The Impact of COVID-19 on Dancers

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COVID-19 and the Impact It's Had on Dancers

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School of Communication

**Honors Research Project**

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*The Honors College*

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Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................2
Goals and Objectives.......................................................................................................................3
Methodology...................................................................................................................................4
Outcomes.........................................................................................................................................4
Academic Impact.............................................................................................................................5
Literature Review.............................................................................................................................6
Reflection.........................................................................................................................................13
References......................................................................................................................................15
Appendix: Link to Documentary.....................................................................................................16
Introduction

In March 2020, the world shut down due to a global pandemic caused by COVID-19. Every single person was impacted by the pandemic and we are still discovering the long lasting effects to this day. The arts community was a group that really struggled during the pandemic, as so many of the people in this field rely on in-person interactions and live audiences. They are still finding ways to recover and get back to where they were before COVID-19. Arts students had their education put on pause and were unable to take their classes in a way that helped to progress their skillset.

Dancers in particular, were a group of people that were not able to participate in their art form in the way that they were always able to. They were not able to go into the studio or work with others. They fully lost their access to the space where they had the room to dance. Some people had the extra space to use for dance at their home, but it was not common. Dancers were stuck in small spaces that were not built for dance. They were not able to train to their fullest extent and many dancers felt themselves regress in their skillset. Performances were canceled and classes were held on Zoom. The connection that many dancers felt with one another in the studio was gone.

Now, we are living in a post COVID world, but we are still seeing the impacts that it had on our society, and in this case, the dance world. The questions I want to inquire about are, how is COVID still impacting dance? Were there changes in teaching styles? Do people have more awareness of dancers' personal space now? How did the lack of performances impact dancers? Were there positive impacts to the dance community that came out of the pandemic? These questions, and many more, can be asked to learn more about the impact that COVID-19 had on dancers.
Goals and Objectives

For my project I made a documentary to show how COVID-19 impacted dancers and their ability to learn and grow. One of the main goals of my project was that I wanted to show how much dancers struggled with learning while they had to deal with the pandemic restrictions. Did learning at home set them back as compared to learning in the studio? I also wanted to show how there are different types of learners and how COVID-19 affected the way people learn, since quarantine limited many people to only one way of learning. Dancers had to get used to virtual learning, dancing in masks, being isolated, no partner work, and no performances. I also wanted to have the people I interviewed, reflect on their life during the pandemic and see what they’ve learned and implemented into their lives.

The documentary includes five interviews, three from dancers and two from dance teachers. I interviewed dancers that were in different stages of schooling when the pandemic hit. Some were in their final years of high school and others were just starting college. I interviewed two professors from the University of Akron because I wanted them to explain how dance has been impacted on a collegiate level and the changes that they’ve noticed. I also asked for footage of dancers in the studio from those that I interviewed to show how learning in the studio can be more beneficial than outside of the studio.

After watching my documentary, I want people who have no experience with dance and the arts, to empathize and connect to dancers. I especially want older people who didn’t experience the pandemic during their fundamental learning years to see how the pandemic impacted the younger generations. The pandemic didn’t just affect dancers while it was going on. It is still affecting them to this day and it always will.
Methodology

I interviewed two dance teachers who had to deal with the change in instruction during the pandemic because I wanted to know what their thoughts were on how the younger dancers were able to learn. Do they feel like dancers were not able to progress in their learning? Were there any positives that they were able to find from their time dealing with the pandemic? How have they changed as teachers post pandemic?

I interviewed three dancers who dealt with the shift of in person learning to virtual. I wanted to know if they feel like they progressed in their dance abilities during the pandemic or if it hindered them in any way. What events do they feel like they missed out on in their dance career? Did learning from home work for them or were they not able to do that at all?

I was a part of the graduating high school class of 2020 and one of the dancers that I interviewed also graduated high school that year. I chose to interview them so that they could share their experience of graduating high school virtually while also missing out on their senior year of dance, including recitals and competitions.

I started organizing interviews in Fall 2023 and began filming in Spring 2024. I originally wanted to have filming started much earlier, but I needed more time to get experience and training with certain equipment that I was not familiar with, like audio and lighting, to ensure that everything would go smoothly for the people that I was interviewing.

Outcomes

I wanted to spread awareness on how the arts were an area that were negatively impacted by the pandemic and are still dealing with the aftermath. Dance programs are often an afterthought, unlike most sports programs, especially at colleges. I think that people need to be
more aware of how many setbacks the arts had during lockdown. During the interviews, I also discovered that there were several positives that came out of the pandemic, like teachers learning to have more empathy for their students and their health.

A lot of people focused on how students were not able to learn to their full extent when they had to be taught virtually, but not as many people talked about how students who were in arts programs were affected. There was not really a good way to have students go to art, theater, or band class, while they were at home. This same thing occurred with most extracurricular activities that students were a part of. This project is focused on dance, but the people I interviewed did briefly touch on education as a whole and the social interaction that students missed out on. I think that these areas impact dance and are an important part of the overall conversation.

**Academic Impact**

This project helped my undergraduate career in many ways. First, it helped me with video editing and filming. I have been taught how to use Premiere so I used that to edit all of my footage. I have a decent amount of experience with filming content, but I learned a lot by having to set up the equipment and figuring out how to do it well. I got to experiment with setting up the camera, lighting, and audio. I also got to use my interviewing skills that I have been taught.

I am a dance minor, so it helped me to become more educated on how the dance industry and studios were impacted during COVID-19. Dance is a huge part of my life and my identity, so I hoped that this project would help me gain a bigger appreciation for what everyone had to go through during the pandemic and it did just that.

Something that I want to do with whatever career I end up in, is that I want to shed light on issues that specific groups deal with that aren’t talked about a lot. This project gave me
experience with sharing a narrative of a specific group. This project was a great learning experience for me and it will help me in my future career.

I will definitely upload this documentary to YouTube, but as of right now I don’t have any other plans for it. I would love to show this documentary to the dancers here at the dance program, but also possibly show it to a group of people who aren’t as familiar with dance. I want to share this message to as many people as I can.

**Literature Review**

The main reason why people create documentaries is because they want to share their message with people. They want to reach as many people as they can and they want these people to connect with what they have to share. Even if those who watch the documentary have no personal real life connection with the matter being discussed, the creator of the documentary still wants them to be able to find something to relate to.

A documentary aims to inform people and give them accurate information on the subject of the piece. There should be no bias weaved into the making of a documentary and those watching should be free to make their own decisions and form their own opinions on the topic after they are done watching. There are a lot of elements to making a documentary that the filmmaker will need to consider.

This literature review will discuss what goes into filming a documentary, ethical responsibilities when making a documentary, what kind of video and audio equipment is required, and how COVID-19 impacted dancers. More specifically, it will cover how the lockdown impacted a dancer’s ability to learn and how dance organizations were also impacted.
Filming a Documentary

There are many things to consider when it comes to filming a documentary. In the book, *Making documentary films and reality videos: A practical guide to planning, filming and editing documentaries*, author Barry Hampe (2007) states that, “...a documentary film must be an act of communication between the filmmaker and the audience” (p. 10). This is why it is important to make sure that a documentary is able to connect to those who watch it. Even if the topic is very specific, you want to be able to reach those who do not personally relate to it, and you want them to connect to it in some way.

The goal of a documentary is to shed light on an issue that has not received a lot of attention or maybe the subject of the documentary is something very important to the filmmaker. No matter what the documentary is about, you need to find a way for it to connect with all types of people, without bias. A documentary needs to be factual, that is what makes it different from other types of films. There are some films that are retellings of real life events, but they are not documentaries because they do not involve the people who actually went through the events. They instead star actors who play the role of someone that is based off of a real person. The events in these films are often dramatized to make the events more intense or interesting. A documentary needs to stray from doing that and make sure it sticks to the truth.

Ethical Responsibilities

Making a documentary comes with a lot of ethical responsibilities. Hampe (2007) also goes on to say that, “...truth in documentary is something that every viewer should worry about and every documentarian should practice conscientiously. I am convinced that truth is the ethical and moral imperative that sets documentary filmmaking apart from other kinds of film and video projects” (p. 11). It is important that a documentary is sharing the facts and not putting in a
personal bias because then it is no longer a documentary. The purpose of a documentary is to provide people with the facts surrounding the topic and then the viewers can decide what their personal opinion will be on the matter. You still want to connect to the audience, but you want to do that by giving them facts and not opinions.

In a journal article titled, “Ethical Responsibilities to Subjects and Documentary Filmmaking” by Ellen Maccarone (2010) she states that, “A documentary film is one that attempts to tell a true story, often from a particular perspective, and tries to elicit a feeling of what the real event or person was like” (p. 195). Since there are times where you are not able to film the events as they are happening, when you are making a documentary, you want to stay as true to the events as you can and you want to create the same emotion that occurred in real life.

**Video Equipment**

One of the most important parts of filming a documentary is what kind of video equipment you choose to use. It is crucial to have a good camera that is used for filming. In the book *Single-camera video production*, author Robert Musburger (2010) says that, “When you first decide on which camera to use for your project, you are faced with five choices: standard-definition (SD) or high-definition (HD), either 4:3 or 16:9 frame ratio, interlace or progressive scan system, the frame resolution at 480, 720, or 1080 lines, and the type of camera” (p. 36). There are so many different types of cameras to choose from that it can be hard to narrow it down to what works for your specific project. Musburger (2010) later goes on to talk about HDV cameras and he says that these cameras can be used for documentary making since, “HDV offers a compressed high-definition format as an inexpensive means of producing HD programs“ (p. 37). It is the camera that makes the most sense for documentary filming, especially when it
comes to price. There is no need to use the biggest, most expensive camera out there to film a documentary.

Technology has advanced so much in just the past few years. It is insane what we are able to do at home that used to be very difficult and time consuming when cameras and videotaping first came around. In the book *Directing the documentary* by Michael Rabiger (2015) he discusses this topic and says that,

Today with a home computer we can edit, create text and titles, freeze, slow-motion, or reverse our footage, as well as make color and contrast changes. We can not only weave together sound and picture but also apply the full range of contemporary image manipulation. (p. 56)

Since this edition of the book was written in 2015, there have been even more advancements in what we can do from home when it comes to video editing. We can even edit full documentaries from a laptop. Editing has become much more accessible to more people, but it is still a skill that takes time to gain proficiency in.

**Audio Equipment**

Video is also a much better way to reach people these days, but there are a lot more technical elements that you have to consider when you are producing a video than if you were writing an article. It is best to get external microphones when recording audio. Jeremy Roschelle (2000) states in the article “Choosing and using video equipment for data collection” that, “Camcorder microphones pick up noise from all directions, and the ideal location for getting a picture is hardly ever the ideal location for getting sound” (p. 4). You don’t want to use the microphone that is in your camera because they tend to be lower quality than an external microphone would be. There are three types of mics that people typically use: pressure zone
microphone (PZM), super cardioid directional (shotgun) microphone, and wireless lapel microphone. They each have their own purpose and which one you choose, depends on where and what you are filming. According to Musburger (2010), “The most useful mics are unidirectional mics” (p. 82). This is because they only pick up sound from the end of the microphone. An example of an unidirectional mic is a shotgun mic.

It is recommended to have an audio mixer if you are using more than one microphone at a time. The mixer will help to adjust volumes and help with other basic functions. When recording, you want to make sure that the microphones are as close to the participants as they can possibly be and reduce as much ambient noise as you can (Roschelle, 2000, p.5). It is important that the audio for a documentary is high quality because lower quality audio will make it seem unprofessional.

Dance and COVID-19

The pandemic affected everybody in so many different ways. One group in particular that it really affected was dancers and the dance community. Just like how students had to get used to online lectures, dancers had to get used to zoom dance classes. This caused a lot of issues with dancers and their ability to learn while out of the studio. They are still seeing the effects of COVID-19 on dancers and their level of skill progression before and after the pandemic. Dance is designed to be done in a studio setting so there was a huge learning curve that teachers had to overcome in order to teach from their homes. Not all students have enough space in their homes to dance or the access to the proper technology.

In the Research in Dance Education article “Healing minds, moving bodies: measuring the mental health effects of online dance during the COVID-19 pandemic” (Rugh et al., 2022) it is discussed how the, “Use of breath, close physical proximity, and tactile cues are some of the
unique facets that draw many individuals to seek out and explore a dance training practice, both on an amateur and a professional level. In March of 2020, these aspects were abruptly removed from the lexicon of dance educators worldwide aslockdowns became necessary to curb the spread of COVID-19” (p. 1). Dancers were no longer able to go to the studio to learn, but instead they were stuck in their homes, as was everyone else at the time. Since dance is such a social art form, people had to figure out how dancers could still find a way to “dance” with each other, even if it was online. The article also says that, “The transition to virtual teaching has presented a unique challenge as dance educators learn how to use a two-dimensional format for a skill that is three-dimensional in nature” (p. 2). Of course, there were issues that arose when teachers moved to fully online classes. Just like how a lot of students struggled to learn when they were in online classes for school, people also struggled to learn dance online. This caused a lot of students to stay stagnant in their technique and some people even felt like they regressed during the lockdown.

In the article “The Impact of COVID-19 on the Field of Dance: Part II” by Dance/USA (Segundo, S2021) it is said that,

Many dance individuals turned to offering virtual classes and rehearsals, to keep in shape and augment their income. While many are returning physically to work, there are many that have not been able to, or that are working on a hybrid (virtual/in person) basis. This lack of connection for an art form that is steeped in physical connection, and the incredible losses experienced, has led to the number one critical concern for individuals: access to mental health resources. (p. 10)

Mental health was something that most people struggled with during the pandemic and it is important that there are resources being shared for those who need it. Dancers were among the
groups of people who voiced how much they were in need of mental health resources. When your entire job is based on whether you get to perform or teach, it can be stressful to wonder when you will be able to go back to doing that. The dance field were among the first groups that halted performances and in person activities when the pandemic began. They were also one of the last groups to resume live, in person activities. While sporting events and schools went back in person, the performing arts were not cleared to have performances in person until months later.

It was not just the dancers that struggled during this time, but dance making organizations also suffered when it came to ticket sales and the types of productions that they were able to put on. Dance/USA (2021) also states that, “Since March 1, 2020, 59 dance companies that reported revenues from ticket sales in prior years, reported a decline in ticket sales of more than 5%, with 44 of them experiencing an average loss of 74% relative to the prior season” (p. 2). It is also stated that there was a 77.4% decrease in live productions, a 75.3% decrease in holiday productions, a 93% increase in outdoor production, a 478% increase in pre-recorded productions, a 252% increase in virtual productions, and a 63% decrease in other productions. Dance/USA (2021) states that, “With the declines in live and holiday productions and the increases in pre-recorded and virtual productions, the overall impact on number of productions as reported was a decrease of 29% relative to the pre-covid era (2018-2019)” (p. 2). This decline in ticket sales and number of performances, greatly impacted the dance community.

There are many dance organizations who are still dealing with the impacts caused from the pandemic and they will be for many years to come. There were a lot of studios that had to permanently shut down after the pandemic since they were not able to hold classes for over a year. Costume prices also increased and with that so did tuition. This has led to more and more
people deciding that they did not want to come back to dance because they could no longer afford it. Younger dancers are not being enrolled into classes anymore because their parents can not pay for classes after dealing with financial loss during the pandemic. Dance organizations hope to make their classes more accessible because of this reason. They want everybody to be able to experience dance, but right now, they need to focus on recovering from what they lost over the pandemic. It is going to be a long journey for many dancers and dance organizations until they are able to return to where they were before the pandemic.

**Reflection**

The making of this documentary has been a huge learning experience for me. I had to research how I was going to go about making this documentary and then I had to learn how to use all of the equipment that was needed to film everything. There was a much more significant learning curve when it came to using the equipment than I had expected. I spent some time getting familiar with everything before I interviewed people and I’m really glad that I made that decision. It was a smooth filming process and all of the interviews went well. I was filming everything by myself though which was tricky at times. I was able to mount the camera on a tripod, set the zoom (audio recorder) up on a chair, and hold the boom mic while I read the interview questions off of my laptop that was also sat on a chair. It was quite the setup, but I was able to make it work. Ideally, at least one or two more people would have made this production run more professionally and faster, but I think I was able to work well with just myself.

I am very grateful to the people who gave their time to be interviewed for this documentary, Molly Bagatto, Avery Brockmeyer, Christine Howe, Isabelle Howerton, and Julie Schullo. Without them and their wonderful words I would not have been able to make this documentary into what I truly wanted it to be. So much of this narrative was reliant on the people
who were interviewed so I’m so thankful that the people I interviewed were able to articulate their thoughts in a way that shed light on why this topic is important.

I hope that this documentary is able to connect with everyone who experienced life during the pandemic and what quarantine was like. I think that hearing from dancers that were impacted by COVID-19 will allow non-dancers to understand dancers, and people in the arts, on a deeper level and truly see how much of an impact the pandemic had on dancers and their community.
References


Appendix

COVID-19 and the Impact It's Had on Dancers

https://youtu.be/CuMuZJOXz5A?si=hEmgJ1SDQVQqcx7F