

## How to Choreograph Dances for Salvation Army Events

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“There is no wrong way! Nothing is as rewarding as seeing students at any level bring a concept through the creative process under your guidance. When you make a game or puzzle of the dance construction process, you and your students benefit from a creative experience that challenges critical thinking skills and the artistic impulse.”

– *Building Dances* by Susan McGreevy-Nichols and Helene Scheff (1995, pg. v)

### Gathering Information

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#### **Purpose**

- What is the goal of your dance?  
(Tell a story? Draw a crowd? Share a message? Call to worship?)
- Who is the target audience?
- What style of dance will speak to the audience the clearest?
- What style of dance will work best for your dancers?
- What is the theme of the event?
- What type of mood are you trying to create?

#### **Space**

- What are the dimensions of the performance space?
- Are there any obstructions to the audience’s view or in the space itself?
- Is the performance space higher than the audience, or is it on the floor?
- What type of flooring will the performance take place on?
- Where will rehearsals be held?
- Are there items in the performance space that will need to be moved out of the way before the dance?  
Ex. Chairs, podiums, microphones . . .
- Are there curtains or wings?
- Is there a backstage crossover to stage right and stage left?
- Where are the entrances to the stage? (side, front, back . . .)
- How many isles are there in the house?

#### **Tip**

Make a sketch of the stage entrances and obstacles. Try to create those dimensions wherever you are rehearsing.

#### **Time**

- When is the event?
- At what point in the program will your dance be performed?
- How long is your piece expected to be?
- How many rehearsals are needed?

#### **Tip**

It usually takes between one and two hours to produce one minute of performance-ready choreography, so plan your rehearsal schedule accordingly.

“Teachers must schedule practice and rehearsal opportunities to promote optimum learning, continued motivation and a sense of self-satisfaction.”  
- Judith A. Gray, *Dance Instruction* (1989 pg74)

## Flow

Your dance will likely take place as part of a larger program. It is imperative to tailor the moments before and after the dance so that everything flows smoothly, without distractions.

- Find out what is right before and after your piece.
- Discuss with leadership what transitional needs you have.  
Ex. How the dancers get on and off stage.
- Have dancers move into place during a time that is not distracting for the audience, but also flows smoothly without any dead air.
- Prepare dancers for the possibility of either applause or silence after the piece.
- Confirm that any obstructions to your space will need to be moved early (perhaps during the last verse of a congregational song) as to avoid a long pause before your piece begins.
- Consider avoiding announcements or introductions directly before the dance. If your piece needs some explanation, consider using program notes or power point to help you out.

## Music

### Choosing Music

When choosing music for your piece, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does it inspire me?
- Is it already over played?
- Is it effective for my target audience?
- Will I mind hearing it a hundred times?
- Is it less than 3 minutes and 30 seconds? If not, can I edit it on garage band?

#### Tip

If you're having trouble finding a song that fits the theme of your event, try typing in key words into the itunes search bar.

### Editing Music

Beginner dancers and novice choreographers should aim to keep performance pieces at about three minutes and thirty seconds in length. An audience has a short attention span, and the goal is to connect them to the Father, not make them restless in their seats. If your song is too long, turn to music editing software such as Garage Band. Take the time to edit your music properly and have a friend listen to your final cut. It's very unsatisfying for an audience to watch a dance and have the music jump in the middle of a musical phrase. Be wary when editing music that's widely known, as your audience will likely be unsatisfied to not hear it the way

#### Tip

General go-to formula for cutting length from songs: verse, chorus, bridge, and final chorus.

they've memorized it. Avoid mixing multiple songs together into one song unless you're a stellar music editor. If Garage Band is beyond your skill set, make a friend who can help you out!

"It is better to have your audience hungry for more than to leave them wishing there was less." William A Draves, *How To Teach Adults* (pg. 67)

### **Working With Live Music**

Live music is both a privilege and a challenge. Using live music means there are now more leaders to coordinate with. Dance requires much more rehearsal time than music, and one bar out of place will severely impair your dancers. To avoid problems during your dress rehearsal with the band, use the following steps as a guide to assist your success:

- Ask for a live recording of EXACTLY what the band will be playing. This can easily be done on a cell phone and emailed to you. (You will likely not receive this until very close to the performance time, after the band has gathered to rehearse.)
- While you're waiting for the live recording, ask the conductor to help you choose a version on itunes (or CD) that is the closest to what you'll be working with. Have the conductor point out on sheet music or lyric sheet what may sound different on the day.
- Insist on more dress rehearsal time than you would need for a recorded song.
- Establish early on with the conductor and leadership where everyone will be on the stage. This will help avoid any last minute changes.  
Ex. Chorus, band, microphones . . .
- During rehearsals with the band, be in communication with the conductor. Speak up if the tempo feels too slow or too fast and it's affecting the dancer's ability to move or damaging the overall feel of the piece.

### **Brain Storming**

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#### **Start With The Lyrics**

Print out the lyrics of your song choice and listen to it as many times as you can endure.

In your head:

- Listen for sounds that happen outside the melody.
- Try to separate the instruments in your head and hear each part individually.
- Visualize the dancers you're working with moving to the music.
- Allow yourself to feel the music, and escape into emotion.

#### **Tip**

Copy and paste your lyrics to a word doc entering them on the page so there is space on both sides of the words for your ideas and notes.

#### **Tip**

Download the ASL Dictionary app on your phone for quick and easy access to hundreds of sign language demonstrations.

On your lyric sheet:

- Circle or underline important words.
- Note changes in mood and tempo.
- Write down emotions the music provokes.
- Mark musical hits.
- Note the time signature. (Are you counting in 6's or 8's.)
- Note of the climax of the song.
- Count the length of musical breaks between sections of the song.
- Sketch group formation ideas.
- Sketch any visualizations you have.
- Circle or underline words you want to look up in American Sign Language.

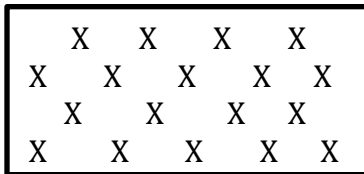
## Creating Appealing Stage Pictures

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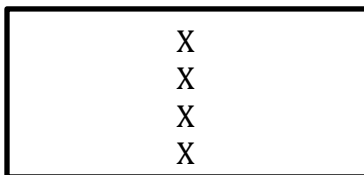
### Formations

Spread out your dancers in a way that is pleasing to the eye, and reflective of the message of your piece. Using a variety of formations is key to keeping the audience engaged.

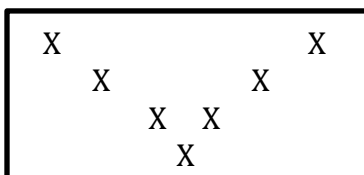
Here are some commonly used formations:



**Horizontal Lines** - A simple, centered formation that accommodates for large groups filling every inch of the stage. The audience is invited to look all around, not being drawn to one particular dancer.

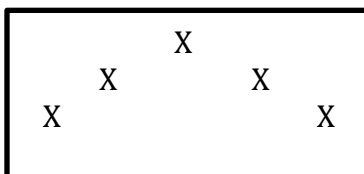


**Vertical Line** - A formation usually used to create quick illusions from behind the down stage dancer.

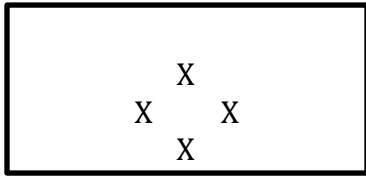


**V** - An aggressive formation that facilitates a forward momentum and a sense of urgency. The audience eye is down front and center.

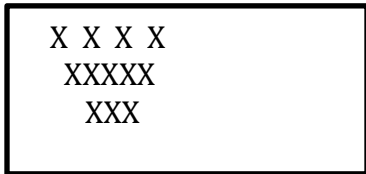
**Wedge** - Center area filled with dancers.



**Inverted V** - A passive formation that beckons the audience deeper inwards. The eye is softly drawn towards the center dancer. Usually seen centered on the stage.



**Circle** - A rounded formation that creates an easy route for smooth, curved pathways, a sense of togetherness and unity. Large groups can add concentric circles outwards.



**Clump** - A seemingly unorganized grouping with taller dancers in the back creating a sense of close oneness between the movers.

“When you dance, your purpose is not to get to a certain place on the floor. It’s to enjoy each step along the way.”  
- Wayne Dyer

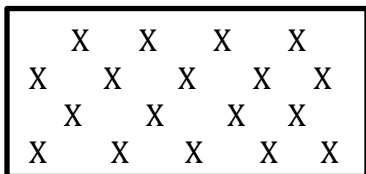
### Formation Transitions

Transitions between formations are just as important as the formations themselves. Get creative about your transitions so your dancers are never just ‘getting to the next formation’. Use the transition as part of your choreography.

### Spacing

Spacing refers to where a dancer is placed on stage and the distance between dancers within a formation. Generally speaking, the audience likes to see all the dancers, and overall, all the dancers like to be seen. The best way to establish clean spacing is by giving your dancers clear points of reference to check themselves with.

- Use tape to mark center stage with an X
- Use tape to mark down stage center with a T
- Use the dancers themselves as points of reference for other dancers



**Windows** - Each dancer is standing in the space (or windows) between the two dancers both in front or behind them.

### Use the Whole Space

Make use of every inch of the space you have available. Salvation Army dancers are often asked to perform in cramped quarters, so utilize what you have. Even if stairs or pillars seem like an obstacle try to integrate them into your piece. It’s unsatisfying for the audience to watch a dance that takes place on only one portion of the stage. Be creative and find new ways for bodies to move around and bring your idea to life.

## Center The Dancers

Young dancers especially can get lost or overwhelmed when performing in a new space. Spend some time focusing on where the center of the room is and who is standing center. During rehearsals, always establish center, and use dependable dancers in the center positions to keep the group on target. For an audience, watching a dance performed just off of center is a major distraction, so from day one make sure to press the importance of this awareness.

### Tip

Take a moment to sit in the audience, and see what their perspective is. If the dancers are performing on the same level as the audience is sitting, none of the foot work or low choreography will be seen, so in that case, keep the choreography high and lifted.

## Levels

The term 'levels' refers to the different height variations available on the stage. Simply using the actual height of each of your dancers is one way to utilize levels. A rule of thumb is: taller dancers in the back and shorter dancers in the front. Feel free to mix it up, but following this rule does keep every participant visible to the audience at all times. Your piece should incorporate as many levels as possible. Jumps, and movements with arms raised for high levels and rolls and floor work for low levels. Variety is key. Try utilizing steps or drama cubes when available.

## Creating Appealing Choreography

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### Use The Whole Body

A common pitfall of the novice choreographer is to end up with three minutes of 'arm dancing'. There is a vast difference between *dance* and *actions*. *Dance* utilizes the whole body, the whole stage and the whole piece of music, whereas *actions* are simply arm gestures that go along with the lyrics. Anyone can do actions, but dance takes discipline and skill.

"The human body is three dimensional . . . Nothing dehumanizes movement so completely as the flat, linear design."

-Doris Humphrey *The Art of Making Dances* (1959 pg.160)

### Dynamics

Utilize opposition and contrast as much as possible throughout your piece. The use of dynamics is the spice of dance that catches the eye and draws the audience in. Three minutes of slow, lyrical, flowing movement becomes dull, and three minutes of constant sharp, quick edgy steps can feel frantic. Remember though, that too much contrast is wearing on the eye. The art is finding the right balance.

Here are some examples the use of dynamics:

- High movements mixed with low movements
- Slow moving choreography next to fast moving choreography

- Steps associated with one style of music used in contrast to a different style of music
- Smooth movements contrasted with sharp movements
- Moving from unison into individual solos
- Utilizing musical 'hits' in your song
- Movements timed to the lyrics, and then timed to the beat
- Movements that don't match the rhythm, but last as long as a mood is held
- Moments of acting, allowing the dancers to explore their feelings, without any choreographic flourishes while the music continues on

### **Motivation**

Movement without motivation is a lifeless series of steps that, frankly, nobody wants to watch. Find your motivation and communicate it to your dancers throughout the process so they have a clear understanding of the direction of the piece.

"It (choreography) begins with the most important step - the decision as to the basic idea from which the dance will spring. All else flows from this."  
 - Doris Humphrey *The Art of Making Dances* (1959, pg. 31)

An audience wants to see humanity prevailing through difficulty, not indulging in the agony of it. If your dancers are to experience toil and trouble during your piece, remember to bring them out of it, and quickly. Nobody wants to watch characters loitering in pain. It is far more compelling to watch characters pressing on and prevailing through it.

### **Theme/Motif**

Make a decision and stick to it. Tell your dancers the idea of the piece and allow all your motivation to be filtered through that. Aim for a motif; maybe it's a step that's repeated, or a style of movement that's used throughout. It could be as small as a head turn or as big as a jump. Start with your subject and discover movements that occur naturally within your theme. Establish a set of choreographic rules and indicate the theme at the beginning then, choose specific moments to bend or break those rules. Your audience will feel clever as they begin to follow your creative line, and surprised when you break it.

### **Props**

A prop can be a great tool to explore an idea, create symbolism or clarify murky plot. They can, however, often end up looking meaningless and distracting.

If you choose to use a prop in your piece:

- Use it throughout the entirety of the dance, not just during one section.
- Make sure it is functional, not decorative.
- Take time to workshop the prop with all of your dancers. They might explore a use for it you hadn't thought of.

- After using the prop, discarding it haphazardly on the floor is a distraction, so make sure it's placement from the beginning to the end of your piece is a part of the dance.
- Limit using a variety of props unless it's adds to your piece.
- Really ask yourself if the piece NEEDS the prop, or if it could be done just as effectively without it.

### Repeating Chorus Choreography

Repeating the same choreography every time the chorus is repeated can be down right boring. Audiences don't like predictability. Avoid repeating choreography if possible, but, if you are working with small children or have limited rehearsal time, there are a few ways to repeat choreography without making it repetitive.

**Tip**  
Often, it's a strong choice to make your final chorus the biggest, with use of unison or added difficulty.

The first time we see the chorus, make it simple and clear. When you have to repeat it, try one or more of the following ideas:

- Add flourishes/difficulty to repeated choreography
- Change the direction/formation of the repeated choreography
- Do the repeated choreography in cannon
- Use a soloist for the first chorus, and add dancers for every subsequent chorus
- Have different sections of the formation perform different parts of the chorus

"Life does not repeat exactly; no two moments are alike, similar as they may seem."  
- Doris Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances* (1959 pg. 151)

### Start Well and End Well

Drill the opening section and your final moments the most. Both the audience and dancers appreciate starting well and ending well. Your ending doesn't need to be dazzling, it just needs to be thoroughly thought through long before you get there.

"The theatre is a place where lasting impression is not only the strongest one but tends to color the audience's opinion of the whole – which is perhaps not fair, but it is a fact."  
- Doris Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances* (1959 pg. 162)

### Common Choreographic Tools

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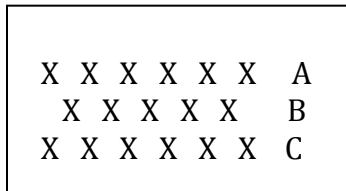
#### Unison

Unison occurs when every dancer does the same thing at the same time. This is a simple, powerful and effective choice, but is not to be used for an entire piece. Always find times to break out of unison and add variety.



## Cannon

Cannon occurs when a dancer starts a step or series of steps, and then one by one, all the dancers join in one after the other. This can be as simple as doing a kick one at a time until everyone down the line has done a kick, or you can use a whole phrase of choreography where each dancer starts four or eight counts after the dancer before them. This will look like what is known in the music world as a 'round' as the dancers who started first will end first.



### Lines

If you have more than one line of dancers, there are many ways to utilize your formation.

**Example A)** Line A dances phrase 1 while lines B and C are frozen. Then, line B dances phrase 2 while lines A and C are frozen. Then, line C dance phrase 3 while lines A and B are frozen. Then, to bring it all together, have everyone dance phrase 4 in unison.

Time Saver: Each of these phrases could be repeated choreography.

**Example B)** Each line dances the same movement in cannon, starting with all of line C, then, four counts in, line B joins in from the beginning of the phrase of movement, then, four counts after that, line A joins in from the beginning of the phrase of movement.

**Example C)** Each line does the same choreography but alter each group slightly based on how far up stage they are. So, line A would do the choreography high up, with a jump or a kick added, line B would do the choreography mid-range, and line C would do it low to the ground, perhaps on their knees or with a roll.

Time Saver: Each line performs one at a time.

## Solos

Solos are a great way to utilize skilled or particularly emotive dancers at poignant moments of the piece.

**Example A)** Verse one begins with a soloist while all dancers are in a tableau. Slowly, one by one, each dancer joins in the choreography until the chorus where they are all dancing in unison.

**Example B)** After a vigorous chorus, the music becomes softer or eliminates voices or instruments. This is a great time to have a soloist break free from the group to mirror the mood the music is creating.

**Example C)** All dance in unison and on important words or 'hits' in the music, have a single dancer break unison for just that second with a jump or kick, then join in with the group again. Solos can last for only a second and still have an effect on the audience.

### Tip

Before handing out solos, always preface your selection with, "This may change," so as to give yourself an out if your soloist is unable to carry the moment alone.

## **Presentation**

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### **Costumes**

What your dancers wear can make or break a dance in an instant.

All costumes should:

- Be appropriate for every body type.
- Make the audience feel comfortable to watch. (Unless making your audience uncomfortable is a part of the vision of your piece.)
- Enhance the overall effect of the piece and not be an addition.
- Be economical. There's a lot you can do on a budget, even with what your dancers have lying around. (Ex. All black, camp t-shirts . . . )
- Not have any safety pins holding them together. Sew it, or don't use it.
- Be completely identical IF everyone's wearing the same thing. Having one dancer in something slightly different is very distracting.
- Fit without sliding off or appearing uncomfortably tight.
- Make your dancers feel like they want to dance in them.

### **Makeup**

The use of makeup in a dance isn't always necessary, but it can be helpful. Take a look at your dancers from the perspective of the back of the audience. You need to be able to distinguish all their facial expressions, so if their faces are getting lost, ask the dancers to use makeup to make those features pop. The further the distance, the more they will need. It's always a good idea to print out a picture of what you want the makeup to look like, or have one person do everyone's makeup to make sure the look is the same for each dancer.

Makeup can become a distraction when:

- The dancers look too young for the type/amount they are wearing
- It's applied poorly or too heavily
- There isn't consistency throughout your dancers

### **Hair**

The movement of hair can be used to enhance your piece, or it can be tucked away so our focus is on the dancer's expressive faces.

Hair can become a distraction when:

- It's blocking the dancer's expressions
- There's more *hair-ography* than *choreography*
- Everyone was supposed to look alike, but some didn't put in the effort
- There's messy fly-aways disrupting the flow of lines

## Working With Dancers

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“Dancers can be grumpy, injured, hate the music or just feel apathetic about what the choreographer is trying to do, He or she does not only have to be an artist, but a diplomat as well.”  
– *Dance Now* by Jan Murray, pg.89

### Listen to Your Dancers

No matter how much preparation is put into your choreography, remember that you are working with a group of individual dancers, each with their own strengths and weaknesses.

- Remain flexible about your choreographic plans.
- If it looks awkward, ask the dancers to show you what would make it easier.
- Ask for suggestions when you’re stuck.
- Listen to what your dancer’s bodies are saying.
- Offer opportunities for reserved dancers to break free.
- If your dancers seem frustrated, ask them what’s not working and offer an alternative.
- If they need a boost, invite a visitor from around the building to come and watch the dance. This always invigorates dancers and spurs them on.

“In composing for dancers, he (the choreographer) must have a high regard for their individuality, remember that they are not like himself and bring all his intelligence to bear on the problem of understanding them, physically, emotionally and physiologically.”  
–Doris Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances* (pg21)

### Performance During Rehearsals

When you finally rehearse in the performance space, things suddenly look weak and lazy. Then, getting young dancers to smile during performance can feel like pulling teeth at times.

The key is to teach performance skills alongside technical skills:

- Enforce the idea that the dance class is a place of focus, right from the second the dancers step into the room.
- During warm ups and across the floor, demand emotive, connected expressions all the time.
- Focus on the meaning of your song’s lyrics or the message of the piece during rehearsals and invite the dancers to explain how it makes them feel.
- As you teach the choreography, describe the mood and meaning as you go.
- If the dancers nail the footwork but forget about their expressions, that section of the dance is incomplete. Drill the facial expressions and emotional connectivity as much as the physical choreography.
- Rehearse your entrances and exits before getting to the performance space.

## **Take Care of Yourself**

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Teaching choreography is an exhausting process, no matter what age level you are working with. It's a physical, social, mental and creative exercise that can leave you shattered. It's imperative to look after yourself to avoid injury, frustration, burn-out and creative blocks.

### **Avoid Physical Injury**

- Always warm up along with your dancers.
- Take a hot bath with Epsom salts to ease muscle fatigue.
- Drink lots of water every day, especially during rehearsals.
- Listen to your body; if it's sore, take it easy.
- Bring healthy, protein-filled snacks to rehearsal.
- Rest, ice, compress and elevate minor injuries. (RICE)
- Report to a doctor immediately if you think you are seriously injured.

### **Avoid Creative Burn Out**

- Continually listen to the Spirit's leading. That feeling of excitement in the pit of your stomach when you get a great idea is more than just you.
- Keep up to date on what's new and ground breaking in the dance scene.
- Enjoy dance movies, TV shows, books and live performances as much as possible.
- Take in a dance class for yourself as often as you can.
- Listen to qualified advice.
- Video record your choreography to re-use if needed.
- Take time to do things that inspire you.
- Set aside time to rest and not think about dance at all.

### **Avoid Frustration**

- Check in with your dancers at the beginning and end of each rehearsal to understand what they're thinking and feeling.
- Be honest with your dancers about where you are in your heart and mind.
- Try to do activities with your dancers outside of teaching them to dance. Even a quick cup of coffee together changes the dynamic of the relationships.
- Take breaks during class if you are overwhelmed, or if the dancers are looking agitated.
- When working with younger dancers, be firm and follow through with threats to be removed from the dance if behavior doesn't improve.
- Sleep on it. A night of rest will do wonders for your patience and creative flow.

A teacher must be a learner himself. If he has lost his capacity for learning, he is not good enough to be in the company of those who have preserved theirs." - Harry Overstreet