

Final Production – Reflective Essay

Our final production, "Icons," was a tribute to some of the most influential celebrity figures in entertainment history. Each member of our cohort selected a cultural icon to embody, using dance and performance to interpret and tell their story. The goal was not just imitation, but to explore their legacies, struggles, triumphs, and impact on popular culture. I chose to portray Marilyn Monroe, a timeless symbol of beauty and vulnerability, whose life reflected both the glittering success of fame and the painful cost behind it. Through my performance, I aimed to capture the arc of her journey, from her glamorous rise to stardom to the emotional and psychological challenges that ultimately marked her downfall. This role challenged me artistically and emotionally, requiring not only technical dance ability but also thoughtful character research and expression.

Throughout the rehearsal process, I maintained a strong work ethic, consistent punctuality, and a collaborative attitude. These were essential not only for my own growth, but for contributing to the overall success of the production. Rehearsals began five weeks prior to the performance, so our time was limited, and expectations were high. We needed to work quickly and efficiently to bring the vision of Icons to life, ensuring that each performance clearly communicated the identity and story of the icon we were portraying. Due to limited studio availability, we had less time to rehearse, which felt unfair given the importance of our upcoming graduation show. As a result, I felt underprepared as the performance date approached.

Initially, I struggled with how to shape my performance and find a character that resonated with me emotionally and artistically. However, from the beginning, I felt drawn to Marilyn Monroe. Her image, voice, and legacy fascinated me, not just as a glamorous Hollywood figure, but as a woman with a complex and often painful story. Once I committed to portraying her, I began researching her life in depth her personal struggles, career milestones, fashion, and the music most associated with her. This research became the foundation of my creative process, helping me develop her physical movements and expressions and better understand the emotional layers I needed to express through dance.

At one point, I was torn between two powerful and influential figures: Marilyn Monroe and Gwen Stefani. Gwen, known for her bold fashion, empowering music, and rebellious energy, contrasted with Marilyn's Hollywood elegance and vulnerability. Yet both icons challenged societal expectations and became symbols of female

empowerment. Rather than abandoning one, we explored blending elements of both. I primarily portrayed Marilyn, staying true to her story throughout most of the performance, but transitioned into Gwen toward the end to symbolize the continuation of Marilyn's spirit in a new generation of strong, expressive women. This creative decision allowed me to present a layered narrative that honoured both their contributions to popular culture.

As Tech Day approached, I was motivated and eager to adjust to the space. However, due to time limitations, my section and solo weren't teched or run until the morning of the show, unlike others who had the chance to do theirs twice. This left me feeling stressed and underprepared. Despite that, I managed to stay focused and channel my emotions into the performance, allowing it to become a genuine and memorable final moment with my cohort.

One of my biggest challenges was shifting from my usual commercial style to a contemporary solo. This was outside my comfort zone, especially as the piece portrayed Marilyn's tragic death by overdose. I worked to express vulnerability through jumps, rolls, and dramatic falls. Although difficult at first, embracing contemporary helped me grow as a performer and made the piece more emotionally powerful.

During our first performance, I struggled with my asthma, which caused me to lose my breath and feel sick halfway through the final number. I managed this by staying composed and waiting for the right moment to exit and re-enter the stage without drawing attention. I believe I handled it well, though I can continue improving how I manage physical challenges during performances.

Another challenge occurred during my solo in the first show when Kirstin forgot to bring on the pills I was meant to use. Though I initially panicked, I stayed professional and continued without them. The pills were a key prop symbolizing Marilyn's overdose, but instead of miming them, I used the moment to portray a panic attack, emphasizing her emotional distress through my movement.

We had two performances, which was an incredible experience. During both, I felt a strong emotional connection to my character. I became so emotionally invested that I began to cry during my solo, making the moment feel raw and authentic. My ten-minute section as Marilyn began with "Glam" by Christina Aguilera, representing her glamorous life surrounded by bodyguards and constant attention. By the end of the routine, I portrayed her feeling overwhelmed by the pressure and longing for a normal life. This led into my solo, "Suicide" by James Arthur, which explored her emotional breakdown. It was challenging but rewarding to portray her pain with honesty and depth.

To symbolize the overdose, a shadow of me taking the pills appeared on a screen, followed by my collapse as the lights faded. I then rose to stand above a fan, recreating her iconic white dress moment, while "Candle in the Wind" by Elton John played. For my final number, I transformed into Gwen Stefani, dancing to "What You Waiting For?" to highlight their similarities. This was combined with the finale, though I felt the ending focused too much on my character. It might have been more balanced to separate it from the group piece.

To prepare, I researched Marilyn's life as a public figure using YouTube videos, websites, and images of her fashion to help me embody her appropriately. I came across a documentary that revealed the tragic reality behind her image, exploring her mental health struggles, failed marriages, and battle with endometriosis, which led to several miscarriages and affected her well-being.

One quote that stood out to me was: "As Monroe's career went on, she began to earn a reputation for being difficult to work with and frequently turning up late to set and intoxicated." This showed how fame and personal pain began to impact her public image. Learning these details helped me approach her character with more empathy, reflecting not just her charm but also her emotional vulnerability in my performance.

How did Marilyn Monroe die? This question was asked multiple times as there were no indications of how she did it. There were rumours of overdose but as I researched more in depth, I found a quote stating, *"no water glass was found in her room, which she would have likely needed to swallow all those pills, and there was no pill residue in her stomach."* as we didn't know how she died we went with overdoses.

Overall, I've experienced significant growth as a dancer, expanding my skill set and developing greater professionalism. I stayed focused throughout rehearsals, took feedback on board, and applied it to improve my performance. This process taught me the power of facial expression and stage presence in becoming a true performer. Moving forward, I'll carry these lessons into any future professional opportunities.

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