



Lesson ideas

WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY DANCE?

Objectives

- Develop an overview of contemporary dance
- Understand principles of 4 key dance techniques
- Learn and perfect professional dance repertoire
- Develop movement vocabulary
- Compose movement from stimuli
- Begin to understand basic choreographic tools
- Improvise from chosen stimuli
- Choreograph within a partner and small groups
- Perform and perfect work

What is contemporary Dance?

Introduction

- Provide an overview of the course / session
- Discussion question; What contemporary dance is Contemporary Dance? Do you know of any contemporary companies? Have you seen any dance works?
- introduce contemporary dance company clip 5 mins
[example 1 : Ascendance Rep]
- Brainstorm ideas on large paper on the floor
- Distribute the hand out on Contemporary Dance (Appendix a)

Technique Class

- Warm up the group waling in different directions (forward, back, side, circle) around the space on 8's, 6's, 4's, 2's 1's. This can be repeated in reverse or jogging. Try to get the group to shift through space, grounded to the floor and covering distance.
- Introduce the class to the principles of contemporary dance technique, using principles of Cunningham, Graham, Limon and Release to demonstrate the key figures in contemporary dance.
(If technique teacher unavailable use a video to describe the differences in practices)

Main contemporary approaches;

Cunningham

(named after teacher and choreographer Merce Cunningham, focusing on the

architecture of the body in space, rhythm and articulation.)

Graham (named after Martha Graham) - focusing on the use of contraction, release, fall and recovery.

Limon (named after Jose Limon) - exploring use of energy in relation to gravity and working with weight in terms of fall, rebound, recovery and suspension.

Release - placing emphasis on minimising tension in the search for clarity and fluidity and efficient use of energy and breath.

Repertoire

- Teach a section of dance extracted from the selected dance piece 'My Castle'
See Clip A (Either teach it directly or get the students to learn it from the DVD (a useful skill to learn). Discuss the use of stimuli and context for the work.
See Appendix 2 : Ascendance Rep Castle Stimuli

Improvisation

- In contemporary dance, one of the most common methods for producing movement vocabulary is the use of improvisation.
- Explain how the through developing innovative movement ideas is key to the dance composition process.

Task 1

In pairs, A closes their eyes, B leads them round the space. This can be developed so that different body parts initiate movement. Use this language to set a sequence capturing the essence of the movement.

Task 2

Using the 'My Castle' Bayeux tapestry stimuli, create own movements reflecting the characters from the images. Create your own Social dance using contemporary ideas learnt. To create a fun angle introduce fruit as props.

Choreographic Development

Task 3

Ask group to re-contextualise their dances using the contemporary dance styles they has studied.

Task 4

- Using the new dance sequence instruct students to rearrange the sequences to create a 2 minute section using the de. At the development ideas below. Discuss how these change the movement vocabulary.

Discuss importance of Motif, theme and variation. Ask whether students are familiar with the terms and their use within chosen company's repertoire.

'Motif is the smallest particle of a dance. It can be one step or a gesture. Generally, the motif is an integral movement of the dance. Dances will have several motifs in them. A choreographer will then develop the motif, referred to as *motif and development*. Other movements will be choreographed by using a motif as a starting point.

A **theme** is a sequence of movements which remain constant throughout the dance. These themes, though, can be changed in certain ways; this is called *theme and variation*. Dance has borrowed this term from musical composition and we use it in much the same way as our musical composing brothers and sisters. There will be many themes in a dance, and the choreographer can put the themes in different

orders (i.e. theme 1, theme 2, theme 1, theme 3) to vary the dance and make it interesting to the viewer. A choreographer might also have one dancer performing one theme while another dancer or group of dancers performs a different theme. This is just one exciting choreographic technique called **juxtaposition**.

Repetition - repeating motif or phrase exactly the same.

Retrograde (filmic) - performing the motif/phrase backwards. Start at the end of the phrase and reverse everything as if this were a movie running backwards.

Inversion - changing movement ideas that are up to down or side-to-side. Try a standing formation upside down or on its side.

Size - condense or expand an original movement idea. Try extremes of this to find huge contrasts and large movement through space.

Tempo - speed changes from the original. Common variations are 2xfast, 3xfast, 2xslow, 3xslow, acceleration, deceleration, stopping. Tempo variations may push you to reduce the size of spatial formation; try keeping that size the same.

Rhythm - vary the rhythm, not the tempo or duration of a motif/phrase. Try lengthening or shortening time aspects, or adding syncopations.

Quality - vary the inherent qualities of the phrase. If the original is sustained and abrupt, make those parts become collapsed or vibrated. If the flow is bound, let it become free.'

(The Intimate Act of Choreography by Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986.)

Performance and reflection

Ask group to perform their sections to the rest of the group and get students to identify movement style within the piece.

Evaluate what they have learnt and whether they had a better understanding of contemporary dance.

Key themes

Basic Dance History

Dance Styles

Perfecting repertoire

Choreographic development and ideas

Performance

Appendix 1

Hand out | What is Contemporary Dance: dance styles?

“Contemporary dance is a style of dance which emerged in the 20th century as an outgrowth of modern dance and other 20th century dance techniques. Defining this style of dance can be difficult, as contemporary dance is an extremely fluid and very nebulous style of dance. Unlike traditions such as ballet, contemporary dance is not associated with specific dance techniques, but rather with a dance philosophy. In contemporary dance, people attempt to explore the natural energy and emotions of their bodies to produce dances which are often very personal.

Some notable names in the field of contemporary dance include: Martha Graham, Trisha Brown, Isadora Duncan, Merce Cunningham, and Jose Limon. Martha Graham is perhaps one of the most famous people in contemporary dance, and the Martha Graham School of Dance in New York City offers training in Graham's techniques to dancers from all over the world. New stars are also always rising in the contemporary dance field.

Contemporary dancers can come from any training background, ranging from classical ballet to breakdancing, and they integrate bodywork techniques such as yoga and Pilates into their dance, along with systems such as the Alexander Method. Contemporary dance places a heavy emphasis on the connection between mind and body, with dancers being encouraged to explore their emotions through dances which push against traditional boundaries. This style of dance often involves a great deal of playing with balance, floorwork, fall and recovery, and improvisation.

In contemporary dance classes, students learn to use their bodies in a variety of ways, and they focus on breathing, posture, and emotional state to establish a mind-body connection. Students may learn choreographed works, or they may be encouraged to improvise dance pieces. A contemporary dance composition may take the form of a personal narrative, an allegory, a commentary on society, or an integration of cultures, and it can feature a wide variety of dance techniques, reflecting the melting pot nature of contemporary dance.”

Contemporary Dance techniques

The four main techniques used in contemporary dance are:

Cunningham (named after teacher and choreographer Merce Cunningham, focusing on the architecture of the body in space, rhythm and articulation.)

What does that mean? Cunningham uses the idea of the body's own "line of energy" to promote easy, natural movement. Richard Alston uses Cunningham technique in his graceful choreography.

Graham (named after Martha Graham) - focusing on the use of contraction, release, fall and recovery.

What does that mean? Graham technique is characterised by floorwork and the use of abdominal and pelvic contractions. The style is very grounded and the technique visibly contrary to the sylphlike, airborne ideals of ballet.

Limon (named after Jose Limon) - exploring use of energy in relation to gravity and working with weight in terms of fall, rebound, recovery and suspension.

What does that mean? Limon technique uses the feeling of weight and "heavy energy" in the body, and movement is instigated using breath to lift, and swings through the body to create and halt movement. It also feels very nice to perform!

Release - placing emphasis on minimising tension in the search for clarity and fluidity and efficient use of energy and breath.

What does that mean? A bit like it sounds - in Release technique, we release through the joints and muscles to create ease of movement, releasing the breath to aid the release of the body. A great relaxation technique as well as a dance style.