastering the characteristics of different styles of dance. At the University of Oklahoma, for example, ballet and modern dance were first offered, and students had to take modern dance classes or get permission from the instructor before they could study tap or jazz. An intermediate level of ballet or jazz is required to learn Broadway-style theatrical dance. Through the progressive learning method, students can have a solid grasp of the principles of dance movements and constantly improve their understanding of movements, and the technical training of different kinds of dance can also be steadily improved.

##### *4.2 Creative Education*

Creative education is choreography teaching from the practical perspective. Through practical

creation, the students can solve the problem of how to use choreography techniques to express the content of the drama with body language and solve the problem of how the dance in the musical can serve the whole plot, namely, the characters, events, emotions and conflicts. Therefore, students need to be trained to create dance movements that fit the themes, characters, and scenes of the musical.

The first thing is to be able to understand the overall structure of a musical work. The study and understanding of the structure of works should be combined with the cultivation of the understanding ability of literature and connotation in theoretical education, so as to be familiar with the historical background and cultural characteristics of works. At the same time, students should learn to understand the audience's mind and have the ability to guide the audience to understand the theme and the director's intention. In this stage, a large number of musical works should be appreciated, and the structure of the works should be analyzed and summarized. Secondly, we should understand how to reasonably use the corresponding dance style in different scenes. After analysis and summary, it is necessary to realize effective connection and create a dance in line with the scene corresponding to the previous basic cognition. To train the creative ability of dance movements applied in different scenes, it is necessary to find the appropriate style and relevant movement vocabulary in the dance scene, and form the coordination and unity of scene, music, and dance style. Gower Champion's career clearly reflects the path he has taken in musical theater styles and practices across multiple eras. His choreography flourished during the last big period of song and dance film making in the 1950s. His result on *42nd Street* was a fusion of stage and film that brought the complete aesthetic that shaped his 40-year career (Payne-Carter David, McNamara Brooks & Nelson Stephen, 1999). Thirdly, dance creation should be carried out according to the theme and characters. At the beginning of the training, the director (teacher) is asked to start with the explanation of the text content, explore the movement forms and styles around different scenes, and gradually form dance movements that can express the theme and

character characteristics of the work. Finally, train the students to communicate and create with the staff of other departments. Musicals create a continuous narrative and emotional flow through sound and movement rather than words, which requires the perfect presentation of music, dance, lighting, costumes, and staging. In the creation of musical dance, involves stage design, lighting, clothing and other art forms. On the basis of understanding the basic theories and development rules of other art forms, students establish good communication through mutual collaboration and learning from each other.

The teaching of musical choreography cannot be limited in the classroom, but also through theater practice to connect and consolidate the creative skills. Musicals are popular and need to be verified by audiences to gain experience.

#### *4.3 Theoretical Education*

Theoretical education includes three parts: philosophy, literature, and basic theory of art.

The first is the philosophical direction of knowledge. By cultivating students' thinking ability, philosophy is helpful to enhance students' ability to interpret musical works, and to improve their ability to analyze and explain the historical and cultural background of musical works. Secondly, there is literature. The script of a musical will involve the adaptation and reproduction of literary works, which requires the creator to have a solid literary foundation. In the process of musical dance creation, it is also necessary to create according to the basic attributes of literary works and respect the character. Through training students' reading and understanding ability, enhance the ability to interpret literary works and analyze characters' characteristics. The study of literature knowledge helps to shape the figurative character and the profoundness of theme expression. With the ability to interpret the work and shape the character image, you can express effectively. For example, Velma's confident and easy jazz dance movements in *Chicago* show that she has the ability to control herself both in reality and on the stage. Different styles of jazz dance are consistent with the background of *The Times* and reflect different characters. Finally, it is necessary to learn the knowledge of dance theory, music theory and

drama theory in order to master the rules and characteristics of cross art. Drama theory can help choreographers understand the characters' behavior expression and dramatic conflict and guide the creation to conform to the scale of physical expression of characters and the degree of expression of dance scenes. Music theory enables choreographers to grasp the characteristics of music more clearly. For example, the perfect presentation of tap dance and jazz in *Singin' in the Rain* can be called an eternal classic. Musicals are comprehensive, which requires creators to master relevant art theories and effectively cooperate with other artists in practical creation.

### 5. Conclusions

The educational process of musical choreography is a multi-faceted process, and the cooperation between industry and teaching should be strengthened in the training of specialized talents. The musical choreography education in European and American countries has been very mature. Through progressive curriculum setting and diversified curriculum structure, it shows the characteristics of application-oriented talent training, which is worthy of reference for the Chinese musical industry and education. Through the research, it can be found that the musical education mode of American and European universities focuses more on creation rather than imitation, encourages students to innovate, and sets up musical creation and performance majors, so that the output of musical talents is clearly stratified. At the same time, some special courses have been added to enable students to develop both physically and mentally. Korean universities offer few courses in creation and choreography, but they offer many courses in dance, which helps musical talents develop their abilities. The dance practice course and theory course of musical theater major in Chinese University enhance students' understanding and creative ability of the works in a progressive way. Through three stages of practical education, creative education and theoretical education, students' practical application ability is strengthened.

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