

THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF CHARACTER DANCE GENRE IN THE EDUCATION OF A CHOREOGRAPHER IN LATVIA

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Abstract

Research in the fields of culture and arts is an important resource for the development of cultural and creative industries for the creation of new teaching methods, emphasizing the professional aspects of teaching. In professional dance education, teachers' theoretical and practical skills, alongside their body language, are of utmost importance and are honed to perfection. The study courses are primarily based on the accepted knowledge of history and cultural heritage, preserving these values as a continuation of traditions in the dance industry. The author has chosen the genre of character dance in professional higher education as the basis of this research. The author provides clear definitions and explanations of the character dance genre, non-national stage folk dance, and stage folk dance in the theoretical research. The background of the empirical study is the professional bachelor's program in Choreography of the Jāzeps Vītola Latvian Academy of Music, graduated by 283 students from 1977 to 2023. The research test sample consists of 9 graduates of the academy. Qualitative methodology was used in the data, – personalized interviews, – with content analysis at the final stage of the research. The main focus of the research is character dance, non-national stage folk dance in the education of choreographers / dance group leaders, the historical experience of the study course, the inheritance of the cultural heritage of dance, and the improvement of acquired skills in creative work. In the interviews dance industry professionals revealed their views on the vision of character dance, and the development of the non-national stage dance course in the study process today, justifying how essential the preservation of cultural heritage is in the Latvian stage folk dance industry in the interviews. The study emphasizes the significance of the historical legacy of the dance study course, pedagogical learning methods, and professional practical skills in the education of the dance industry. **Keywords:** *character dances, dance teacher, dance team leader, non-national stage dance, professional higher education, physical literacy.*

Introduction

Transferring dance and cultural heritage to the next generation is one of the most pressing issues among dance professionals today. Laws and pedagogical guidelines

actively seek achieving set goals in professional and higher education (Anspaks, 2004, 2006). It is important to promote the new generation's professional growth and long-term participation in sharing and preserving the cultural heritage (Treimane & Vinogradova, 2018, Vinogradova, 2018). The culture of the stage dance language is largely dependent on the professional knowledge acquired during one's studies. Professional contribution of the character dance genre to the culture of stage dance was paid the most attention within this research. The current research is takes into consideration on the contemporary pedagogical guidelines, the definition of the dance genre in the learning process, as well potential improvement of the students' growth opportunities at the initial stage of choosing a professional career (Spalva, 2006).

“The purpose of developing the guidelines of the dance industry is to confirm the value of the dance field in the cultural environment and to define the directions of action for diverse and sustainable development of the dance industry, competitiveness, to create a higher quality of life for everyone, preserving and developing Latvia's cultural capital and the creativity of the population, based on tradition, excellence, diversity, creativity and accessibility principles” (Latvijas Dejas padome, 2023, 3).

The specific educational requirements for the cultural and creative sectors are of significant importance and have an impact on the comprehensive development of a person. Cultural education systems are responsible for cultural sector specialists with very specific skills and knowledge, namely a wide variety of specialists, professionals, and teaching staff of various fields of performing arts (Kultūras ministrija, 2022). “Arts education can enhance our human capacity to perceive the experiences of others by feeling them empathically, or picking up on non-verbal cues” (UNESCO, 2022, 72).

One of the key aspects of this study is the research of a pedagogical conceptual model of the character dance genre in the education of dance group leaders. As the study aims to identify the professional contribution of the character dance genre in the learning of the stage folk dance course in the education of dance collective leaders, an analysis of the stage folk dance study course in the education of dance group leaders/choreographers was made. The research data was analysed in several thematic directions: the value of the past heritage, the necessity of the study courses nowadays and the courses' influence on the professionalism of young specialists in the field. The study also involves an in-depth analysis of the main guidelines which would be useful in updating the content of the contemporary study courses.

Theoretical Background

The educational institutions of the cultural education system should take into account the goals and tasks outlined in the “Cultural Policy Guidelines for 2022–2027 “Cultural State” and the “Educational Development Guidelines for 2020–2027 “Future Skills for the Future Society” approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in Latvia. “To ensure the sustainability of Latvian culture, that is, to guarantee that future generations have access to the Latvian cultural offer in no less quantity and quality than at present, it is essential

to strengthen the cultural education system of Latvia to ensure the revival of talent in Latvian culture. The goal of the cultural education system is professional cultural education oriented towards the development of talents, – involving a large number of students, – allowing to identify and purposefully develop young talents who will continue cultural education in the next levels of education” (Kultūras ministrija, 2022, 27).

The transfer of cultural education forms, skills, abilities, and knowledge, as well as the structuring of experience in the study process allows an individual to improve their experience through the body as a source of knowledge (Shilling, 2018). This would allow for a more meaningful education as a result of one’s movement being shaped by competent teaching staff, following the main guidelines for the improvement of physical literacy including: demonstration of movement during the study process; involvement of the synergistic cooperation of the dance element is accompanied by live music and its importance in the learning of each element; emphasis on the importance of improving physical literacy and the culture of aesthetic representation of the body (Eichberg, 2009); a study for more recent development of the course content in context of professional higher education. In the context of this study the importance of physical literacy in professional dance education is based upon the research of the character dance course. The course in question involves two important, yet vastly different definitions:

- 1) **Character dance** (fr. *danse de caractère*) – a dance genre in classical ballet, which is opposed to noble or academic dance and is related to the depiction of different nationalities or people’s characters in dance (Spalva, 2013).
- 2) **Stage folk dance** – a genre of performing arts, that has historically formed as a synthesis of folk dance and classical dance and which is characterized by the placement of the choreographic means of expression in time and space typical for folk dancing in the author’s interpretation (Spalva, 2018).

Both definitions meet within the framework of one study course in the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Music Academy (JVLMA) study program – choreographer. Throughout the period 1977–2023 the course had different titles.

Methodology

The research base consists of 9 interviews with the graduates of the JVLMA’s professional bachelor’s study program in the specialty of choreography. Respondent selection was based on multiple criteria. One would have to be: a dance industry professional with corresponding higher education in the dance; a leaders of a Latvian folk dance company that was previously active or is currently active in the industry (dance company tutors, Song and Dance Festival leaders and assistant leaders would also qualify); a creative choreographer in their professional career, as well as an active educator in the dance industry.

In order to make a historic contribution of higher dance-related education in the dance industry data collected from the whole duration of the selected period was accounted for within the framework of this study, which has not been attempted in Latvia before. The period selected for data collection was 1977–2023, from the very beginning of

the foundation of the choreography department to the graduation of the 29th graduate generation. The data collected provides a more accurate overall view of the local dance industry.

At the heart of the research is the analysis of character dance, folk stage dance, and non-national stage dance courses, which were historically implemented in the JVLMA study program in Latvia as a courses for choreographer specialty. Since 1977, 283 students have graduated from this program in full-time and part-time studies, obtaining qualifications in accordance with the study courses at the time. The qualitative approach based on personalized interviews with content analysis at the final stage was chosen as the methodology of this research.

The findings of this research made it possible to go beyond a specific analysed document and its content. The data analysis steps divided the narrative into text fragments with the respondent's statements, in which the meaning of the content was clarified by combining the respondents' experiences (Mārtinsone et al., 2011, Kroplis, Raščevska, 2010).

There were 26 interview questions prepared for the study. The questions were approved by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of Latvia. (2024.10.01. Nr. 71-43/13). All 26 questions prepared were open-ended semi-structured questions, encouraging a longer, more detailed answer from the respondents (Mārtinsone et al., 2011). This allowed the follow-up questions to be asked if necessary, making the interview less rigid. Interviews involved a five-stage process: preparation stage, first contact stage, orientational stage, substantive stage, and final stage (Mārtinsone et al., 2011). Every interview was concluded with a qualitative content analysis, which in its essence was recovering the main ideas of the interview content, such as the main guidelines of the respondents' recommendations for improving physical literacy in the transfer of dance cultural heritage.

Results

Initially, materials were collected from the State Archives of Latvia and the JVLMA archive and analysed. In the period from 1977 to 2023, 283 students graduated (206 of them are women, 77 are men) the course. Data analysis revealed both the study years with the highest number of graduates (20) in the 29 graduate generations, as well as the current downward trend in the number (3) of graduates of the choreography department. This trend is correlated with the beginning of the annual enrolment in the study program, which started in 2004. In the time period 1977–2004, the admission was only happening once every four years, offering an explanation of higher number of graduates. The study program was offered in both in-person and part-time formats. During this period, 229 (81%) individuals graduated in person while 54 (19%) graduated remotely. Year 1981 marked the graduation of the first qualified cultural education workers; the qualification title would change eight times through the history of the program. Second being a leader of a self-employed dance group, then cultural education worker, head of the dance group, dance team leader, dance teacher, choreographer specialty,

choreographer-pedagogue (professional in the ballet industry), dance teacher, and finally – choreographer. In the year 1998 the title of the qualification would get its final change, – to choreographer, – and remain unchanged ever since.

The purpose of the study helped to clearly define the criteria for the selection of respondents: leaders and assistant leaders of Song and Dance Festivals, and Children and Youth Song and Dance Festivals, currently active leaders of dance companies, and tutors. 9 professionals (3 men and 6 women) – Latvian stage folk dance industry professionals, group leaders, and tutors, – were selected. All of the professionals selected agreed to an interview either in person or remotely, for a deeper conversation of the topic of this research.

At the beginning of the interviews, each respondent briefly described their experience in the dance industry, confirming their professionalism and devotion to their chosen profession. 8 respondents out of 9 answered negatively, stating that the bachelor's diploma of professional education was not the reason for pursuing their profession, because their choice of profession was already made before beginning their studies at the JVLMA. The selected respondents have obtained various qualifications: 1 respondent qualification – Cultural education worker, head of the dance group; 1 respondent qualification – Dance teacher, leader of the dance team; 1 respondent qualification – Dance teacher; 2 respondents' qualification – Leader of a self-employed dance group; 4 respondents' qualification – Choreographer. This also showcases the changes in the titles of the obtained qualifications in the period from the founding of the Choreography Department and the changes in the title of the qualification by European education requirements.

Most respondents emphasized the importance of professional higher education in the dance industry both then and now. The acquired knowledge and confirmation of professional qualifications are very important in personal development in future careers when working as a leader of a dance company. The study program lasted four years, beginning at different times for each respondent and primarily conducted face-to-face.

One of the questions of the research was about the ever changing title of the study course (for example character dances, non-national dance, non-national stage dance, non-national stage folk dance), which was revealed in the archival material documents and respondents' answers. In the respondents' answers, various types of dances were mentioned, including non-national dance, character dance, folk dance, and USSR folk dance. During their interviews most of the respondents even mentioned several titles of this study course, while some, unfortunately, could not recall the exact title of it. In the archive transcripts, it was possible to conclude that a JVLMA lecturer had been teaching the course for a long time, which was also the reason the course was referred to using an alternative jargonism title in respondent answers. This was an important question to ask in order to get more in-depth knowledge from the respondents and find similarities in the course structure, which has character dance elements integrated into it, including the physical literacy improvement exercises by the barre. This similarity in the course structure was noted regardless of the course title.

The respondents were asked to describe the lecturer's contribution to their professional growth and creative work, and all of them unanimously praised the lecturer's contribution and competence, which then became the foundation for the students' competence. Their in-depth understanding of movement, creation of sequences of movements for their studies, and development of a creative vision for their daily work leading dance classes all were substantially influenced by the lecturer. For a more detailed insight, the respondents were asked to remember how many semesters the study course was taught. Most of the respondents, unfortunately, could not answer this question accurately, – some recalled attending the course during the entire period of studies, while others mentioned only taking the course for three semesters. In the search for an answer, a confirmation of the course being taught up to 7 semesters in the older programme was found in archive materials, while 3 semesters were mentioned in more recent materials.

It was concluded over the course of the interviews with the respondents, that the amount of practical classes within the programme has been reduced over time, which impacted the content of the course and allowed for less time to be spent understanding the way to perform a specific element.

The study aimed to investigate how professionals in the dance industry perceive the term 'character dancer', which was therefore included in the list of the questions the respondents were asked. The author would like to emphasize the definition of the category in Latvian digital encyclopaedia "... dances of other nations, dances of world nations and stage dances of nations, partly also classical dances (*demi – classique*) and character dances (*demi – character*)" (Martinsone-Škapare, 2018). The most memorable answers of the respondents are as follows: "Character dances, that you dance with character, instead of performing a dry *plié* session, for example, but you already jump in with some of that charm, some of that feeling of how you could dance in the nation corresponding to the example."; "... I would like to say that character dances are dances with a national characteristic of a particular group of people, reflecting the folk dance tradition, movement tradition and, very importantly, the musical aspect of that group of people. It is important to distinguish this particular national dance from other national dances."; "It is a dance based on content, not just form. The dancer, or choreographer, who creates that dance with the help of dance movement tries to reveal this content. The method can be different, but so that the viewer can read this story from what is happening on the stage. Both what the choreographer wanted and what the dancer is currently interpreting." Character dance styles and adapts traditional dance steps to academic technique (Martinsone-Škapare, 2018), which is an integral personification of stage folk dance's cultural heritage and a source of creative inspiration for choreographers of all time.

Respondents were asked about the inclusion of character dance elements into the study course during the practical lectures. The author wanted to update this aspect from today's point of view, to effectively structure the curriculum of stage folk dance course with the qualification dance team leader, specialising in Latvian folk dance in Latvian Culture College under Latvian Culture Academy. Through updating the instructions

and requirements for the performance of the curriculum, students would thus motivate students to improve the quality of professional dance growth and knowledge (Spalva, 2006). Respondents were requested to remember and tell about the structure of a practical lesson.

The answers allowed **identifying 4 main guidelines:**

1. Learning the elements of the ballet barre. (usually, structuring the teaching elements of the character dance genre at the bar: *plié, battement tendu, battement tendu jeté, rond de jambe par terre, flic-flac, strikes, pas tortilla, retiré, battement fondu, battement développé, grand battement jeté, technical exercises*).
2. Learning the elements in the middle of the dance hall.
3. Sequences of step combinations.
4. Dance etudes and dance improvement.

The structure of a character/stage dance class remained unchanged regardless of the course length and requirements. The deciding factor was always the teacher, who would collaborate with the students in order to find the most effective ways for the students to perfectly grasp the dance element.

The respondents emphasized the teacher's accurate demonstration of movements in class, due the goal of dance study courses being the improvement of students' physical literacy. The theoretical presentation of the study course, consisting of the chosen nation's nationality, history, and dance culture, provided a wider perspective on the nature of the movements. Historically, the materials available for the foreign stage dance course in Latvia were very limited, – respondents praised the lecturer's extensive knowledge on the matter, – while nowadays students have access to books, video materials, video analysis and error correction of self-created lessons, not to mention a wide range of digital possibilities for their research and development of a dance theme of their choosing.

The respondents were also asked about the importance of live accompaniment (concertmaster) and the necessity of cooperation during the practical dance classes in order to improve students' physical literacy within a study course, which is one of the most important questions within this study. The most vivid of the answers to this question was: "Extremely important. And I believe that only with a live concertmaster is it possible to learn these movements, and only in this way can you learn the dance at all." "I think it is very important. ... It is very important, so to speak, for students' sense of music, for cooperation in the learning process." "The (presence of a) concertmaster is of great importance. And for a good and knowledgeable person, I think a collaboration between a teacher and a concertmaster is a very big and important one." "Very important. It's not even up for debate." It is clear that live accompaniment is necessary in the process of learning the movement, so that it can be obtained at a slower pace in the initial stages and, as the movement is improved, it becomes possible to perform it according to the set goals and the nature of the given nationality.

The interview also included questions about the criteria for successful completion of the study course, the importance of movement accuracy, the importance of movement performance, as well as a question about the factor that contributed to all the aforementioned

requirements. The most important factors could be heard in the answers: “I’ll start with, maybe, atypical but in my opinion, one of the most important things was systematic work during classes. Systematic work, responsible work, as I mentioned the work culture here, was a very important aspect. And, and respect, respect for fellow students and the teacher. Then, of course, the improvement of the students here was evaluated, whether the instructions given in the daily training sessions were followed, or whether it was corrected. The teacher paid attention to very small nuances in the performance. They raised their hands for direction, height, well, very, very many different nuances. Well then, of course, the evaluation of the final exam was also important. The final exam was never one-piece, so there was both this practice lesson performed together, and the etudes prepared independently by the students. And then, of course, they were evaluated, the conformity to the character of the particular nation, the accuracy of the performance, and the cooperation with the concertmaster. Well, yes, that’s how I would say everything was evaluated in general, yes.”; “Well, I think it’s the attitude towards the instructor, the attitude towards the movement and your self-growth, how much you’ve developed.”

During the entire interview, the respondents repeated themselves answering several questions and duplicated the answers to previous questions, emphasizing the importance of the performance of the movement, the quality of the movement, and how important it is to continue working and improving skills for the professional preservation of the dance movement’s cultural heritage. The respondents agreed on the importance of precision of movement in the stage dance course of other nations, emphasizing the specificity of this study course in a way the dance movement read off of a stage. Respondents’ evaluation of the study course and its contribution to the improvement of the competence from the point of view of contemporary investment, provides a lot of important insights: “In general, I evaluate it as very valuable. It gave me such a broader perspective, at least in the context of European folk dances, at the nuances of dances of different nations. As a representative of Latvian stage folk dance, I found it very interesting.” “All this is very enriching, both as an educator and as a performer, no matter what you learn about or what you create. It is necessary, it broadens both their shared horizons and your skills as well.” The respondents unanimously spoke about the contribution of the study course to their professional and creative work, both every day in the dance hall and when choreographing.

In the final part of the interview, the respondents were asked to share their thoughts and vision of the future development of the study course, and how important it would be to preserve cultural heritage by future professionals. “They gave me a lot and I think that this is simply necessary at the university.” “Well, he (the teacher) doesn’t have a story about development (of the movement) at all, he just needs to a place in the base program. As an indelible place. Because we already, our culture, by nature, has already developed with all these foreign dance cultures. Yes!”; “I think that it is very important for everyone who studies this course. It is very important. If you have chosen the art of dance as your profession, then you have to learn, you must learn to evaluate and watch because we no longer live only in Latvia. You would learn to appreciate and understand other people’s dances, – you have to understand that. I think every professional should know this and

have this course.” “In my opinion, of course, I believe that this study course should not be an elective, but also a part of the course base, at least for one or two semesters. It can be studied by all choreographers, as I already mentioned, the benefits are plenty. It is especially taking into account the representation of different genres in choreography studies. Yes, if possible, it should be divided so that this is a mandatory part that should be learned by everyone, where at least in the European context, every local professional has to know and understand these basics... at least the basic principles of how to create a training session and how to perform it yourself. And then further, as a potential, this optional course could be useful, yes, maybe for those who directly choose, who are representatives of classical dance or also representatives of Latvian stage dance, where then they could look in-depth, look in-depth and work in depth with such nuances of performance. So that it would be easier for the graduates of this course to constantly include it in their training sessions.”; “All this is very enriching, both as an educator and as a performer, no matter what you learn about or what you create. It is necessary, it broadens both their (the students’) views and their skills as well.”; “It’s not just your (students’) body that gets trained, but you are improving as a person, as a dancer. But it is also knowledge, expanding the field. You can’t be narrow-minded in something, because there are already other requirements for that person, the graduate. And it is necessary. In the sense that they give you that information, it opens up your interest to see how it is done elsewhere.”

The recommendations of the respondents were to invite authentic dance lecturers as much as possible, to learn the movements of each nation from the source itself: “An authentic source, authentic character and mentality to convey through movement.” Respondents emphasized the necessity of this course for future professionals of Latvian stage dance with the comment that it is mandatory in the study program. “Therefore, I believe that a collective whose leader has this knowledge, how to teach at least the basic principles with proper explanation, that a collective would be a winner.”

Discussion

The study aims to identify the professional contribution of the character dance genre in the learning of the stage folk dance course in the education of dance collective leaders. The results of the study revealed the overall picture of the bachelor of study program at JVLMA’s Choreography department and its graduates preserving and transferring cultural heritage of the time. 283 students have graduated the programme in 29 graduate generations, of which the majority still is and will stay loyal to dance.

The 9 industry professionals selected as the respondents for the study revealed their opinions on the crucial parts of the character dance/stage folk dance study course, the role of external and internal influences in the acquisition of the course, the importance of the physical literacy improvement in the transfer of cultural heritage both during the study period and at this day and age as they take on a role of dance company leaders and tutors assuming responsibility in front of the large audience of the Song and Dance

Celebration. The human body is a subtle instrument in which each gesture has its own meaning. The improvement of this gesture, – movement, – is facilitated by the hard work in regular refinement of the character dance elements in the dance hall.

The respondents particularly emphasized the importance of live accompaniment by a concertmaster in dance classes, as one of the crucial contributing factors in quality education of new professionals. They also highlighted the need for diligence in the nuanced movement explanation on the teaching staff side in order to achieve the result of improving the students' physical literacy, – in combination with the students' hard work of course.

The results of the study also revealed the contribution of the character dance genre to the professional growth of Latvian stage folk dance company leaders during the years of their own studying when acquiring a degree. They were then in turn able to appreciate and teach the newer generation the importance of this knowledge and physical literacy in transferring cultural heritage, raising future dance teachers, dance company leaders, and dance industry professionals.

Conclusion

One of the most difficult stages of the research was to understand the change of the title of the Character dance study course from 1977 until today. The reasoning behind the changes has not yet been uncovered. Although its title has been changed over time, – Character Dance, Folk Stage Dance, Folk Stage Dance, Stage Folk Dance, Stage Dance of Other Nations, Dance of Other Nations, – regardless of its title, the structure of practical lessons within the study course remained consistent. All these title mix-ups prevented the interview respondents from clearly understanding the definition of the character dance genre, prompting them to give their own interpretation in their answers to interview questions.

All respondents agreed on the importance of the study course in the professional and creative work of a dance company leader. According to the respondents, improving theoretical and practical knowledge is an integral part of professional education studies. The respondents urge the study course organisers to put more emphasis on the following:

- 1) improvement of physical literacy in the study process;
- 2) cooperation with the concertmaster in the course of lectures, in order to give students an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the music and movement element, – i.e. synergy cooperation;
- 3) expanding the scope of artistic and creative activity;
- 4) preservation of cultural heritage and sustainable development of dance;
- 5) maintaining a high level of competence in the field of the future dance company leaders.

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