

Commercial Dance

An Essential Guide

Anthony R. Trahearn



Commercial Dance

This is an exploration of the vital and rapidly evolving world of Commercial Dance, tracing the evolution and merging of Hip-Hop, Club and Jazz dance styles from the music videos of the early 1980s, to today's huge influence on pop music and dance in a multi-media culture.

Chapters including 'Iconic Moments' and 'Main Movers' contextualise and analyse culturally significant works and choreographers. With direct contributions from an international array of industry leading dancers, choreographers and creatives – including JaQuel Knight (Beyonce's choreographer), Rich + Tone Talauega (Madonna & Michael Jackson collaborators), Rebbi Rosie (Rihanna's dancer), Dean Lee (Janet Jackson's choreographer) and Kiel Tutin (BLACKPINK's choreographer) – this book shines a light on the creatives in the Commercial Dance industry who have made significant impacts, not just on the world of dance but on popular culture itself. Chapters discussing dance history, copyright law, inclusivity and dance class culture as well as additional contributions from dance scholars enable this book to give credence to Commercial Dance as a legitimate academic area of study.

This is a complete and comprehensive textbook for all dance students at any level of study on college, university or conservatory courses.

Anthony R. Trahearn is currently the Head of Dance and programme leader for the BA (Hons) Commercial Dance course at the Institute of the Arts Barcelona, Spain. He trained at London Studio Centre and subsequently worked as a Commercial dancer and associate choreographer for 17 years, working internationally with some of the industry's most established creatives.



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“For all the dancers – beginners, advanced or professional. Never forget why you started dancing in the first place...”

And also for my parents, who drove me to dance class for the first time when I was 8 years old and have supported my career ever since.”



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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	The Definition	7
3	The Ingredients	11
	3a. Hip-Hop & Funk Styles	11
	3b. Jazz Dance	24
	3c. Club Styles	37
	Professional Insight – Barry Lather	47
	Professional Insight – Rebbi Rose	49
4	The People	55
	4a. The Commercial Dancer	55
	4b. The Commercial Choreographer's Assistant/Associate	57
	4c. The Commercial Dance Choreographer	58
	4d. The Creative Director	60
	Professional Insight – Reshma Gajjar	61
	Professional Insight – Jono Kitchens	63
5	The Realisations	67
	5a. Music Video and MTV	67
	5b. Musical Theatre and Dance Theatre	82
	5c. Live Concerts and Televised Events	90
	Professional Insight – Karla Garcia	96
	Professional Insight – Kiel Tutin	98
6	Iconic Moments	103
	Michael Jackson's 'Thriller'	103
	Janet Jackson's 'Rhythm Nation'	105
	Beyonce's 'Single Ladies'	108
	SIA 'Chandelier'	109

	Pink: What About Us	111
	'The Greatest Showman'	114
	Mary J Blige Live Performance	115
	Rihanna's Savage X Fenty Fashion Show Vol II	117
	'Us Again' Walt Disney Animation Studios	120
7	Main Movers	123
	Brian Friedman	123
	Charm La'Donna	125
	Christopher Scott	126
	Fatima Robinson	128
	Frank Gatson	130
	Jamie King	132
	JaQuel Knight	133
	Laurieann Gibson	135
	Marty Kudelka	138
	Michael Rooney	140
	Nadine 'Hi-Hat' Ruffin	142
	Paul Roberts	143
	Paula Abdul	145
	Rich + Tone Talauega	147
	Tina Landon	149
	Toni Basil	151
	Vincent Paterson	153
8	Talking Points	157
	8a. Copyright and Commercial Dance	157
	8b. Commercial Class Culture	162
	8c. Polar Paradigms – Inclusivity and Sexualisation	165
	8d. A Supporting Dancer	168
	8e. Street Dance versus Urban Dance	169
	Professional Insight – Randall Watson	172
	Professional Insight – Xena Gusthart	174
9	Places to Train	179
	9a. BASE Dance Studios	180
	9b. Broadway Dance Centre	180
	9c. Pineapple Dance Studios	181
	9d. Millennium Dance Complex	182
	Professional Insight – Kashika Arora	183
	Professional Insight – Nathan J Clarke	184

10	Academic Insight	189
	10a. Dancing on a Cliff Edge	190
	10b. Collaborations between Early 20th-Century European and American Concert and Commercial Dance: Tamiris and Nagrin	198
	10c. Punkin' and Werkin' It: The Queer Roots of Commercial Dance	203
	10d. A Reflection on Hip-Hop, Hegemony and Appropriation	209
	Professional Insight – Dean Lee	215
	Acknowledgements	221
	Index	223



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Chapter 1

Introduction

Most dance students know that Jerome Robbins choreographed the 1961 movie ‘West Side Story.’ They also know that Bob Fosse choreographed ‘Cabaret.’ These are two movies which made a large impression on the trajectory of dance in the 20th century. Michael Jackson’s iconic ‘Thriller’ short film and Beyonce’s ‘Single Ladies’ music video have also made a notable impact, not just on the development of late 20th-century dance genres, but they are also immensely significant moments in global popular culture, just as ‘West Side Story’ and ‘Cabaret’ were. So why do so few people know who choreographed these music videos, yet Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse are widely recognised as performing arts pioneers? Michael Peters choreographed Michael Jackson’s ‘Thriller’ short film and Frank Gatson Jr and JaQuel Knight choreographed Beyonce’s ‘Single Ladies’ music video. Far fewer students know the names of those choreographers. Over the last 40 years, remarkably influential moments of dance in film, television, music video and on the stage have passed without a tip of the hat to the choreographer and the dance creatives involved.

Commercial Dance’s further inclusion into academic dance studies is necessary to recognise the impact it has had on popular culture. Working hand in hand with pop music, these two areas of performance art have created a cultural tidal wave, which from the mid-20th century has helped to steer everything from fashion to socio-political movements. ‘Thriller’ (1983) and ‘Single Ladies’ (2008) are both cultural outliers, not only because of the immense popularity of the songs but also for the choreography in the short film and music video that accompanied these songs. Accordingly, these visual companions must also be acknowledged as ground-breaking – and they are of course, frequently – the artist’s performance, special effects, costume, make-up, styling, photography, film direction are all exhaustively referenced and discussed in documentaries, articles and books. Unfortunately, all too often we find that the choreographer – the person who actually created these dance sequences (which in these two examples are as iconic and as easily recalled as the songs they were created for) – is left off the list of acknowledgements. Google your favourite music video or dance film and see if you can find who the choreographer was and whether they are credited on sites such as IMDB. If they are credited, how far down the list of creatives do they appear? You may be surprised by what you *don’t* find!

Defining Commercial Dance

I worked in the Commercial Dance industry as a dancer, assistant choreographer and occasional choreographer for 16 years in London. ‘What is Commercial Dance?’ is a question I have struggled to answer comfortably since I started working in 2001. Whilst researching and writing this book over the last three years, I have asked this same question to many different people. I always had the feeling that they had not been asked this question before and weren’t really sure how to answer it. Most people have an idea of what Commercial Dance *looks* like and where we can *find* it... but what actually *is* it? You probably have your own idea of what Commercial Dance is but articulating exactly what it is can be challenging, but for the sake of the academic progression of Commercial Dance itself, absolutely necessary.

During my research I noticed that ‘commercial theatre/work/arts’ are referenced frequently throughout the archives of dance history – loosely referred to as a form of theatre motivated by making a profit ahead of a purely artistic or creative desire, its purpose is to sell stuff. In this book, I have focused on the term ‘Commercial Dance’ as both a genre of dance and a sector of industry. Commercial Dance as a dance form is an amalgamation of a number of popular dance styles including Jazz through to Hip-Hop, taking in Voguing, Popping, Locking, Breakin’, Krump, House, Waacking, Dancehall and Contemporary along the way. It is performed by dancers in music videos, in movies, on television shows and at concerts supporting music artists. There are many expressions of dance that can be found simmering in the melting pot of Commercial Dance.

Artistic appreciation is subjective and based largely on personal taste, so applying labels and quantifiable dimensions to works of performance art, although imperative for further understanding of the area, can be a dull and unnecessary exercise in academicising and quantifying the creative industries (after all – one person’s work of art is another’s trash – that’s part of the fantastic subjectivity which art encourages). However, this analysis and evaluation is necessary in order to study Commercial Dance effectively and in a way that can be compartmentalised and discussed succinctly.

Expansion in Education

Commercial Dance is everywhere – on TV screens, social media feeds, in our favourite singer’s music videos and in nearly every dance centre, yet so few questions have been asked, let alone answered, about the nature and evolutionary path Commercial Dance has taken. How do we evaluate such a diverse area of performing artistry? Is Commercial Dance and the canon of work which it consists of on an artistic par with that of Contemporary dance or is it the shallow art form some consider it to be – just a hallow, dispensable piece of the marketing and branding jigsaw that dominates today’s media-driven consumerist societies? As a dance genre, is it capable of growing up, leaving its adolescence and taking a permanent seat at the table of Performing Arts education and academia?

Commercial Dance is increasingly studied in universities and performing arts institutions. Globally, undergraduate courses and programmes which include Commercial Dance elements currently sit alongside historically established areas of performing arts academic study such as Musical Theatre and Contemporary Dance – about which the recommended reading lists are endless. Sondheim, Gershwin, Graham, Bausch – the amount of academic reading, analysis and research material available to students studying these musical theatre and modern dance luminaries is extensive. Their stature is justifiably solidified by a mountain of books, collections and research papers which have been produced over the last 100 years or

so. A student of Commercial Dance today hoping to find some solid study support will more than likely leave empty-handed after visiting their local bookshop or college library, unless they want to read a book about Misty Copeland or Darcy Bussell (both great classical artists in their own right, just not related to Commercial Dance). They may find a chapter or two in a Dance Studies Companion from the 1990s dedicated to ‘Dance in Music Video’ or ‘Street Dance’ but often the focus is somewhat ambiguous as to what this ‘music video/street dance’ is and where it actually sits in the world of movement and dance studies. Research into subjects related to Commercial Dance including Dance on Screen, Hip-Hop studies and Music Videos has expanded significantly over the last decade with specialists such as Professor Sherri Dodds, Professor Mary Fogarty and Professor Emily Caston providing solid, insightful analysis, giving credence to areas that have been somewhat overlooked. What is still missing is coverage of how to relate the study of these individual specialisms to the broader content and industry of Commercial Dance.

Widening the Scope of Dance Literature

The validity of Commercial Dance and the popular social dance genres it envelops has still not really been secured within the world of academia. It has not been dismissed, but its development within universities or conservatoires has been at a glacial pace. For decades, scholars have been advocating for an updated, broader and more inclusive approach to dance studies, an approach that recognises the cultural and artistic importance of social and popular dances. Professor of Dance and Performance at New York university, Julie Malnig, acknowledged back in 2001 that *‘one of the fascinating aspects of social dance itself is the variety of styles it encompasses and the continually fluid exchange among what we call social, vernacular and popular dances’* and commenting that sometimes these areas of popular entertainment are *‘hidden in the recesses of culture where scholars had seldom tread.’* Malnig was fighting Commercial Dance’s corner 20 years ago, just calling it by a different name. In 2009, Gay Morris, a dance historian and critic, also urged dance academia to engage further with cultural studies whilst *‘broadening conceptions of what constitutes “dance”’* advocating that unless the importance of the social role that dance plays is acknowledged, then dance studies cannot continue to be successful. The intention has long been there to expand the scope of Dance studies to include social and popular dances prevalent in the area of entertainment. Social and popular dances provide the fabric from which Commercial Dance is constructed.

Still, there seems to be a reluctance to take dance in the Commercial arena seriously in some quarters. Perhaps, it is subconsciously dismissed by scholars (those still immersed in European studio based dance genres) as a dubious area of ‘art’ with no history or repertoire to speak of – not in comparison to modern dance history and the great works of Balanchine, Bausch, Khan, Hofesh, Cunningham et al. This perspective may appear elitist, blinkered and outdated to current students of dance – Commercial Dance deserves the same consideration and intellectualisation afforded to classical and contemporary dance genres. I hope that this book is able to cover some of the areas which have not been sufficiently documented and discussed.

Why I Wrote This Book and Creating Relatable Dance Literature

I have always been a practitioner by trade, not a theorist. Furthermore, I am not a dance historian, academic nor an anthropologist and although I back the idea of intellectualising

Introduction

Commercial Dance and I am wary of *over* intellectualising it. Having had many discussions with current dance students and taking heed from my own experiences of studying dance in an academic sense, I feel that some academic writing can alienate dance students. I have written this book hoping to help bridge the gap between academic and editorial writing in dance. If a student is interested in digging deeper about the past and potential future paths of dance, they can be stifled when presented with disengaging and verbose academic writing so complex that if you are not from a background of academic theorising (as I wasn't), you are left feeling a little lost and disconnected. In reviewing a 1993 book about Madonna, the academic and cultural critic Camille Paglia comments on the pretentious nature of some academic writing which covers popular culture, noting that the consistent use of words like “diegesis,” “intertextual,” “narrative strata” and “discursive practices” would be “comical except for the ill effect on students.” I hope that this book avoids such grandiose words and yet still encourages thoughtful critical reflection about Commercial Dance without hindering the reader's enthusiasm for study and research by offering a relatable and engaging approach to the subject matter.

Throughout this book, I have tied the historical and cultural perspectives directly to relevant practical performance work. It is an attempt to collate, collect, and to an extent, catalogue the components of a young, complex industry. There is a lot of material covered in these pages, it is essentially an oversight of a 40-year-old genre of dance. Collecting this information has been possible only from an enormous amount of research which has included many different modes – journal articles, newspaper reviews, interviews, e-mail exchanges, zoom conversations, documentary footage, academic books and my own experiences have all been utilised. There are areas which I would have loved to have spent more time on – I would have liked to delve a little deeper into some of the topics. I offer that this book is a starting point and I encourage *you*, the reader, to delve deeper and continue the research into many of the areas included in this book.

My Own Experience... and Ignorance

Contained within the text are occasional observations from my own experiences as a professional, working in the Commercial Dance industry. This is not a thinly veiled attempt at a memoir, but I use these personal references as a way of providing relatable human insight into the working practices of the Commercial Dance industry and some of the talented creatives catalogued in these pages. I also believe that in a time when AI software is developing rapidly, real world experience and having been “in the room where it happened” is increasingly valuable for arts education to maintain a sense of authenticity rooted in human observation.

I have learned so much from researching and writing this book. As a dancer and dance educator, some of these things I now realise I should have known and understood as an 18-year-old dance student, I did not. After reflecting on this, I have identified two reasons for this. Firstly, when I was studying dance in London at a pre-professional level (late 1990s) there just wasn't the educational material, nor faculty knowledge about what was thought of as ‘street dance in music videos.’ Within dance education at this time, there was no acknowledgement that this industry actually existed, very few thought that becoming a full time, specialist “music video or back-up dancer” was a viable and sustainable career choice and certainly not one that had had much artistic merit. There was no YouTube or Vimeo, no social media channels that shared choreography or videos with the world. Any music video or live performance you had heard whispers about had to be sought after, usually by borrowing a VHS or waiting up all night to catch the music video on MTV, so discovering this new and exciting choreography,

from a UK perspective anyway, was not easy. Secondly, my own ignorance is to blame. I could and should have asked more questions about the industry I was actually working in, what the origins were and the cultural contexts of the movement I was performing. So perhaps by writing this book, I'm actually trying to compensate for my earlier ignorance.

I must also acknowledge that there are choreographers, dancers and creatives, those working today and those who offered their work decades ago, that have contributed significantly to the growth of Commercial Dance who may not be mentioned in this book. Any omission is simply down to a limited amount of page space and research and writing time. Initiatives such as 'The World Choreography Awards' (USA) and 'Move It' (UK) illuminate just how many exceptional Commercial choreographers are producing noteworthy work. I am sure that in future editions of this book, and other books specialising in Commercial Dance, their artistic endeavours will be captured. The selected 'Main Movers' and 'Iconic Moments' are not intended to be part of a definitive or exhaustive list – as with much within this book, it is a starting point for a catalogue of work which I hope will be continually expanded.

Reflect, Question and Research!

I urge every reader of this book to ask questions about the dances they dance. Who originally choreographed this routine? What actually *is* this style of dance I'm performing and what part of the world did it originate from? I guarantee that learning more about the historical and cultural context of the 5, 6, 7, 8's you are perfecting will open your eyes and enable you to perform the choreography with a greater authenticity, will further your appreciation of its origins and no doubt progress your abilities as a dancer. Hopefully, this book can advance the conversation about Commercial Dance and be a helpful tool for dancers of all ages, whilst also giving Commercial Dance history and its creatives, past and present, the attention, affirmation and acclamation they deserve.

Keep up to date with news and features about this book at
www.commercial-dance.com

The Outline

Commercial Dance: An Essential Guide will take you through the ideas of what Commercial Dance is and discuss its roots, its current state, its pioneers, those currently bringing innovation to the game and the industry's potential future trajectories. It's intended to be informative and interesting – regardless of whether you are a dancer or not. I hope that the features and spotlights included about some of the key personalities and moments in Commercial Dance are engaging for all. I am also optimistic that some of the historical insights might awaken a curiosity to learn more about the steps you see on the screen.

'*The Definition*' chapter opens the book and ponders exactly what Commercial Dance consists of, as a performing art and as an industry, and strives to place a firmer handle on its origins.

'*The Ingredients*' looks at the origins of the individual styles of dance that provide the base material in the complexion of Commercial Dance. Styles have been categorised into three groups: Hip-Hop & Funk Styles, Jazz and Club Styles. Within these broader groups, you will find sub-chapters covering everything from Breakin' to Waacking.

'*The People*' gives a breakdown of the main job roles found within the industry. This section covers the key players in the industry – the dancer, the assistant choreographer, the choreographer and the Creative Director.

Introduction

'*The Realisations*' observes the various channels of entertainment in which Commercial Dance finds its audience: MTV & Music Video, Live Shows & Television and Musical & Dance Theatre.

'*Iconic Moments*' will focus on some of the notable moments in the evolution of this dance form, from Sia's 'Chandelier' music video to Janet Jackson's 'Rhythm Nation.'

'*Main Movers*' puts some of the choreographers and creatives who have helped to shape this industry centre stage, including Fatima Robinson, Marty Kudelka and Rich & Tone Talauega.

'*Talking Points*' is a chance to explore some of the many conversation points pertaining to social and cultural issues which are prevalent throughout the Commercial Dance industry. Areas including copyright law, sexualisation, the term 'Urban Dance' and dance class culture are discussed.

'*Places to Train*' provides information about, and a brief history of, some of the most prominent dance studios offering classes in Commercial Dance internationally.

Academic Insight is a collection of four essays from Dance scholars covering subjects such as the manifestation of queer cultures in Commercial Dance, appropriation and the gig economy.

Throughout the book *Professional Insights* features are included in each chapter, which provide a series of spotlights on creatives working in the Commercial Dance industry. They share their stories, inspirations, philosophies about dance and advice for budding dancers wishing to pursue a career in this eclectic and exciting industry.

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