

Relating Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Dance Department of The Université du Québec à Montréal¹

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University level training programs in contemporary dance are uncommon in Europe. In Québec, the marriage between professional dance training and a university diploma was a way to secure the survival of contemporary dance. In a milieu where the cultural, social, and political recognition of dance was meager, the support of the provincial education system assures the preservation and future continuity of dance studies and dance training. For one, the university dance program is protected from the whims of fashion. At the same time, it is a safe distance from the uncertain political will of governments in regard to funding of the arts. As an educational institution, the university receives its funding from the Ministry of Education and not from Culture and Communication. This affiliation allows a certain degree of independence in both thought and practice, where the creativity and artistic relevance of training programs must be protected from the arbitrary decisions of the Quebec arts council (CALQ). This council, an arm of the Ministry of Culture and Communication, has the power to make sweeping decisions which affect all the performing arts in Québec. These decisions are made by committees composed of representatives from a diverse cross-section of dance professionals. These peer groups do not share a common artistic vision nor a collective sense of the needs of the dance milieu. It must be stated clearly that dance leads a precarious existence, even while protected by an institutional system. Québec dance artists, deeply committed to their practice, at whatever level, have learned to push the limits of their imagination to assure the survival of their discipline. Dance within the university context requires (reveals) the same ingenuity, We must conform to the demands of the institution while continually fighting for our right to exist.

History

Establishing a professional training program at the university level is a tributary to our history, The origins of contemporary dance training in Québec are linked to the first resident dance companies to perform contemporary work in the province: Le Groupe de la Place Royale, established in 1966, and Le Groupe Nouvelle Aire, in 1968. From the onset, these two companies formed dance schools to ensure the training of young dancers and to promote the emerging form of contemporary dance. These schools became a breeding ground for the choreographers and teachers of today. Jean-Pierre Perreault, Edouard Lock, and Ginette Laurin began their careers with these companies. Today they

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continue to set the pace of contemporary choreography in Québec, as well as internationally. Martine Epoque, Michèle Febvre, Diane Carrière and Sylvie Panet-Raymond were other pioneers affiliated with these two companies. They subsequently applied their vision in Montréal's university milieu, with the creation of two bachelor programs in dance and one dance certificate.

By the end of the 70's, after 10 years of existence, Le Groupe Nouvelle Aire was exhausted. Constantly battling to obtain the government grants necessary to sustain their activities, they finally closed their doors in 1982. Le Groupe de la Place Royale was also exhausted by the lack of appreciation and funding of their work by the provincial agencies. In 1977, they moved out of Québec, to the province of Ontario, where the provincial government began to modernize its institutions and focus on its cultural identity. Large sums of money were allocated to the universities to develop the arts and the social sciences. Thus, it wasn't a coincidence that in 1979, two bachelor programs in dance were established: L'université du Québec à Montréal, serving the French community, and Concordia University, serving the English-language population. The one-year certificate program was established at the Université de Montréal. All three programs helped to catalyze contemporary dance training in Québec.

We are lucky to have these programs. Recent history has shown that the graduates of the university programs have gone on to establish their own dance schools. As choreographers, they were too busy creating. The limited funding available to them did not allow for an expansion of their activities. Spending energy on a private training program would seem suicidal.

Context

In Québec, there is no provincial system which assumes serious and continuous training in contemporary dance from the high school level through university. There is a lack of coherence among the different levels of training which are available. Some high schools with an arts orientation have included an introduction to contemporary dance which is in accordance with the program in arts education established by the Ministry of Education. Since provincial guidelines do not exist for contemporary dance, it is up to each high school to determine their pedagogical orientation. No school is obliged to offer dance education.

Uncommitted to dance at the high school level, the Minister of Education has never established a protocol for a progression at the next tier of study, leading to a CEGEP diploma. CEGEP's, or Collèges d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel Spécialisés, are Québec schools with a mandate to prepare students for a university education or a professional trade. At this time, there are three CEGEP programs in contemporary dance in Québec. Students are admitted in accordance with their academic qualifications and their motivation. Their competencies in dance may be minimal. Thus, the majority of students entering the university dance programs in Québec have benefited from 2 or 3 years of intensive training in dance. However, there are no established standards of dance training within the CEGEP programs, much less in the private studios and



schools which teach recreational dance. The absence of training standards at the pre-university level creates enormous pressures on the university dance programs. In three or four years, the students must achieve a level of proficiency coherent with the demands of a professional dance career. At the same time, they must develop the ability for critical thinking and depth of reflection that is required of a university degree. How can we find a balance between theory and practice when the university demands advanced cognitive skills and the dance milieu requires highly qualified dancers of international caliber?

How does the dance program at UQAM respond to these divergent demands: respecting the limits and requirements of the university while simultaneously responding to the ever changing and increasing demands of the performing arts?

The undergraduate curriculum in dance at the UQAM

Our professional training program in contemporary dance includes three streams:

- dance performance,
- choreography,
- dance education.

The third stream has a particular status in that it must function under the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, which awards a teaching certificate to all students completing the education degree. This certificate is given to graduates of the dance program upon recommendation from the dance department. This diploma graduates to teach dance at the primary and secondary levels in Québec public schools. UQAM is the only university by the Québec Ministry of Education to certify dance teachers.

The professional program in contemporary dance at UQAM can be completed in 3 years of full time study, There are two semesters per year, each 15 weeks long. Full time students take 5 courses per semester. A core program of 3 semesters provides a foundation common to students of all 3 streams. Overall, students in dance performance and choreography take 10 theory courses, including kinesiology, dance history, aesthetics, art history, as well as 29 studio courses, including dance technique, repertory, composition and improvisation. The dance education program is compatible with the structural design of the other 2 streams, but another year of study is added to comply with the requirements set out by the Ministry of Education. This includes 800 hours of students teaching, interspersed with classes in pedagogy. Each stream offers a particular selection of courses, yet the diversity is limited by shared courses in multi-media studies and other dance courses, Unfortunately, difficult choices must be made within the limited number of credits we are able to offer.



Linking theory and practice in the undergraduate dance program at UQAM

The goal of marrying theory and practice within dance training requires modifications both in the studio and in the classroom, and at all levels of study. To do this, the department has focused on developing an integrated approach. During the studio courses, theory is omnipresent, manifested in direct applications. For example, the repertory class offered the first semester of the first year uses choreographic excerpts from two contemporary dance artists of international renown. Work on the two dance pieces exposes the students to such concepts as projection, focus, use of space, phrasing, modulation of movement quality and awareness of others. Experiencing these notions within a choreographic context anchors the theory into practice, thus creating a multi-layered system of learning. Technical skill in dance is taught in repertory and technique classes, but also through classes in the principles of Laban Movement Analysis and music notation.

The repertory classes also provide an experiential connection with dance history and aesthetics. The works of Merce Cunningham and Lar Lubovitch, for example, are not part of the basic culture of our students from Québec. These companies perform rarely, if ever, here. The undergraduate students have had little exposure to internationally acclaimed choreographers, and they can not necessarily relate to the artistic vision being conveyed. Dancing these visions gives the students technical and expressive experience, while, at the same time, providing historical, aesthetic and compositional reference. One could say that each studio course, including dance technique, integrates a theoretic component which links one course to another.

Creating complementarity: the CFC and the CIC

The curriculum of the core courses is based on the complementarity of each course, as well as the common elements. This approach to teaching competencies referred to at UQAM as transverse, emphasizes a complex matrix of inter-related and overlapping parts, where the same elements are seen in multiple contexts. Thus, the students in technique class will apply concepts learned in such classes as somatic education, kinesiology, Laban analysis and musicality. Building cohesion among the core courses required a concerted effort among the teachers. A pedagogic committee, the CFC (comité de formation corporelle), was formed to coordinate the course content and to establish a common nomenclature among the varied, and at times eclectic, terminology used by each teacher. The committee also created joint evaluation projects to enhance interaction and cohesion among the different courses. This, in turn, maximized the students' learning, speeding up the process of integration, and supporting intelligent and responsible dance practice.

This pedagogic committee has also developed a structure for team-teaching projects, where 2 or 3 teachers work together outside of class, or actually teach together, to facilitate the integration of concepts which are addressed in more than one course. Generally, the teachers design team projects as a result of common interests. The entire committee works together on certain occasions



to help a student who is having difficulty or to observe the student group as a whole. Each group is different, so each year the nature of the team projects changes.

This particular exchange of ideas and methods has created an important basis of interaction among the part-time and full-time faculty members. The depth of this collective reflection and the rigor used in the choice of pedagogic strategies has given birth to a dynamic research team. Inspired by innovative ideas which are explored empirically, this team has forged a new model of working together. The knowledge of each other's interests and skills, and the ability to work efficiently off the ideas of each other, has led to a formidable knowledge base which far exceeds that which can be gleaned individually of from occasional training courses. When individual members of the team discover new ideas through reading or additional training, the knowledge is shared with the group such that new applications are integrated collectively.

Established in 1996, the dynamic of the CFC has catalyzed the creation of other pedagogic teams. The CIC (Comité Interprétation Création) is a committee formed to address the issues particular to the choreography and performance courses. A health center and a health committee were created by Sylvie Fortin, a professor who was originally a member of the CFC. Strengthened by the richness of collegial exchange, she created a research group, comprised of post-graduate students and health professionals outside the department, to study the relationship between dance practices and dancers' health. This research actively represents the second part of the health centre's mandate. The first is an exchange set up between the dance department and a private company, Perfmax, to provide a weight training program for our students. The previous lack of this type of cross-training hampered the students' ability to keep up with the rigorous dance training of the bachelor program.

Each of the 3 streams offered in the dance department offers a sequential progression from one course to another. One example of this can be seen in the choreography stream, where the level of difficulty grows substantially from one year to the next.

The first choreography course, obligatory for all second year students, requires students to apply the tools of dance composition directly, on their own body.

The second course in the sequence, offered the following semester of the second year, introduces students to the complexities of the creative process involving a group of dancers. They learn how to manage the group, how to create choreographic vignettes that other people will dance, and how to give directives.

The third course, offered in the third year, requires students specializing in choreography to create an original 15-minute piece on one of the students specializing in dance performance.

Finally, a select number of students are able to pursue a fourth course, where they create an original, 30 minutes piece with a group of performance students. This final project is supervised by one of the dance professors and produced by the department in a professional theater, the Agora de la danse. These four courses provide a theoretic framework, elaborated progressively and in conjunction with the students' creative evolution. This approach permits each students to question

their motivations and choices when faced with the flexible, yet discerning eye of the supervising teacher.

Theory

The theory courses are spread over the three-year program. They are also offered in a logical sequence. Kinesiology and dance history are offered in the first year, along with courses in somatic education, technique, repertory, Laban analysis and musicality. Dance aesthetics and art history are offered for the second and third year students, at a time when they have sufficient knowledge of their new professional milieu to deepen their conceptual vision and take an interest in the social and cultural perspectives of their chosen mode of expression. At this level, students know enough of dance history to situate their own artistic identity within the broader construct of dance.

It would be pretentious to say that the students appreciate the theory courses. They are considered, for the most part, a necessary obligation. Some students wait until the end of their training to complete the theory courses, with the pretexts that they don't have enough time to do the required reading and writing in the midts of their practical training and artistic projects, While this decision delays their graduation, it does have some advantages. First, time has a good effect, and the students grow to understand the importance of conceptual learning. Secondly, this strategy encourages the talented students to pursue post-graduate studies to deepen their abilités in critical thinking and writing.

Finally, all students learn to appreciate the perspectives gleaned from a program which integrates theory and practice in professional training. They are better equipped intellectually to position themselves in regard to their professional choices. Their writing skills are honed for the challenging task of submitting requests for funding. They are more able to situate and defend their position within their cultural milieu. They have an understanding of their artistic affiliations and they can clearly determine what is that they want or do not want to do.

In this regard, it is pertinent to mention an interesting phenomenon emerging in the Montreal dance community. Many choreographers who are looking for new dancers mention that a university education is a valuable compliment to performance skills. Academic training helps young dancers develop critical thinking and the ability to structure ideas. This enhances their technical skill and depth of expression. Danielle Desnoyers, recently employed as a guest choreographer at UQAM for a three-year period, holds this view.

Teacher's skills

Theory teachers have, for the most part, multiple talents. The majority has danced or choreographed professionally. They later turned to the university with the desire to reorient their careers through the development of critical thinking. Their initial experiences in dance continue to influence their perspectives on the discipline as a whole, where dance analysis is rooted in dance practice. Beyond



the fact that these teachers have occupied a place in the dance landscape of Québec for some time, their diverse talents and their attachment to the “milieu” allows them to present theoretical notions in the context of the milieu, bolstered by actual facts. People like Iro Tembeck, professor of dance history, and Michèle Febvre, professor of aesthetics, were acclaimed stage dancers before becoming interested in theory. They each pursued their education to the completion of doctoral studies in dance.

In general, the first generation of professors in the dance department obtained their Ph.D.’s while teaching at the university. The second generation was hired on the same basis. Since the dance department has only 10 full time professors, it is essential that they have the ability to teach a variety of courses, At the same time, each professor is encouraged to pursue a particular area of specialization. Thus, studio teachers must have skills in technique, dance performance, and movement analysis. Somatic education teachers must master numerous methods and be able to apply this knowledge to technical training. Theory teachers must draw from their knowledge of dance performance, choreography and/or multi-media techniques. In short, each teacher must have numerous skills.

It is the dance department’s philosophy to remain connected to the professional artistic community. Our existence today is reflected, in part, by the partnership developed with the Agora de la danse, a theater which rents space in the UQAM dance building, which runs a seasonal program dedicated to promoting professional dance artists. Beyond our business relationship, our partnership has strengthened over the course of the years through a variety of projects. Their invited artists regularly give conferences or workshops to our students, and their international connections permit us to get involved in cultural activities that would not be possible otherwise. Our university does not provide sufficient funds to allow projects of such magnitude. The Agora de la danse has promoted conferences like the *Le Vooruit* to address aesthetic and cultural aspects of dance, thus providing an international forum for exchange among academics, artists and policy makers. Our dance department greatly benefits from the exposure generated by such projects.

The department’s approach is tributary to the strong ties with the dance community. Because there is only one professor for each area of specialization, each individual is responsible to assure academic, artistic and scientific links with the professional dance milieu and the communities related to the professional pursuits of the students. On an institutional level, our department is actively engaged in exchanges with the artistic milieu. This ensures that we stay connected to the reality outside of the university, in particular, with the constantly evolving preoccupations of the artists. These contacts assure a high level of pertinence and expertise within the university dance programs.

The dance department offers three regular degree programs: bachelors (B.A.), masters (M.A.), and doctoral level studies (Ph.D.). Accordingly, the professors teach at all three levels requiring a flexibility of pedagogic approaches, appropriate to the needs of each level of study. This ranges from highly sophisticated conceptual analysis to a practical approach which introduces the

field in broad and basic terms. The interesting thing is how these different levels of discourse are mutually enriching. It is important that they not lose sight of each other.

Thus, our students benefit from a broad spectrum of perspectives: theory is taught by teachers well rooted in practice and studio teachers are well versed in the conceptual parameters associated with their work. The ease with which the professor integrate theory and practice is a reflection of the belief in their complementarity, as well as the programmatic necessity to navigate frequently between the two. It is important to mention the contribution of the part-time teachers, who are particularly involved with the performing arts community as dancers, rehearsal mistresses, teachers and choreographers. They teach in the department on a regular basis, assuming the majority of the courses offered at the bachelor level. They also respect the cross-fertilization between theory and practice. This perspective, upheld collectively, gives the character and strength of our programs.

This presentation could lead you to believe that our academic university environment is favorable to our development and influence. This is not the case. As I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, we must continually justify our existence within the university, and it is essential that we be pro-active when combining pedagogy and politics.

We have succeeded in convincing the administration that our technique classes can accommodate only 20 students, when it is expected that a science teacher gives courses for 150 students at a time. We are able to juggle with the ratio of credits per contact hour, to allow a variety of studio courses. Our technique classes are obligatory, but not credited. This is a luxury, permitted exclusively in the dance department, to allow us to offer more courses within the 90-credits limit that we must respect at the bachelor level. Each privilege has been fought for, particularly hard seeing that we are the smallest department of UQAM. Each time we must document and justify our specific needs, while facing the animosity and rivalry of our colleagues in other departments. With each new challenge we must use our imagination to pro-actively conjugate the requirements of the university with the expectations of the professional dance milieu. Equally, we must use our imaginations when addressing pedagogy and theory, to demonstrate that dance is a discipline worthy of university level study.

Luckily, we are a part of the most prestigious fine arts faculties in Canada. Hand in hand with our colleagues in music, theater, visual art, design, and art history, the fine arts faculty of UQAM is able to bend the administrative structures to meet our needs. I believe that this united front on the part of the faculty is what allows us to continue to exist in the face of budget cuts and shifting political priorities. Often motivated by the same preoccupations (for example, to have artistic productions accepted as research), and a collective spirit, which, by the way, is not immune to internal squabbling, we promote our cause first, for the sake of the arts, and second, for the sake of the university. A good example of this is the doctoral program in interrelated arts, which is taught by professors from all departments of fine arts faculty.



I can safely say that the influence of UQAM's arts faculty is felt throughout Québec, as well as internationally. The quality of its teachers, researchers and artistic vision stands one of the best ambassadors of UQAM abroad. This is one of the best forms of publicity that the university could ever hope for.

So, one could say that the art of being indispensable, based on the quality of one's creative activities, remains one of the best weapons to assure the survival of the dance community within the cultural landscape of Québec. The international appreciation of our dance artists proves the point. As independent artists used to using our instincts and ingenuity to survive as artists within the professional milieu, we now apply these same skills within the university. We will remain diligent on our determination to forge the way as artists, teachers and researchers invested in our own creative process. This dynamic presence is what ultimately ensures our survival.

