

Nu Delta Alpha Journal Volume 3 Dancing with Props

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Jarrett William Koski, of Clearwater, Florida, has been involved in theatre since he was 8. He is now working on his BA in Theatre Arts Education at Lees-McRae College (LMC), where he is the performing arts department props master. He is president of the LMC players, children's traveling show company, and vice president/treasurer of Nu Delta Alpha. His theater credits include choreographing and playing an Urchin in Roar of the Greasepaint...Smell of the Crowd and as Jesus Christ in Stephen Swartz's Godspell. He also choreographed two solos that incorporated props.



Close your eyes. Now picture a blank stage. The lights come up and you visualize dancers gliding across the floor. In their hands they grasp something that extends their movement way past their reach. The music begins...and they take you on a journey far beyond your wildest imagination, with not only the choreography, but with theatrical props in their hands.

The urgency to dance beats as instinctually as the heart. Manipulating a theatrical prop, as ancient as dance, can ingeniously emphasize one's creative concepts within all dance forms.

What is Dance? What is a Prop?

Dance refers to the rhythmic movement of the body, usually accompanied by music. It may express social interaction in a spiritual, recreational or performance setting. Dance also describes methods of non-verbal communication with a feeling that especially takes the audience through the exciting journey of performance and emotion. I truly believe that one has to live and breathe dance to understand it within the body, mind and spirit.

A **prop**, or **property**, is any object that an artist utilizes to further enhance or communicate the plot or story line. The term derives from live-performance practice, especially theatrical methods. However, its modern definition extends beyond traditional dramas and musicals, as well as circus, novelty, comedy, and even public-speaking performances, all the way to film, television and electronic media.

Basically, there are three types of theatrical props:

- ◆ **Realistic** – everyday objects that visually establish a setting, to make us imagine being in a certain place
- ◆ **Stylized** – those objects specifically designed to complement the set or to establish the time period
- ◆ **Mimed** – imitations, or, pretending to use a type of object

See if you can figure out what kind of props are used in the dances that I will describe here!

Because props may act as key elements in this quest, we shall now examine this relationship to three major categories of dance:

- ◆ **Traditional**
- ◆ **Cultural**
- ◆ **Contemporary**

Traditional Dance

Traditional is the first category; namely, classical ballet, modern and tap. How are these art forms interpreted in movement with the addition of props?

Ballet is the most formalized, with origins within the Italian Renaissance court that were finely-tuned as a concert art form in France and Russia. It is highly technical with its own elaborate vocabulary. Traditionally, props have played an important role in story ballets. In the ballet *The Nutcracker*, Clara (the lead character) dances with her beloved Nutcracker Prince, a gift from her mysterious uncle. She falls asleep after dancing all night at a family party and, to her delight, wakes to find that her Nutcracker Prince has come to life — just in time to rescue her from the evil Rat King. Then, the Prince sweeps her on a magical journey where we see all sorts of props, from fans to ribbons to candy canes, which wistfully interpret the dances of many lands.

Modern Dance developed in the early 20th century in the urgency to break away from the technical restrictions of classical ballet. This style is now found on the stage and in the ballroom. Props continue to be important in this ever-changing artistic world, utilized by modern dance icons Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham. The use of chairs and mobile blocks were instrumental to Cunningham's vision in his piece "Witty and Elegant", and as produced by innovative set designer Robert Rauschenberg.

Recently I choreographed a modern dance that focused on the theme of love lost. A real person performed as a prop that, in the opening, sat in a chair that inspired and filled the male character with the emotion and strength to dance. When the dancer sees the "prop person" seated, the mood seems to change by showing the contact of the one in the chair with the one dancing. Within five eight counts, we see the imagery of the characters gently waltzing together, then the illusion of the woman disappearing. The next part exhibits a fight with the empty chair, giving the emotion of regret, of loss.

In *Two Sides to Every Story*, I explored two dances dealing with relationships between a man and a woman — a kind of storytelling. In the first dance, the woman (as represented by the prop) acts as if she is beginning a relationship, while the man (the dancer) is ending one. In the second dance, we see a reversal of roles, just the opposite. By choreographing, I now realize that props can be more than just inanimate objects. Modern dance is one of the best styles that fulfill the goal of "Feeling [that] must be expressed through movement" (Anderson, 174).

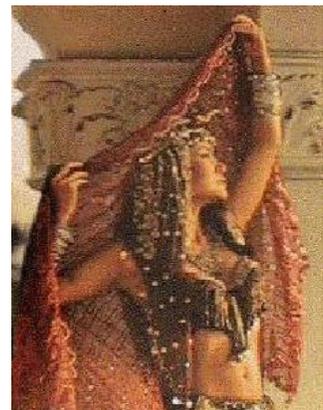
The last style of traditional dance is **tap**, which developed in the 19th century United States and continues its popularity around the world. Unique to this style, the tapping sound exerted when the small metal plates on the dancer's shoes touch a hard floor. One of the best dance shows, which later became a movie, created was entitled *Tap Dogs*. The 80 minute-long movie featured six Australian men performing non-stop routines on a set designed to represent a construction site. Reminiscent of the steel making community in which the original dancers had grown up. The feature is recognized for its simple costuming of faded jeans, lumberjack shirts, vests and baseball caps, although the key feature or "trademark" of *Tap Dogs* is the specially modified boots that the dancers wear.

Cultural Dance

The next category to be studied is **Cultural Dance**, which expresses the many traditions, aesthetics and social values of people worldwide. Here we will briefly examine the Middle Eastern dance called Raks Sharki.

In Raks Sharki (or raqs sharq), the dancer uses many props such as finger cymbals, spoons, tambourines, veils, scarves, canes, candles or even snakes. Each prop emphasizes different dances within this style. Customs dictate whether men and women dance together or apart in a particular Middle Eastern region.

In spring 2008, the Lees-McRae College Performing Arts Department mounted



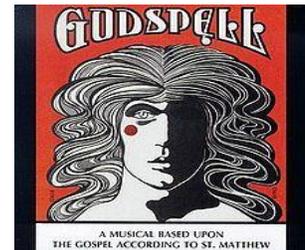
the theatrical production *The Arabian Nights* that included a collection of tales by various authors, translators and scholars from several countries. Beautiful poems were spoken or sung. The director, Dr. Tessa Carr, interpreted the different music by adding a variety of props to the dance movements. Rhythmic sounds of a drum, finger symbols, maracas, tambourines, and triangles brought the stories to life. At the top of Act One and Act Two, two dancers in Middle Eastern-inspired costumes, wore belts that evoked a striking, shimmering look and sound.

The Musical as Contemporary Dance

Contemporary Dance falls under the third category, particularly the new style of Broadway musical that is the home to infinite types of theatre. Props, in turn, are incorporated throughout these shows with acting and singing. Although the musical has been around for quite some time, we will discuss the new breed, with dance that is seen in popular venues and elevated onto the Broadway stage today.

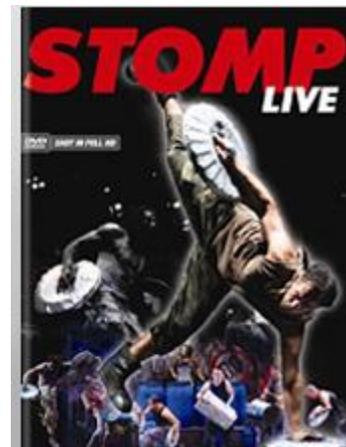
In my sophomore year of college, our performing arts department put on the production *The Roar of the Greasepaint—The Smell of the Crowd*. Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse co-wrote the music, book and lyrics. In vaudevillian style, we meet Cocky, an unlikely “down-in-his-luck” hero, who is constantly being crushed by the Establishment (of whom he humbly calls *Sir*). The audience travels with Cocky and a series of characters on a hopscotch circle painted on the stage. For this production I served as choreographer and props master. In the opening number “Beautiful Land” the dancers use specific props to make the choreography come to life: red and orange lollypops, a bag of lemon drops, green seaweed, indigo cats’ eyes on a poster board and violet flowers. Through each verse the choreography and props worked together to make a wonderful opening number.

I was deeply honored to portray Jesus Christ in Steven Schwartz's *Godspell*. Props are used throughout what, at first, appears to be a seemingly whimsical piece. In one scene, Jesus and the notorious Judas perform a Vaudeville-style number with magical canes. Ultimately, the play becomes very serious for the theme deals with the parables of the New Testament. Modern “pop” music, meshed with traditional hymns, culminates into the final passion of Christ.



One of my favorite musicals, *Avenue Q*, is largely inspired by the children’s television show *Sesame Street* —but, due to some explicit language and other content; it is definitely not for young children. The script deals with finding a “purpose” in life. What makes it so interesting is that the actors use puppets throughout the entire show. There are three types of puppets. For the single-rod puppet, the puppeteer puts one hand inside, which then controls the prop’s mouth. This type is used for the characters Princeton and Kate Monster. The double-rod puppet is used for the characters Rod, Lucy, the Bad Idea Bears and the Newcomer. The last type, the “free-hands” puppet, is more intricately maneuvered and so requires two puppeteers, as devised in the characters Nicky, Trekki, Mrs. T and Ricky. This Tony award-winning, fun-filled adventure demonstrates the trials and tribulations of life. There is not much formal dancing in the show but plenty of expressive movement and the puppets create a magical adventure for the audience.

Most Broadway shows use props with dance. In *Singing in the Rain*, the leading man (including Gene Kelly on film) uses his umbrella as he taps in the street and swings around a lamppost. In *Chicago*, chairs and jail bars set the stage in the song “Cell Block Tango” which makes the Fosse choreography explode with excitement. In *Hairspray*, multiple cans of hairspray are logically used in most of the big dance numbers. In the big production number “We’re in the Money” for *42nd Street*, the dancers tap on props that look like gigantic quarters, giving the obvious illusion of being “in the money.” For the dance review *Fosse* (a tribute to choreographer Bob Fosse), many props are used throughout the dance numbers “Hey Big Spender” and “Steam Heat,” to name just two. Note:



Bob Fosse loved using hats!

Another type of contemporary dance is found in *Stomp*, which is the renowned non-traditional dance troupe that originated in Brighton, United Kingdom. The mostly male dancers move with ordinary objects to create a percussive, physical theatre performance. I saw *Stomp* live and it changed the whole meaning of dance with props for me. Such pure talent as these men project blows you away as they bring music and dance alive by means of garbage cans, fences, walkers and so on. The dancers “stomping” on the objects create the music. *Stomp* receives great reviews across the globe. The DVD does not do the show justice—you must experience it firsthand because you will not believe your eyes!

Props Highlight

As you can see, props act as an important part of dance. I enjoy how they highlight different aspects of the work. Dancing for me has always been a way to express all of my emotion without saying one word. But tap giant Gregory Hines said it best, “I don’t remember not dancing. When I realized I was alive and these were my parents, and I could walk and talk, I could dance.” I believe these fine words apply to all of us who love to dance. When I am on stage and I feel the lights hit my face, I get lost in the moment. Whether as small as a chair or as big as a complete set, props are very useful in dance. Traditional, cultural and contemporary dance all can adapt props within them— expressing ourselves realistically or in a stylized or mimed way.

And so, the dancers complete the choreography...As part of the audience, you are moved to applaud; the lights fade on the stage, the curtain closes. You have just been transported on a journey that you never thought possible and you, too, have danced with all kinds of props that create incredible imagery within the magic of movement and our hearts!

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