FROM DANCE CAPTAIN TO CHOREOGRAPHER: CROSSING THE PROFESSIONAL BRIDGE

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts
with a Concentration in
Musical Theatre

by
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Spring 2014
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

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From Dance Captain to Choreographer: Crossing the Professional Bridge

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ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

From Dance Captain to Choreographer: Crossing the Professional Bridge
by
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Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts with a Concentration in Musical Theatre
San Diego State University, 2014

Dance captains are perhaps the least known or acknowledged members of a musical-theatre production team. Their importance has grown exponentially with the advent of long-running musicals and the technical demands of contemporary musical-theatre choreography. The position of dance captain is not only crucial to the overall success of a musical; it is also a unique training ground for aspiring choreographers. In fact, many Broadway choreographers begin their career as dance captains.

Relatively little has been written about the role of the dance captain in musical theatre, when it was formalized, and how the responsibilities were handled before the position was created. This project report traces the origins and evolution of the dance captain, detailing the duties of the position. This includes maintaining the integrity of the choreographer’s work throughout the performance run, the documentation of the choreography, and the prodigious job of teaching the choreography to understudies and new cast members. I reference personal experience as the dance captain of the European Tour of the musical Grease and my professional development from dancer to dance captain to professional choreographer.

I have created this project report to document the lessons that I learned as dance captain that helped me to become a choreographer. More importantly, I hope it will assist students, performers and audience members in understanding the dedication, skill, and diplomacy required of the dance captain who, for the most part, remains invisible to the theatre-going public.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge my chair, Paula Kalustian. Without her support, wisdom, and inspiration this project would not have been possible. Thank-you also to Dr. Rick Simas for holding me accountable to the highest standard of research and scholarship.

A special thanks to the producers, creative team, management, cast, and crew of all the incarnations of the European tour of the musical Grease since 1999. Every single person who participated in these productions added to my creative and collaborative process, significantly affecting my learning experience and my evolution from dance captain to choreographer.

Finally, I would like to thank my fiancé, Michael, and my family for their unending support and encouragement in all that I do.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In musical theatre, once a production has officially opened, the blocking and choreography are considered “set” and are expected to remain the same for every performance thereafter. As the director’s and choreographer’s jobs are completed, they leave the production, and it becomes the responsibility of two other individuals to maintain the blocking and choreography throughout the run: the stage manager and the dance captain. Most people have at least heard the term stage manager even if they’re unclear what this individual actually does. Dance captains, who are often the hardest working individuals in musical theatre, are generally the least known or acknowledged members of a production. The position of dance captain is not only crucial to the overall success of a musical; it also affords a performer the unique opportunity to work closely with and learn from the choreographer during rehearsals, as well as work with, and learn from the stage manager during the run of the production. The experience of being a dance captain is an excellent training ground for aspiring choreographers. In fact, many Broadway choreographers begin their careers as dance captains.

In 1999, I was given the opportunity to serve as the dance captain of the European tour of Grease. The experience of working in this position on a Broadway-scale touring production was both educational and enlightening. The lessons learned as dance captain served throughout my performing career and helped transition me into becoming a choreographer: professional attitude, dedication, diplomacy, organization, and the various administrative duties required in professional theatrical productions. Working as dance captain was a revitalizing addition to my role in the production’s ensemble. As a person who thrives on multitasking, I appreciated the challenge of maintaining the production’s choreography throughout its run, which for the European tour of Grease spanned eleven years of my career before being offered the position of Resident Director-Choreographer in 2010, and then in January 2014, the job of Associate Choreographer.
This project report will chronicle my advancement from dancer to dance captain to choreographer. The documentation of this journey can provide insightful and useful information to young performers who might consider themselves a good fit for the job of dance captain or to those who aspire to become choreographers. Every performer should understand and appreciate the dedication, skill, and diplomacy required of the dance captain who, for the most part, remains invisible to the theatre-going public. The report will document the unique challenges and duties of the job, which help develop a dance captain into a choreographer.

In order to clarify the subject matter of this report, it is necessary to define several key terms. Table 1 defines these terms for quick reference.

**Table 1. Key Terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Stage Manager:</strong></th>
<th>A person who has the overall responsibility of the smooth execution of the on-stage production</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Principal Stage Manager (PSM):</strong></td>
<td>The senior stage manager among a team of stage managers</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assistant Stage Manager (ASM):</strong></td>
<td>Assistant to the Stage Manager</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Principal:</strong></td>
<td>An actor in a leading role</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ensemble:</strong></td>
<td>A group of supporting actors, dancers, and singers, in a theatrical production.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chorus:</strong></td>
<td>Another term for ensemble</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Swing:</strong></td>
<td>An actor who is part of the company, but does not perform if all cast members are able to do so. He or she prepares a number of roles—typically ensemble or minor characters—and must be ready to perform on call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Understudy:</strong></td>
<td>An actor who performs an ensemble or minor role in a production, but also learns another role—typically a lead or secondary character—and is prepared to perform that role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Replacement:</strong></td>
<td>An actor who is hired to replace another actor that has left the production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Run:</strong></td>
<td>A continuous sequence of performances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Track:</strong></td>
<td>The complete path of a performer throughout the production</td>
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</table>
Primary sources for this project report include observations, notes, and analyses, which originate from personal experience, including my work as dance captain of the European tour of *Grease*, beginning in 1999, and then working with and training the subsequent dance captain in January 2014, when Associate Choreographer of that production. Secondary sources, including books and articles, will be utilized in defining the role of dance captain.

Chapter 2 is comprised of a brief history of the role of dance captain to help illuminate the significance of the position and its development and evolution within the structure of the Broadway musical. The various duties performed by a dance captain will be outlined, detailing the immense job of teaching the production’s choreography to understudies, swings, and replacements. Chapter 3 chronicles my personal experiences as a dance captain, including the challenges faced on the road as the dance captain of the European tour of the musical *Grease*, as well as the path to becoming the Associate Choreographer of *Grease*, and ultimately becoming a professional choreographer of subsequent professional and educational musical theatre productions. Chapter 4 details the culminating experience of choosing a dance captain for the 2014 European tour of *Grease* and teaching her the responsibilities and duties of the position. Chapter 5 documents the impact that my fifteen year association with this European production of *Grease* had on my professional progression from dancer to dance captain to choreographer. Conclusions will be drawn to benefit students and encourage aspiring dance captains and choreographers to enter the professional world of musical theatre with the insight and knowledge to be professionally prepared.
CHAPTER 2

ORIGIN, EVOLUTION AND DUTIES

THE HISTORY OF THE ROLE OF DANCE CAPTAIN

Every professional musical production is required to hire a dance captain. However, relatively little has been written regarding the role of the dance captain in musical theatre, when it was formalized, and how the duties of the dance captain were handled before the position was created. Reading a variety of books on the history of musical theatre, little information could be found on the origin and evolution of this important member of the production team of a musical. In fact, there is no book or even a chapter of a book dedicated to the position of dance captain. The lack of information available inspired a closer look at the role of dance captain in order to shed light on this important, yet largely unknown member of a musical production.

According to the Guidelines for Dance Captains set forth by Actors’ Equity Association (AEA), “The dance captain is a member of the company who maintains the artistic standards of all choreography and/or musical staging in a production.” Actors’ Equity Association, which was founded in 1913 as an American labor union, represents professional stage actors and stage managers working in the United States. AEA seeks to advance, promote and foster the art of live theater as an essential component of our society. Equity negotiates and administers more than thirty different national and regional contracts with theatrical employers. These agreements dictate minimum salaries, benefits, job security and numerous other protections to ensure a safe and hospitable work environment.

The earliest contract language for the position of dance captain appears in the 1957 Actors Equity Association’s Rulebook, which is the first after the merger of Actors’ Equity and Chorus Equity in 1955, reads as follows:

Rule 11 CHORUS; additional compensation provisions
(D) Dance captains

Dance captains shall receive twenty-five dollars ($25.00) per week in addition to their weekly contractual salary.
It is not surprising that this acknowledgement by AEA of the position of dance captain first appears in the 1957 rulebook, given that the highly choreographed production of *West Side Story* opened on Broadway September 26, 1957 (Norton 64). Certainly, the technical demands of Jerome Robbins’ and Peter Gennaro’s choreography required the services of a highly trained dancer to fulfill the duties of dance captain and maintain the integrity of the choreographers’ work.

Historically, we know that there was dancing in Broadway musicals long before 1957. However, there was a time when the dancing in Broadway musicals was so rudimentary that the duties of the dance captain, as defined today, were easily assumed by the stage manager. In an article written for *Dance Magazine* in 1956 by Oscar Hammerstein II, the celebrated lyricist and librettist who is best known for his collaboration with Richard Rodgers on such ground-breaking musicals as *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and *South Pacific*, noted that the dancing in musical comedies in 1918 was so simple that he, as the show’s stage manager, was capable of teaching it to new cast members: “There were no steps in our dance routines too difficult to teach the newcomers. I had had no training as a dancer. I was twenty-three and normally limber, nimble, and rhythmic. That was all you had to be” (17). Hammerstein noted that it wasn’t until the mid 1920’s that “a greater expertness began to be required of ensemble dancers” (20). It was, in fact, George Balanchine’s choreography for *On Your Toes* in 1936 that was “the first good example of integration of dance” (20). However, it was *Oklahoma!* in 1943 that “opened the gates for other ballet choreographers and for hundreds of talented young dancers who had had a very limited outlet for their training and energies” (21). According to Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!* is the show that raised the standard of dancing and choreography in all musical plays that followed.

Agnes de Mille popularized the convention of the dream ballet in musical comedies, utilizing it to further the plot in *Oklahoma!* Just before the ballet, the character of Laurey struggles to decide whether to attend the box social with Jud or Curly. The 15-minute dance sequence begins with Laurey dreaming of what it would be like to marry Curley, but then her dream turns into a nightmare as Jud appears, murders Curly, and takes Laurey for himself. Waking from the dream, Laurey makes a crucial decision: she will attend the box social with Jud, despite her love for Curly, for fear of what Jud may do if she rejects him. Often referred
to as “Laurey Makes Up Her Mind,” this dream ballet forwards the plot, and in the process makes dance a fundamental storytelling tool for the Broadway musical. De Mille created movement that was inextricably linked to the given circumstances of Hammerstein’s plot. It was de Mille’s insightful integration of plot, character and theme that elevated the role of dance in the American musical theatre.

Agnes de Mille’s protégé, Gemze de Lappe, was an ensemble dancer in the first touring production of *Oklahoma!* in 1943. She joined the Broadway production the following year, and then debuted as “Dream Laurey” in the London production in 1947. De Lappe was chosen by de Mille to restage and re-interpret her work for future generations (Applewhite). De Lappe articulates to subsequent generations of dancers the details of de Mille’s work that were passed down to her by the legendary choreographer. These include the essence of the characters, the intention of each dance phrase, the musical nuances, and the ever-present sub-plot in de Mille’s work. Today, teaching and maintaining all of these aspects of a choreographer’s work is the job of the dance captain, demonstrating that the position, whether or not it was credited in the production’s program and accorded compensation, existed long before it was formally acknowledged by AEA in 1957. Further, it seems clear that the role of dance captain evolved as dance became integrated into the story and score of musical-theatre productions.

**THE DANCE CAPTAIN’S DUTIES**

According to the guidelines set forth in the current AEA Rulebook: “The dance captain shall always work in tandem with the stage manager in conveying and maintaining the creative intentions of the Artistic Staff” (*Guidelines for Dance Captains*). The guidelines also state: “A dance captain must be hired where there is movement of such a nature that the maintenance of its artistic quality, as originally staged, does not fall within the normal duties of a stage manager” (*Agreement and Rules 36*).

The dance captain has a number of duties: first, as a performer in the production, either as an onstage ensemble member or an offstage swing; and second, as a staff member responsible for helping to maintain the artistic standards and vision of original production, specifically the integrity of the choreographer’s work. This includes the dance steps, patterns, formations, style, intent, technique and energy level in all of the musical numbers. The dance
captain periodically gives notes and/or schedules brush-up rehearsals (in coordination with the stage manager) during the run to ensure that dance steps are executed in the style and spirit that they were originally intended, and that the original spacing and positions of the musical numbers are maintained. The dance captain also makes sure that the condition of the stage and rehearsal or audition space is safe and suitable for musical staging and choreography. This is especially important when working on tour because the production changes venues so frequently.

Every performer in a musical theatre production has a track, which is defined as the roles that he or she plays; the scenes and musical numbers in which he or she appears; the dialogue/lyrics that he or she speaks/sings; the blocking, movement, and choreography that he or she performs; and all of the offstage activities that he or she must accomplish, such as costume and wig changes; utilization of props; crossovers; etc. After a musical is set, it is the dance captain’s job to learn everyone’s track in the show, and, in tandem with the stage manager, be able to teach each understudy his or her track for the entire production. The dance captain and the stage manager schedule understudy and swing rehearsals to teach the roles these individuals cover alongside other understudies and swings. These rehearsals take place regularly throughout the run and are meant to solidify the understudy and swing tracks so that these actors are prepared to perform in the event of another actor’s absence.

The process of documenting a performer’s track is tedious and time-consuming. Actors’ Equity Association prohibits the use of video recording devices; thus, hand-drawn charts must be created to notate the blocking of scenes and staging of musical numbers, which ultimately become part of the “Show Bible.” The dance captain documents the formations and traffic patterns in all musical numbers so as to have a record to refer to when teaching understudies and replacements. Each chart includes stage dimensions and scenic elements such as permanent structures, wings, proscenium opening, and furniture, so there is an accurate depiction of the stage space for every scene. Each performer is notated by a color-coded icon on the chart and reflects where that particular performer is situated at any given moment. It is especially time-consuming to chart placement and movement of the ensemble in musical numbers. There may be as many as four charts for two measures of music, which may only take a matter of seconds of stage time. All of these charts are then collected into a book, which is referred to as the dance captain’s “bible.”
Figures 1-4 show the traditional method of notating formations, spacing, transitions and traffic within a musical number. These charts notate a sequence of movement and traffic patterns within the musical number “Grease Is the Word.” This specific part of the staging is referred to as the “rock out.” The dancing in this section is not difficult; however, the traffic pattern must be precise in order for all of the actors to arrive safely in the correct position on stage at the right time. There is a light cue that happens when the actors begin the “rock out” section, and if they haven’t all arrived at their position at that time, the dramatic effect that the choreographer crafted, cannot be achieved.

Before the invention by Jeff Whiting in 2012 of Stage Write, an application specifically created for Apple iPads that makes it possible to more accurately document the staging and spacing of blocking and choreography, dance captain’s had to draw by hand every single chart from scratch as seen in Figures 1-4. Stage Write allows for faster, easier notation; “A simple set-up allows the user to easily import or draw the dimensions of the performance space, the scenic elements of the show, and to create icons for each performer in order to prepare to capture creativity with dynamic spacing charts” (Whiting). Stage Write charts can be easily shared by email or hard copy with swings, understudies and replacements, allowing them to quickly and easily see their spacing within musical numbers when learning a new track.

Figures 5-8 are charts created with the use of Stage Write to document the same section of the musical number “Grease Is the Word.” Once the dance captain has mastered the Stage Write Software program, these charts can be created in a fraction of the time and are more precise and accurate than their hand-written counterparts.

In addition to notating and teaching musical staging and choreography, the dance captain “assist[s] the stage manager and choreographer, or their assistants in the assignment of understudies, specifically in regards to musical numbers and important bits of business in musical staging and/or choreography” (Actors’ Equity Association, Guidelines for Dance Captains). It is the dance captain’s responsibility to see that understudies, swings and covers are prepared to perform their assignments in the musical numbers and, when necessary, rehearse new performers with the ensemble or cast members involved in the musical numbers prior to their first performance. This is known as a “put-in” rehearsal. The dance
Figure 1. Handwritten dance captain chart for “Grease Is the Word” - Formation before “Rock Out.”
Figure 2. Handwritten dance captain chart for “Grease Is the Word” - Ensemble traffic.
Figure 3. Handwritten dance captain chart for “Grease Is the Word” - Principal traffic.

- Pinks move US immediately and then move SR in single file.
- Pinks turn over left shoulder.
- T’s turn over right shoulder.
Figure 4. Handwritten dance captain chart for “Grease Is the Word” - “Rock Out” formation.
The dance captain will also apprise a performer of possible technical problems that he or she may encounter when performing the track, such as quick costume changes, participation in set changes, or use of props.

With regards to long-running musicals, there may be cast changes and replacements. In cases when the choreographer is not available, the dance captain is responsible for auditioning principal and ensemble replacements regarding the movement/dance requirements of the role. The dance captain is then responsible for teaching the choreography and musical staging to new cast members.

Ideally, the dance captain is also the swing. A swing is not in the show on a daily basis, but covers several parts, which may include leading roles, supporting roles and same-sex ensemble tracks. A swing must be prepared to perform any of his or her assigned roles at any given performance. It is more practical for the dance captain to be a swing as opposed to an ensemble member who performs regularly, so that as dance captain, one can observe the show from the audience, taking notes whenever he or she is not required to cover a role on
The dance captain’s daily duties include checking with the stage manager no later than half an hour before the performance to determine if any absences are anticipated. In case of an ensemble absence, the dance captain either informs the swing that he or she will replace the absent performer, or the dance captain must prepare to perform as the swing for that particular performance. In cooperation and coordination with the stage manager, the dance captain informs the company of these changes as soon as possible. The dance captain must then rehearse the swing with dance partners if the choreography involves lifts or any technically difficult movement that may require additional preparation. In the case of a principal’s absence, both the dance captain and stage manager inform and rehearse the understudy (along with other cast members, if necessary or requested by those performers). The dance captain must then perform as the swing for the missing ensemble member who has stepped into the principal role, or else notify the swing that he or she will be performing that track. If an emergency requires that someone other than the understudy or swing must
perform the role or track, the dance captain is responsible for preparing the replacement performer as much as possible and as well as time will allow. According to AEA, the dance captain should maintain a record of all assignments, note any changes therein, and inform the stage manager of all extra duties or changes being made so that appropriate payment can be arranged.

“The dance captain is the keeper of the flame,” says Brad Musgrove, a veteran dance captain who maintained Susan Stroman’s choreography for the Broadway hit The Producers (Carman 57). “It is your job to ensure that when the director and choreographer go away after opening night, everyone is doing what they were originally intended to do. And you have to keep it fresh. You’re the warden” (Carman 57).

A dance captain must be multi-talented, for not only must he or she have the technical proficiency of a dancer, but also possess (or develop) a keen ability to retain massive amounts of detailed choreography in his or her head and body. Most choreographers believe it is essential that the person, who will be teaching their choreography to the understudies and
future replacements, insist upon precision and detail. Often, the dance captain is chosen by the choreographer, which most ensemble dancers consider to be one of the highest compliments they can receive.
CHAPTER 3

PERSONAL PROCESS AND GROWTH

The circumstances that lead to someone becoming a dance captain are usually varied and unique. I was offered the position of dance captain for the European tour of *Grease* in 1999 after I had been an ensemble member in the company for four months. At that time, a second company of this production of *Grease* was opening in Paris, and a new company was being cast in New York and brought to Munich to learn the show. The artistic team, which for this production consisted of the director, two choreographers, and a musical supervisor, wanted an existing company member to join the new cast and assume the role of dance captain. There is no union jurisdiction in Germany or France for professional actors; however, the producer issued contracts for dance captains and stage managers in accordance with AEA regulations. It was requested by the artistic team that there be an experienced dance captain on staff because much of the choreography and staging needed to be taught to the cast when the director and choreographers would be gone, mounting the Paris production at the same time. I had proven myself to be skilled and reliable during the six-week rehearsal period and had established a professional relationship with stage management during the early run of the tour. Having demonstrated my work ethic on that particular production, in addition to having prior experience as a dance captain, I was chosen for the position.

In working with production stage manager (PSM) Ken Cox on the European tour of *Grease*, it was evident how vital the relationship between the dance captain and stage manager is in maintaining the quality and longevity of a production. Preceding each week of performances, Ken and I met to coordinate the rehearsal schedules for understudies and replacements, as well as brush-up and put-in rehearsals, note sessions, auditions, and press events. Thorough organization is paramount, especially regarding scheduling. According to the Actors’ Equity Association, all weekly rehearsals must be scheduled by the dance captain and recorded by the stage manager so as not to exceed the allotted hours set forth in the actors’ contracts. Time management is essential. Sometimes there is list of things that must
be rehearsed or adjusted, and there is limited time to give notes and have them addressed before each performance.

During the tour of *Grease*, the sheer number of hours required to perform the job well, proved to be a challenging aspect of the position. In addition to the duties outlined above, a copious amount of interpersonal time must be spent with the cast. Communication and diplomacy are essential skills. One of the most challenging aspects of the dance captain’s job is giving notes to fellow cast members. The dance captain must at times be a leader, manager, best friend, and therapist, in order to fulfill the requirements of the job. The integrity of the production must be paramount. I’ve found that the most useful skills are tact and diplomacy in order to deal with sensitive, theatrical personalities. Ultimately, in cases of complaints or differences of opinion between cast members and dance captains concerning choreography and/or musical staging, Actors’ Equity states that the dance captain shall make the final decision. It is helpful to know that the union will support the dance captain in any mediation if need be, in the event of a problem. Cast members are warned and reprimanded in writing, and ultimately fired if they don’t follow AEA rules.

Directors, choreographers, and performers generally agree that one of the most difficult aspects of the profession is achieving the delicate balance between keeping the musical staging clean and precise, yet retaining its freshness, energy, and spontaneity. Over time, the actors find “new life” in their characters because they perform the show so often. They need to create and grow the stage business and character interaction to keep it interesting for themselves, as well as the audience. As part of my job as dance captain of *Grease*, I regularly sat in the audience and monitored whether the “new life” that an actor had created for a character helped to enhance the production or distract from it. The cast respected my authority because I had been a member of the production from the beginning and had been chosen by the creative team to maintain the integrity of their work. However, I had to find a diplomatic way to give notes to actors when their performances strayed too far from what was originally intended or set. Creative people understandably want to interpret for themselves the blocking and choreography so that it’s authentic to their character. Thus, it can be challenging for a dance captain to find the balance between maintaining the director’s and the choreographer’s vision while allowing for a performer’s uniqueness.
Of course, things don't always go exactly as planned. A swing or understudy may have to go on stage with little or no notice, and performers can become ill or injured during a performance, necessitating an immediate replacement. With regard to the European tour of *Grease*, there were times when so many cast members were out that I had to make immediate on the spot changes to the choreography in order to accommodate the reduced size of the company. These incidents forced me to think quickly and efficiently about how to alter formations and movement patterns in order to adapt to the new number of bodies on stage. For example, aspects of choreography are created depending on the number of dancers performing at a particular moment. Opposition and symmetry are choreographic tools, meaning that dancers performing to the right of center, for instance, use the right leg, while dancers to the left of center use the left leg. The onstage picture becomes skewed if there isn’t an even number of dancers performing that particular choreography. As the dance captain, I had to be aware of symmetry in the musical numbers, especially in cases when there were an uneven number of dancers onstage due to absences. In those instances, I had to decide whether or not to change the opposition choreography to unison, which then may not be visually as interesting, but may look cleaner and more appealing to the audience. Creativity, inventiveness, as well as having an eye for stage pictures are essential. Ultimately, these artistic challenges that I faced as dance captain helped me develop as a choreographer.

In the same way that being a swing dancer seems the most logical route to becoming a dance captain, becoming a dance captain is a logical step toward becoming a choreographer. According to award-winning Broadway and Hollywood director-choreographer Rob Marshall, who started his career as a dance captain, “I choose my dance captains very carefully” (Carman 58). In an interview with Joseph Carman for *Dance Magazine*, he said, “They’re almost like choreographers in the making. I look for someone who has an eye for the whole, instead of just themselves. I watch which dancers are watching the scenes as well as the numbers. I also look for somebody who has great administrative qualities” (Carman 58).

It is the dance captain’s responsibility, along with the stage manager, to address any spacing or blocking issues in musical numbers that may arise when the production moves to a new theatre. The new venue may be smaller or have different sightlines from the audience’s perspective. This requires rehearsing the performers to adjust their positions on stage in order
to adapt to the new venue. For example, if a dancer has been choreographed to perform down stage right, but that position prohibits a portion of the audience to fully see a crucial part of the action, the dancer’s position must be adjusted. On the European tour of *Grease*, as is the case with most Broadway national tours, the theatres all had proscenium stages. This type of theatre is characterized by a picture-frame opening that separates the auditorium space from the stage space. All of the venues in which we performed on the tour had a similar stage space, and only varied slightly in size; thus, the spacing and blocking alterations in the musical numbers were generally minor, requiring minimal rehearsal.

Generally, a touring production requires a lot of marketing and publicity, especially prior to the opening night in a new city. It was especially informative and educational when I was required to adapt choreography for promotional events, rather than restage an exact replica of it. The performing spaces for these events varied drastically, allowing me the opportunity to create new staging while maintaining the essence of the original choreography. Stage space dictates the number of dancers and formations that can be used, as well as how transitions are fashioned. Transitions are the movement from one composition to the next and their patterns carry different dramatic weight depending on the stage configuration. Transitions need to be altered in a new performance space in order to have the same dramatic effect that the choreographer originally intended. It was essential to explore each new performance space to assess the venue’s advantages and limitations before rehearsing with the performers. Sometimes the choreography needed to be modified for television cameras, while at other times it needed to be adjusted for a large stadium or theatre in the round. These experiences forced me to formulate quick, creative solutions to the challenges presented by different performance spaces, which helped me to grow as a choreographer.

Casting new performers was one of my favorite duties as dance captain. It was fulfilling to witness the process from initial casting to the replacement’s first performance. I always felt confident in auditioning newcomers because of my thorough knowledge of the production. This made it easier to identify which actors to call back and cast, especially when there were hundreds from which to choose. In casting *Grease*, I learned that the more knowledgeable a choreographer is about a production with regard to story and music, the faster and clearer the audition process will be, ultimately benefitting the overall production.
This knowledge has served me as a professional choreographer, especially in regards to research before casting a production.

In a musical, the choreography is created to tell the story, set the scene, develop the characters or further define the situation. In teaching choreography to new cast members, I relished in the creativity of this part of the dance captain’s duties. I impressed upon the actors that the choreography must be motivated by the intention of the characters, and that transitions must occur with a change of tactic or dramatic action. I emphasized that the choreography wasn’t created as a progression of random dance steps purely for entertainment, but as movement that tells a story specific to time and place. As I was a member of the original production, I could describe specific details of the rehearsal process with original choreographers Carla Kama and Melissa Williams, especially in regards to the motivations behind the movement. During “brush up” rehearsals, I reminded the cast that overall synchronicity and choreographic details are not only important aesthetically, but that they also contribute to stylistically telling the story.

During a long-running production, the dance captain regularly observes performances, spends hundreds of hours teaching understudies and replacements, and therefore has an intimate, comprehensive understanding of the entire production. Because of this, he or she is the logical person to re-stage the production with new actors for a new venue. Thus, when Grease was booked to perform in Istanbul, Turkey, I was hired to re-stage the production. The experience proved to be an excellent training tool, further paving the way for my career as a choreographer.

Tony Award-winning director-choreographer Rob Ashford’s career as choreographer began when he was asked by choreographer Rob Marshall to re-stage Kiss of the Spider Woman, in Buenos Aires. Ashford had been the dance captain of the national tour, and when Marshall was unavailable to go to Buenos Aires, he asked Ashford to go in his place to stage the choreography. “That was my first time on the other side of the table, and I didn’t have any worries about creating the work. Rob [Marshall] had created the work. All I had to do was teach it and figure out how to communicate and get the ideas across” (Cramer 7). Ashford got the chance to again re-stage Kiss of the Spider Woman in Tokyo, recalling, “It really was those two opportunities that got me interested in being on the other side of the table” (Cramer 7).
Ashford got his start performing on Broadway in 1987 the Lincoln Center revival of *Anything Goes*, followed by *The Most Happy Fella*, *My Favorite Year*, *Crazy for You*, and *Victor/Victoria*. He served as swing and dance captain in most of the shows in which he was cast, which nurtured his interests as both a choreographer and director (Cramer 6). Ashford acknowledges that a big part of his training as a choreographer came from his work as a dance captain: “That’s the job; seeing the big picture as well as the details” (Cramer 6). He believes that “a good choreographer knows exactly where to place focus, where you want the audience to look at a certain time” (Cramer 6). Ashford is quick to acknowledge that he has always been a visual person, but the experiences he had as dance captain helped him grow visually and creatively.

In 2010, I became the resident director-choreographer of the European tour of *Grease*. This position was an expansion of my duties as dance captain, but without performing, which allowed more time to focus on the artistic and directorial aspects of the job. The multi-faceted duties of dance captain taught me many lessons and proved to be the perfect preparation for this new leadership role. Ultimately, the lessons learned as dance captain trained me for the position of Associate Choreographer of *Grease*, as well as the choreographer of over a dozen professional and educational musical theatre productions.
CHAPTER 4

HIRING AND TEACHING THE DANCE CAPTAIN

As the associate choreographer of *Grease*, I was responsible for hiring and training the dance captain for the 2014 European tour. The production was predominantly cast with actors who had not previously done the production; however, there were two returning ensemble members. To choose the right person for this position, I had to have a clear set of qualifications. First and foremost, this individual had to be a strong dancer who knew the production’s choreography well. Second, he or she had to demonstrate a good working relationship with fellow performers and stage management during their previous contract, performing in *Grease*. Both returning ensemble members met these qualifications, however, I knew that there was a better candidate for the position than either of these individuals. I decided that the female swing from the 2012 tour, Lauren Strigari, was the best choice. Not only is Lauren a strong dancer who knows the choreography well, but she had also demonstrated exceptional dedication and solid work ethic, earning her the respect of the cast and stage management team on the previous tour. Lauren was always prepared to do whatever was best for the production, such as taking over a role mid-performance, or performing a split track. The latter meant that Lauren had to perform a variety of ensemble tracks during the musical numbers because of multiple cast vacancies. She was capable of seamlessly switching tracks at a moment’s notice and was always willing to rehearse with the performers that were affected, even if it was just before going on stage. Lauren was contracted to swing five female ensemble tracks and understudy the role of Cha-Cha. In some instances, Lauren even appeared in male ensemble tracks due to multiple cast vacancies. This was above and beyond her responsibility; however, swings are sometimes expected to perform roles or tracks that they have never rehearsed or performed. Lauren was always ready and eager to help when the cast was depleted due to illness or injury.

During rehearsals for the 2014 tour, I spent a great deal of time informing Lauren of her duties as dance captain. I organized meetings at which she and the stage manager discussed scheduling, even before *Grease* opened, so that Lauren would know ahead of time
how to prepare for the tour. I emphasized the importance of the working relationship between the dance captain and stage manager.

From the first day of rehearsal, I asked Lauren to help teach and demonstrate the choreography. I wanted the cast to immediately connect with her as the person who was responsible for maintaining the integrity of the choreography. I also wanted them to see her superb dancing abilities, especially in regard to stylistic detail and energy. Lauren not only has excellent dance technique, but excellent musicality as well, and the ability to maintain characterization when she dances, capturing the essence of the production’s 1950s inspired choreography.

It is extremely important that the dance captain sets a high standard. In a long-running production, performers can lose energy and focus, especially on the eighth performance of a given week. The stress of frequently traveling to new, unfamiliar cities can cause the cast to be agitated and fatigued. Illness, injuries, homesickness and tension can occur. All the while, the dance captain must maintain a positive, and professional attitude. Lauren is such a person, capable of boosting morale when things get tense, further demonstrating why she was chosen for the position.

The process of teaching Lauren to be dance captain was truly a culminating experience. It has been nearly fifteen years since I began the journey as dance captain of Grease, and it is nearly impossible to articulate the breadth of my personal and professional growth since that time. As I bade farewell to Lauren in Germany on January 19th, 2014, I couldn’t help but reflect on how rewarding the experience had been both professionally and educationally. I was “passing the torch” of dance captain onto Lauren, offering her the opportunity to grow as an artist and person, and hone her own choreographic talents.

As a graduate student of the Master of Fine Arts Program in Musical Theatre at San Diego State University, I choreographed four musicals during my two years in the program. For the Spring 2014 musical production of Pal Joey, I worked closely with undergraduate dancer, Allison Lorenz, whom I chose as dance captain because of the technique and the leadership potential she displayed at the audition. During rehearsals, I advised her to make herself readily available to the other ensemble dancers, especially to those with less dance experience than she, in order to help them learn and perfect the choreography. Allison was especially proficient at the detailed work of cleaning the choreography, which allowed me
more time to focus on creating choreography rather than drilling dance numbers. Guiding and mentoring Allison throughout the rehearsals and run of the production proved to be another culminating experience on my journey from dance captain to choreographer.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The role of the dance captain in musical theatre productions cannot be underestimated. Even though these artists are rarely seen onstage, the contribution that they make to the overall success of a production is immeasurable. When sickness, injury, or other emergencies arise, it is the dance captain, in collaboration with the stage manager, who makes all the necessary adjustments to ensure that when the curtain rises, the audience sees the production that the director and choreographer envisioned. Most everyone knows the old adage “the show must go on.” Based on my years of experience, I know that it’s the dance captain who most often puts the proverb into practice.

The technical dance training I received as a child prepared me for the demanding position of dance captain. My early ballet training was with a certified Royal Academy of Dance teacher. I was tested each year by international RAD examiners and received high honors. In addition, I studied with jazz masters Matt Mattox, Gus Giordano, Luigi and many of their protégés. Since childhood, I have been passionate about the creation of dance. I choreographed in my backyard, basement, and even in grocery store aisles for as far back as I can remember. The feeling of joy and accomplishment that filled me as a child when I performed my own unique creations is what made me make dance my lifelong career and passion. The undergraduate dance education I received at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts deepened and broadened my vision. There, I was taught to think beyond the rigidity of classical structure, which helped to spark my creativity in new and different ways. Ultimately, it was the experiences that I encountered during my years as a dance captain that truly broadened my choreographic horizons and artistic vision, preparing me for the position of Associate Choreographer for the European tour of Grease and the role of choreographer for other professional and educational musical productions.

The years spent as dance captain of Grease provided me with the opportunity to develop skills that continue to serve me today as a choreographer: time management, interpersonal communication, diplomacy, creativity, tenacity, and resilience. Acquiring these
skills helped to give me the self-confidence to pursue my choreographic dreams. I am secure in the knowledge that I am both creatively capable and possess the practical skills necessary to be a choreographer of musical theatre.

I’ve always been passionate about teaching and passing on to the next generation of aspiring artists the art form that has made my life so fulfilling. Now, having had the opportunity to train and collaborate with both professional and student dance captains, my professional journey has come full circle. As a budding scholar and educator, I hope that this documentation will prove insightful and helpful to young performers so that they understand the responsibilities placed on a dance captain improve organizational skills and ability to overcome obstacles. The pressure put on dance captains is enormous, however, the impact they have on the overall success of a production is tremendous. For the right individual, the job of dance captain can be extremely rewarding, allowing one the opportunity for profound artistic and professional growth.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


