

Universal Principles of Design in DANCE

Used to develop, analyze and evaluate

Repetition: Repetition provides the opportunity for the observer to take in and absorb a movement idea and can be used as a means of heightening tension. Repetition and recurring movement ideas develop interest, establish form, and reveal or emphasize the intent of the work. For instance, repetition can assist in making a specific rhythm increasingly discernible or emphasize key movement patterns or themes. Skillfully used, repetition can both generate satisfaction in the recognition and re-experiencing of something familiar and create dramatic power.

Variety: Variety provides a contrasting but complementary difference. The opposing and interacting forces create a dynamic relationship within the larger principle of unity. Contrasts in forces or elements heighten the perception of the pattern and contribute to the expressiveness of the dance. Unity can be lost to excessive change or novelty. Unless the forces are held in appropriate balance, the dance can be distorted or diminished. Usually, the natural expansion and development of the basic dance idea produces a diversification of material and contrast in the quality, rhythm, and spatial aspects that provide variety. Variety achieved in this way maintains its integrity.

Contrast: Contrast is not merely a difference, as in variety, but is a dynamic opposition, in which the tensions heighten the meaning and increase the strength of each of the opposing but related factors. Contrast in dance is the juxtaposition of opposing elements of body, action, space, time, and energy. e.g. Body: upper body/lower body, right side of the body/left side of the body; Action: action/stillness, flexion/extension, balance/falling; Space: space - high/low, forward/backward; horizontal/vertical; Time: fast/slow, free time/measured time; Energy or dynamics: strong/relaxed, heavy/light, free/bound. Too much contrast scattered throughout a dance can destroy unity and make a work difficult to “read.” Unless a feeling of chaos and confusion are what you are seeking, it is a good idea to carefully consider where to incorporate contrast for effect.

Unity: The most essential attribute of a well-formed dance is unity or wholeness. The unified dance gives evidence of developing a strong, clear purpose. It unfolds with a directness that moves toward the heart of the idea. Every part contributes to the whole. From a choreographic standpoint, unity means selecting, limiting, and manipulating. Since the spectator can attend to only a limited number of movement ideas at one time and cannot grasp a collection of unrelated movements, qualities and rhythms, the choreographer must select each movement idea with care in terms of its relevance to the function and mood of the work. Then through sensitive manipulation of essential material, the dance is shaped through the arrangement and relationship of elements to create an inherent “holding together” power with all parts having a harmonious relationship that contributes to the sense of completeness.

Sequence: A dance should be perceived as a continuing experience. It should convey the feeling of going somewhere, of developing. Continuity depends on sequence and progression. As movement material is manipulated in relation to its function, it assumes a sequence of action. These sequences are organized in such a way that they provide for progression within the overall structure of the dance and serve to carry the spectator along—creating continuity, meaning, and order to the dance as a whole. Within the progression a preparation for each new sequence should be indicated in advance and grow out of the preceding sequence.

Transition: In order for a work of art, a movement phrase or constructed dance to attain a sense of unity, the contrasting movements or sections must be related to each other by means of connecting intervals known as transitions. For the parts to connect and blend together, the link must be structurally sound in its relationship to both of the adjoining parts. The transition grows out of one movement idea and leads to the next to provide a connective bridge between movements, phrases or sections of a dance. Each transition acts as a bridge that binds together the components and sustains the continuity and “ongoingness” of the dance.

Emphasis/Climax: Movement sequences and dances must build to an emphasis or climax. Within the structure of the dance there is a beginning, development, and resolution. The climax is sensed as the high point within the development. This is the moment of full importance, the turning point that leads to the resolution. The dance starts, goes somewhere, and arrives. The climax gives a sense of arrival and completeness. Key or dominant points resulting from emphasized action are used throughout the dance to differentiate and intensify important parts of the work. But the key points must be limited to the essentials and developed in a sequential relationship in order to build the tension aspects of the dance and progress effectively to its climax.

Balance: Balance includes more than the sequential organization of a dance; it deals also with the arrangement of the parts as they occur simultaneously. For instance, by augmenting the number of dancers who perform them, delicate movements can be brought into balance with movements of greater dynamic intensity performed by fewer dancers. Balance also involves arrangement of movements and dancers in relation to floor pattern and the arrangement of individuals and of groups in relation to each other and in space so that equilibrium exists. In relation to performance space, the choreographer can consider the strength of the space areas and relative intensities with relationship to the movement and sequences; weak space areas can be equalized with those that have proportionately greater strength.

Proportion: Proportion refers to the relationship of parts to each other and to the whole work. The relationship of one part to another with respect to magnitude, quantity or degree; the quantitative selection of the component parts of a composition relative to each other in terms of their movement composition, relative numbers, dimension, temporal values, or dynamic emphasis. In dance, the principle of proportion applies not only to the individual dance movements but also to the larger dance sections and to the compositional grouping of the dancers. The use of proportion should assist in featuring significant portions of a dance by giving them increased emphasis.

Harmony: Throughout the process, recheck and relate all material to the function. Does a particular movement belong in the work? What is its use? Is it essential to the work? Is there a more appropriate movement? Does the particular gesture further the intent? Does a particular phrase contribute to the overall meaning? The specific intent and nature of each work determines the directness or indirectness with which it is conveyed to the perceiver. However, remember that the basis of the aesthetic experience combines form and feeling, which the choreographer must transfer through the material to the observer.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND EVALUATION

Unity: Did you create a unified dance using all the parts to create or support a clear purpose, theme, consistent style, or mood?

Variety: Does the dance include elements from Body, Action, Space, Time, and Energy?

Repetition: Were movements, phrases, or themes repeated?

Contrast: Did you use contrasting elements or is the dance low in contrast— i.e. performed all at one level, at the same speed, or with dancers all facing one direction?

Sequence: Does the sequence of the phrases or sections of the dance convey continuity in movement, expression and meaning of the dance or a sense of progression of the dance as a whole?

Transition: Do the transitions move the theme, intention, or mood along? Is there a sense of overall unity and “on-going-ness”?

Emphasis/Climax: Is there a purpose or meaning to the movement? What elements, ideas, or themes have you accentuated or highlighted?

Proportion: Is this phrase or section of the dance too long in terms of its relative importance to the dance as a whole?

Balance: Does the whole piece feel balanced or off balance? Is there a beginning and middle but no ending? Is there too much contrast, but not enough repetition?

Harmony: Are all movements and elements (i.e. music, setting, props, lighting) of the dance compatible? Is there a feeling of accord?