

Exploring Production Circuits through a Backstage Investigation of Competitive Dance in Ontario

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The night before...

The Competition: Judges have been picked up and taken to the hotel, catering has been arranged, programs have been picked up, the theatre is organized, and the awards are arranged and ready to go.

The Studio: Costumes are done and have been handed out, numbers have been rehearsed, music for the weekend has been submitted via Dance Bug, and the props have been loaded to the trailer.

The Parents: Tights and shoes are clean and free from holes, back-up tights were purchased, all costumes and headpieces are accounted for, snacks are packed, directions have been printed, and the girls are in bed.

The Dancers: Have practised each dance until they can perform them in their sleep, remembered their corrections, tended to their injuries, and will remember to perform.

. . . It all comes down to this weekend.

Current television shows *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dance Moms* have brought increased public awareness to competitive dance as a popular dance form in recent years; however, the practice is not new. It has long been experienced in many different ways throughout Canada and the United States. In fact, rich in history, competitive dance has been practised in Ontario for close to seventy years. Nevertheless, competitive dance has largely been investigated from a position grounded in moral panic, with the focus turned toward improper technique, suggestive body movements, and inappropriate costuming (Callahan-Russell 2004, 134; Fisher 2016, 328; Hebert 2016, 209; Woerner 2010, 29). While the exploration of competitive dance in this fashion has brought increased awareness to the topic, it has simultaneously erased the personal agency of its participants. Shifting the focus to track the location of meaning within a practice—in particular, by examining the participants who consume an art form and the conditions in which they do so (Herrnstein Smith, 1998)—makes differing evaluations possible. In the case of competitive dance, this type of investigation gives voice to those participants who have been previously allocated to the background, specifically the dancers and their parents.

By positioning competitive dance as a popular dance form, it becomes possible to recognize that while competitive dance shares many similarities with high art theatrical dance—including movement vocabulary and early history—it serves its community differently. Furthermore, for the vast majority of student participants, time spent in competitive dance is their “career” within the practice. While they enjoy dancing, they do not tend to continue dedicated dance practice into adulthood; instead, it is the development of traits such as dedication, time management, and confidence that are brought forward with them into their adult lives.

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Competitive dance, which is created and produced by adults, purchased by parents and executed by children, functions within a production circuit. It is, however, important to remember that although a consumer market has been created around competitive dance, the heart of the practice remains centred around children's enjoyment. More importantly, competitive dance has developed around the family unit and, as such, family values structure competitive events and the formation of dance studios. This paper, using thick description, will provide a behind-the-scenes look at each participant as they experience a dance competition weekend.

Through the theories of Howard Becker, Pierre Bourdieu, and Simon Frith concerning artistic production circuits, I will argue three points. First, competitive dance operates with a cyclical economic market that brings autonomy to each of its participants. The consideration of the practice within this context makes it possible to recognize how competitive dance serves its participants, especially the routinely unnoticed dancer and their family. Second, similar to other art forms, competitive dance is influenced by external social forces—forces that also influence many other children's competitive endeavours and which explain “why so many families end up spending weekends watching their children compete” (Levey 2009, 3). Finally, I argue that whether a dance practice is theatrical or popular, value judgments are made and appreciated through comparable processes. My investigation of competitive dance makes each participant's wants and needs visible, foregrounding how an individual's desires influence the event as a whole. Most importantly, my study insists that although it shares similarities with theatrical dance, competitive dance is a unique practice.

Drawn from a larger project, observations made in this article are the result of extensive fieldwork and first-hand, insider knowledge. In 2016, I spent three months travelling throughout Southern Ontario visiting a total of sixteen regional competitions and one national competition. Cities visited include London, Niagara Falls, Brantford, Burlington, Kitchener, Guelph, Collingwood, Barrie, Richmond Hill, Vaughan, Mississauga, Toronto, and Ottawa. Later, I conducted interviews with both past and current participants including competition directors, adjudicators, studio directors, teachers, parents, and dancers. In addition to my position as a dance scholar, I have also remained an active participant in competitive dance, having held multiple roles within the practice. Although I came to competitive dance late in my dance training after spending my early years training at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School, I was able to experience competitive dance in both Manitoba and Ontario. While completing the Teacher Training Program at the National Ballet School and my BFA and graduate work at York University, I continued to attend competitions first as a family member, then as a teacher, and finally as a studio director. While I did eventually close my studio, I have continued working at dance schools in the Greater Toronto Area preparing students for the competitive stage and adjudicating dance competitions nationally.

Early Competitive Dance

The first day of the competition, 5:00 a.m. The alarm goes off. . .

The Competition: Out the door by 6:30 a.m.—thank goodness there is a Starbucks in the hotel lobby. Arrive at the theatre by 7:00 a.m. Check in with the theatre staff, the emcee, and the sales staff at the souvenir table. Greet the judges and show them to the green room. Start greeting teachers and handing out studio bags. At 7:45 a.m., bring the judges into the theatre and make sure that they have what they will need for the morning session. After a final check in with the awards assistant at 8:00 a.m., the competition kicks off with the cutest little four-year-old novice. The

morning flies by in a blur of routines, small crises at the music table, missing medium t-shirts at the souvenir desk, and the late arrival of the catered lunch. 11:30 a.m.: adjudication time. The emcee comes out and leads fun games with the dancers while last minute mark tabulations and awards are organized. After handing out special awards, the judges return to the green room for their lunch break while the remainder of ribbons and medals are handed out from the morning sessions.

The Studio: Out the door by 6:00 a.m. for a quick stop at a coffee shop drive-through to grab what will be the first of many coffees this weekend. Arrive at the theatre for 7:00 a.m. Check in backstage with the competition director to pick up the studio bag. A quick peek inside reveals the usual: two programs, two pens, a pack of gum, lip balm, a bottle of water, and the typical swag gift item (this time it's an umbrella). A quick look through the program to confirm the studio code, see which other studios will be competing this weekend, and to highlight the studio's performances; then it is off to collect the first group of dancers from their parents. The morning flies by in a blur: warming up dancers, bringing them to the stage, cheering loudly for their successes, catching those who come off in tears (either because they forgot what they were doing or because they are being hard on themselves), and catching up with other teachers (many of whom you only see this time of year). As the last number of the session takes the stage, you fight your way through the crowds of parents and dancers, grateful that the competition has sectioned off a portion of the audience for teachers, as there is not a single seat in the house. Adjudication time! As the special awards, marks, and placements are announced, you quickly make notes in the program, and cheer for your students' successes.

The Parents: Roll out of bed and wake up the girls; fifteen minutes later, go back in and announce to your teen, "We are leaving in fifteen minutes whether you are in the car or not." Twenty-five minutes later, pull into a drive-through to grab breakfast sandwiches, juice for the girls, and an extra large coffee for yourself. You secure a great parking spot (exciting!), but dread sets in when you realize that you will have to give it up when you undoubtedly run out again for another coffee. As you help the youngest get her bag out of the car, you remind your eldest to grab her Rac n Roll full of costumes, makeup, and shoes. After dropping her bag off in the change room, the teen runs off looking for any of her friends—who, like her, have to be here at this ungodly hour because they have a younger sibling competing as well. Put the younger girl's hair up into a bun, put on her makeup, and get her into her first costume. Relieved when you are finally able to hand the little one over to her teacher, you head out front with the other moms and stop by the sales table in the lobby to buy yet another overpriced program—but, hey, at least it comes with a free pen. You shoo off your teen (who somehow has a sixth sense attuned to the opening of your wallet and is asking for some money to buy something off the souvenir table), knowing full well that by the end of the weekend you will be coming home with another t-shirt, pair of shorts, or knee-high socks with the word DANCE printed across them. Taking your last sip of coffee, you head into the theatre to find a seat. The morning passes in a blur of costume changes, dancing, cheering, and catching up on studio gossip with the other moms. Adjudication time. Explain to a new mom that: yes, really, the lowest mark they give out is high gold, and regardless of how many entries are in a category, they get a first place ribbon. And, of course, you cheer loudly for daughter's first ever category win.

The Dancers: Your mom knocks on your door, letting you know that it is time to wake up. You spring out of bed; it's competition weekend! You laugh to yourself as you hear your mom yelling at your older sister, again, to get up. You know that if she hadn't been on Facebook with her friends until midnight, she wouldn't be so tired this morning. You have a hard time eating breakfast in the car, as you begin to get nervous about your solo. Walking through the lobby, you take note of the pink bear at the souvenir table and think about how great it would look with all your other bears at home. "Ouch! Mom did you have to stick that pin in my head so hard!" "I don't want to have to put the false eyelashes on the glue stings my eyes!" "Oh, don't be such a baby," you hear your sister say, as she sticks her head in to see if any more of her friends have arrived. When your mom leaves you with Miss Jenny to warm up and go over your solo one more time, the nerves turn to excitement. "Only five more numbers," Miss Jenny says and she takes you backstage so that you can watch from the wings. The emcee announces your name and you hear your sister shout "GO LUCIE" from the dimly lit audience, the sound of her voice reassures you. From that moment on you are lost in the

choreography and the rest of the morning flies by in costume and hair changes, and of course, dancing. Adjudication time! You swarm the stage with your teammates and other competitors, learn the competition's adjudication dance, and try to catch the balls, t-shirts, and other give-away items the emcee is tossing. Sitting down, you listen for your marks to be called out. Only a high gold for ballet, but a diamond and first place for your jazz solo! You say good-bye to your friends who are done for the day—but with an older sister who has ten pieces to compete over the weekend, you are here for the rest of the day.

. . . Lunch time, then only two more sessions to go for the day.

Often thought of as a singular event, competitive dance is an annual commercial dance practice spanning a great deal of time and many geographic locations, and it involves a large group of people. Regional events are held on weekends from late February until early June and, depending on the number of entrants, can start as early as a Wednesday. Unlike competitions held in the United States, where regional tour dates occur in multiple states, the majority of Canadian competitions operate solely within a single province (Steuart 2014, 37–40). Former performers, teachers, and parents operate the competitions, scheduling multiple tour dates, and renting theatres, hotel ballrooms, and even hockey arenas to host their events. The Nationals week, usually the first week in July, is growing in popularity. Here, contestants who qualify at a regional event are able to participate in a title pageant (Mr. and Miss Dance), as well as a standard dance competition. Nationals are often held in destination locations such as Blue Mountain, Niagara Falls, Mont Tremblant, or even Disney World. As Nationals occur in the high season and lodging starts at \$2000.00 for the week, this competition often doubles as a family vacation, where parents and siblings travel with the dancer. In 2016, there were thirty-eight corporate competitions in Southwestern Ontario, and in April, at the height of the season, there were more than twenty separate competitions happening on any given weekend.¹ Dance competitions attract participants from private sector recital dance schools, where potential entrants train weekly from September until June. Increasingly, many schools make some form of summer training mandatory, further lengthening the dance season. Dancers compete in western theatrical (ballet, pointe, and modern), American vernacular (tap, jazz, musical theatre, hip-hop, and acrobatics), and newly emerging (lyrical and contemporary) dance styles.

Although competitive dance is practised in Canada and the United States, Canada has experienced its own progression, with each province following its own trajectory. During the 1940s, Canadian dance teachers became increasingly aware that they were losing talented dancers as they searched for higher levels of training and employment in the United States and Europe (primarily England). Although employment for skilled dancers was scarce, it is important to remember that exciting works were still produced by small Canadian dance troupes at this time, including the Volkoff Canadian Ballet, the Alberta Ballet, and the Winnipeg Ballet Club (Collier 2004, 148; Flynn 2004, 189). These opportunities did not produce full-time work; rather, dancers held full-time jobs that often had nothing to do with dance, and they had to make rehearsals and performances work around their employment schedules (Karr 1951). The Ballet Festivals, which occurred across Canada between 1948 and 1954, would have “a catalytic effect in the professionalization of dance in Canada and created an unprecedented boom period for theatrical dance” (Bowring 2004, 75). The formation of the National Ballet of Canada in 1951 and the granting of a Royal Charter to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in 1953 provided the first full-time, professional opportunities for dancers in Canada. By the end of the 1950s and into the early 1960s, the largest generation of dancers who had trained and performed in Canada would relocate throughout the country, becoming teachers and opening dance studios. Archival records—newspaper advertisements and dance recital programs—reveal that during this time it was common for dance schools to offer highland dance alongside ballet training. Scottish dancing has strong ties to competition, as dancing has always been a part of the Highland

Games. In an era before cell phones, cable television shows, and social media, the games served a critical social function by bringing teachers, dancers, and families together. It is easy to imagine why teachers of theatrical dance would also be attracted to this sort of opportunity,² making way for the establishment of dance divisions within the Kiwanis and Peel Music Festivals. Through the late 1960s, these venues gained in popularity,³ becoming the first platforms of competitive dance in Ontario.

The United States, having already established strong professional opportunities for its dancers, was focused on pedagogical concerns and on closing gaps in education that resulted from teacher isolation. The development of travelling teaching conventions—including Dance Educators of America, Dance Caravan, and Dance Masters of America—provided a solution. Eventually, these conventions offered a competition as a component of their event, and it would be from these conventions that early dance competitions in the United States would be cultivated (Weisbrod 2010, 22). Canadian teachers (already accustomed to travelling for pedagogical upgrading) became members of these associations and were exposed to an alternate form of competitive dance. Through the 1980s, US competitions grew in popularity, and Ontarian dance teachers began taking their dancers south of the border to compete. As demand for these competitions grew, Toronto became a Canadian tour stop, allowing even more dancers to witness a new format of competitive dance. Driven by an impulse related to the desire to maintain Canadian talent, Canadian teachers and parents took the initiative to establish their own dance competitions; thus, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the early formation of Ontario corporate competitions, separate from the music festival.

Competitive Dance at the Turn of the Century

Herrnstein Smith explores the connection that exists between those who use a cultural event and the social conditions in which the event experience’s advancements. An art practice will be “evaluated continuously, repeatedly, privately, and publicly, by us and by them and by all who follow” (Herrnstein Smith 1988, 5). To that end, when considering the progression of competitive dance at the turn of the century, it is important to consider the spending trends of the middle class, shifts in parenting trends, the advent of around-the-clock news, and the explosion of social media. Karen Schupp (via Elsa Posey) argues that the rise in corporate dance competitions in the United States in the later part of the twentieth century coincided with a rapid increase in the number of private sector dance studios. Schupp speculates that interest in the practice may be “due to the growth of the middle class, which led to increased leisure time and disposable income, and the increased presence of media featuring dance during this era” (2018, 46). In her study of private sector dance schools, Posey points toward a self-fulfilling cycle where an increase in the number of dance schools created more dancers, who then went on to perform or attend post-secondary dance programs, and eventually opened their own dance schools (2002, 44). The rising number of dance schools looking for competitive dance platforms in which to participate led to increased demand for dance competitions. In turn, a flood in the market of corporate competitions spurred the rise in competitive dance culture.

Schupp presents competitive dance as a meaningful venue through which young people are able to “perform, build communities, and nurture transferable proficiencies. Although not explicitly ‘for sale,’ these qualities provide an understanding of why competitors ‘pay to dance’” (2018, 42). At one point, Schupp indicates that it is “the adolescents who pay for their lessons” (2018, 51), a statement

that removes parental agency. Of course, dancers are not always in control of their participation; a five-year-old does not decide to dance and then at six or seven decide to compete. In fact:

The decision to involve a young child in a sports program is largely made by the parents, although the child has more say in the matter as she grows older. But once the decision is made, it involves the whole family, and parent and child become locked in a complex dance of action and reaction, cause and effect, as the child's involvement has a ripple effect on family, relationships and motivations. (Murphy 1999, 37)

It is the parent who enrolls a child in dance lessons, and subsequently (when the dance studio approaches them with an invitation to compete) decides whether to invest more time and money in the child's dance practice—albeit with the child's input. I spoke with a family with three children (two girls and a boy) about their decisions concerning placing their daughters on a competitive dance team. Their oldest daughter⁴ started dance when she was six years old and began competing the following season. The father stated, “She started dancing with the competitive program at age seven because the school offered the opportunity for comps [competitions] and because it was pretty clear that the stronger dancers participated in comps. It became something to aspire to, and it felt like an accomplishment to put our kids into comps” (Anonymous 2016a). His wife addressed their decision to start their younger daughter in competitions at age five: “It was really easy because our eldest was competing at that time, so we didn't have a choice. We couldn't say you can compete and you can't. It was pretty much because one was competing that the other started. She wanted to follow in her sister's footsteps” (Anonymous 2016a). This conversation shows that while the children are the participants in the studio and on stage, the parents are making the choices about the level of participation with its financial demands. The studio owners I interviewed remarked on parents' motivation for enrolling their young children in dance. According to one studio owner, parents often make comments like, “every time music comes on, she just has to dance, so I figure she should be in dance” (Anonymous 2016b). In total, I interviewed eight competitive dancers: all were dancing by age six, and all but one was competing by age nine.

Investigating the economy and its impact on the private sector dance school in the United States after the 2008 market collapse, Ali Woerner recognizes that each state has felt the effects of the recession differently (2011, 30). While Canada managed to skirt the full effects of the recession, the US plays a large part in the global market; therefore, communities that are dependent on resources such as lumber, mining, and some manufacturing were heavily impacted. Even though “participation in dance competition culture is a significant financial investment with little to no direct financial return [, most] parents have a strong desire to provide the best life possible for their children, including activities that bring joy in the present and contribute to a successful future” (Schupp 2018, 52).

Even in times of financial strain, parents will find a way to keep their children enrolled in the activities that they love (Posey 2002, 45; Woerner 2010, 31). As Ali Woerner puts it: “Proof of this is in the still booming dance competition market, costume ordering, and the plethora of private dance studios operating all over the country” (2011, 30). But why are parents willing to do so? In order to understand this, it is important to consider the underlying conventions of parenting during the early part of the 2000s.

Parents, wanting only the best for their children, have been influenced by the idea that extracurricular activities are a crucial part of their children’s development. Already busy in their own lives, parents have turned to “experts” to help raise their children (Levey 2009, 36) under the assumption “that participating in sports helps us to learn important behaviours, values, and skills” (Spickyard Prettyman and Lampman 2006, x). I spoke with another parent about her daughter’s participation in competitive dance and what she likes about the practice. She had this to say:

I like that I know where she is. In terms of who she’s hanging around with, um, I like that she’s found something that she’s passionate about, that she enjoys doing. That her time spent there [the studio] is a positive experience. I like that she’s with people with like-minded goals, they kind of drive each other, help each other to become stronger in what they do, which I think is a great life lesson. (Anonymous 2016c)

Not only does this show that this mother hopes her daughter will gain life skills from her participation in competitive dance, but it also demonstrates that she values knowing that her daughter is in a safe place while she dances. In a time of increased accessibility to news—with continuous reports of tragic world events, abductions, and mass shootings—there is a perception that our world is less safe, and that children should not be left unsupervised (Elkind 2001; Mercogliano 2007, 3; Murphy 1999, 44). Children’s activities, benefiting from parental unease, advertise their practice spaces as safe harbours, areas where parents can drop off their children and feel confident in their safety. For “many competitive dancers, the dance studio is a second home where they eat meals, complete homework, and converse with peers between classes (Schupp 2018, 53). In fact, dance studios go so far as to sell the concept of “family” on their web pages. One studio opens with “Discover what makes us Not Just Another Dance Studio! We are a family!” (Not Just Another Dance Studio 2019). Another studio states, “We are proud to offer a studio environment that provides quality training, a sense of community and a family friendly atmosphere” (Innovative Rhythm Dance Studio 2019). The word *family* fosters comfort for parents, reassuring them that they are leaving their children in a safe place.

Middle-class families have both the financial means and the time to devote to their children’s activities, and they view competitive dance as one such pursuit. In fact, a 2014 youth sports report conducted by Solution Research Group found that 24 percent of girls in Canada participate in dance, gymnastics, and ballet; female participation in dance as an activity is second only to swimming. I spoke with a mother and her daughter about the changes they have seen in competitive dance over the ten years that the young girl had been competing. I was struck by the mother’s comparison of dance for girls to hockey for boys. She stated:

I think, because I know people who have their kids at other studios, it’s that hockey parent mentality. You didn’t have a boy, you had a girl, so for boys it’s hockey, my kid is going to be the next NHL star or they’re going to be whatever. I’ve seen dance turn into that, not to be sexist, but it is. It seems that if you have a boy they will go into hockey and be the next hockey superstar. If you have a girl they go into dance and because there are so many competitive studios—especially in Toronto—that if you can pay the money they will put your kid on the comp team, and they think their kid is going to be the next Maddie Ziegler of *Dance Moms*. (Anonymous 2016d)

In choosing dance as an extracurricular activity, youngsters and their parents have come to expect competitive environments that are similar to those of their peers in other sports activities.

Compounding the changes in competitive dance is social media (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) and reality dance television programming (Foster 2017, 58). This mother's reflection also shows this, as parents and dancers are now turning to reality television rather than their peers as a benchmark for their children's success. As parents of a given competitive dance cohort are all a product of the period—influenced by other parents, media, and social norms—they share a *class habitus* or a common system of tastes and preferences (Bourdieu 1978, 834). Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu suggests sporting events and entertainment practices are defined at any given moment by the expectations of those who utilize the event or practice, creating a case of supply and demand (1978, 833). While it may not be possible to pinpoint whether the rise in the popularity of competitive dance is due to the economic boom of the late twentieth century or a change in parenting practices through the early part of the twenty-first century, it is safe to claim that both have influenced competitive dance.

Competing in the Popular

To understand how competitive dance functions, it is worthwhile to turn to scholarship on popular dance. What are popular dance forms and how does competitive dance function as such? Theresa Buckland describes popular dance as fashionable, tied to popular music, and transmitted through schools of dance and television (Buckland 1983, 326). Yet, this description is ambiguous and lacks a fully embodied understanding of the vast number of styles housed under the term popular dance. Simon Frith and Sherril Dodds locate two key elements that are lacking in this description. In his research of popular music, Frith emphasizes that art becomes popular once it can be turned into a commodity (Frith 1990, 99). Dodds emphasizes the importance of mass production in a more encompassing definition of popular dance:

Although popular dance is not necessarily subject to “mass participation,” it is frequently transmitted through, or closely allied to, the mass media. In economic terms, popular dance is rarely subsidized through public funds or private donors: it is either created at low cost by individual agents/communities or else constructed for the purposes of commercial means by institutions such as the record industry, private dance schools, and film and television companies. (2011, 63)

Therefore, the change in competitive dance over time—by which I mean both the underlying assumption that the event is meant to be enjoyable and the commodification of the practice—have shifted competitive dance from a theatrical dance form to a popular dance form that uses theatrical movement vocabulary.

Competitive dance has become a highly commercialized practice, one that is continually researched and re-evaluated by its participants. Competition and studio directors are exceedingly aware of what approach will make them unique and attractive, thus allowing them to draw in and retain customers. Dance's current popularity on television has increased public exposure to the art form, exposure from which private sector dance studios have benefited. A willingness to accept a broader range of physiques and to make accommodations for larger class sizes has resulted in a boost in popularity, and the number of dance schools is increasing.⁵ In 2016, an extensive Google search found listings for 454 dance schools in Southern Ontario, 138 of those in the Greater Toronto Area. Competitions now offer dancers who train less than six hours a week a separate division, separate venues for small dance studios, and the ability for part-time competitive students to have their own venue (a

development that has unfolded within the last year). The new part-time division allows for dancers at varying finical levels to experience competitive dance.

Type of Dancer	Training Time	Cost of Training	Number of Costumes	Cost of Costumes	Entry Fees
Recreational	1 hour	\$460/year	1	\$100	Recital tickets
Part Time	6 hours	\$2500/year	2 to 4	\$500	\$320 to \$640
Full-time Competitive	15+ hours	\$5000/year	7 to 15	\$1500 to \$4000	\$1440 to \$3000

Time and financial commitment for various levels of dance training

While Dodds maintains that it is “problematic to look at popular dance in purely market terms as it is a movement practice rather than a commodity,” and that by doing so one loses sight of the subjectivity that exists within dance as an art form (56), I argue that the magnitude of the event requires competitive dance to be explored in market terms. Exploring the relationships and expectations that exist financially, as well as socially, allows for a deeper understanding of how the practice functions.

In exploring the relationships that exist between artists, their art, and the public, Howard Becker, Pierre Bourdieu, and Simon Frith explain how production circuits are created. Becker maintains that conventions—which he defines as “all the decisions that must be made with respect to works produced” (2008, 29)—dictate form, function, and participant interaction. He maintains that there are three levels of participants—the consumer, the producer, and the distributor—who, in their interaction with each other, create art worlds. Consumers use the art; occupying one of three roles, they purchase objects, are audience members, or are students (Becker 2008, 54). In this regard, however, the student is not an active participant in the circuit; rather, the student is an unfinished vessel and educated audience member. While the student purchases tickets and views the artwork, their values and judgment have little impact on the finished product. As I will show, this is not the case for dancers and parents in competitive dance. Separate conventions establish how works of art are created and then distributed. Here, standardization originates in the technical vocabulary and history of an art form, guiding creation. Once complete, art is then distributed through one of three means—patronage, public sale, and self-support—each of which allows the artist varying levels of autonomy.

Building on Becker’s model of the art world, Pierre Bourdieu looks beyond the internal workings of a practice. While he acknowledges that works of art are conceived, executed, produced, and then viewed, he draws attention to the external forces that influence cultural production, reminding us that “no cultural product exists by itself” (1993, 30). Bourdieu argues that, in fact, by separating pieces of art from the conventions of an art world and viewing each in relation to the grander scheme, new interpretations become available. This allows for an understanding of how works of art relate to the social conditions in which they are produced (1993, 33). Bourdieu insists that members of production circuits:

Forget that the existence, form and direction of change depend not only on the “state of the system,” i.e. the “repertoire” of possibilities which it offers, but also on the balance of forces between social agents who have entirely real interests in the different possibilities available to them as stakes and who deploy every sort of strategy to make one set or the other prevail. (1993, 34)

For as long as competitive dance is explored under the same conventions as theatrical dance, it will continue to be viewed as a “‘rootless body’ . . . one that pops up on the surface of any dance form” (Fisher 2014, 332). However, an exploration of how competitive dance functions and shares similarities with current society sheds light on how those who participate in the practice derive value.

Likewise, Simon Frith examines “the social contexts in which value judgments are deployed” (1991, 106). He argues that regardless of whether art is high or popular, the manner in which value is determined is the same—and to assume otherwise is hypocritical (Frith 1991, 105). Frith bases this argument on two assumptions. First, at the very core of a cultural practice, all members have the ability to make judgments and assess differences. Participants within a practice know what they like and have the ability to assert these opinions. Second, there is no reason to believe that value judgments are made differently among various cultural spheres. Competitive dance is different than theatrical dance; although the practices are different, the process through which the participants make judgments is not. Furthermore, Frith maintains that judgments are made at three levels: the musician, the producer, and the consumer. Through the process of creation, musicians monitor what it means to be professional and what constitutes a successful performance; producers turn music and performers into commodities; and, last, the consumers utilize the music. This push and pull between the three levels of participants creates a production circuit, one that happens whether art is created for a theatrical high art audience or for the populace.

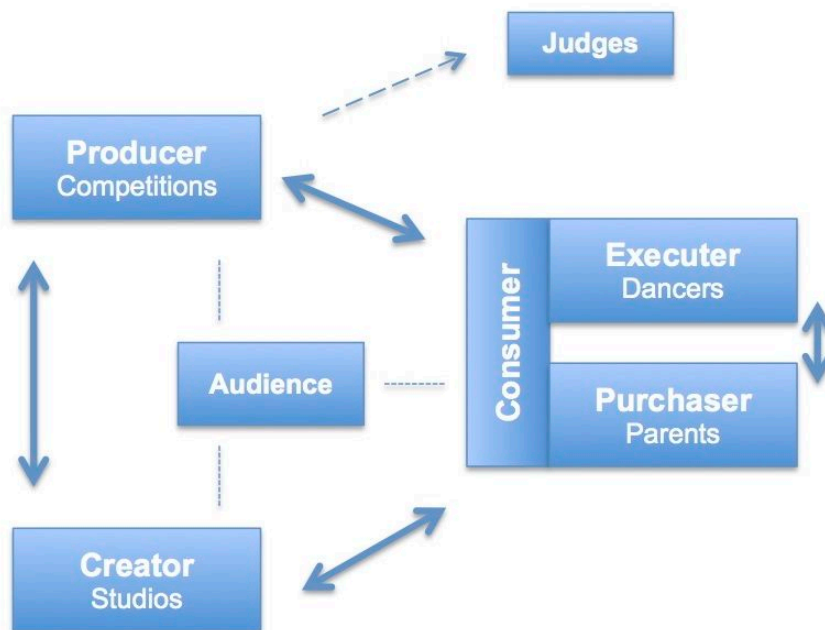
Becker’s analysis of the art world makes it possible to recognize that competitive dance itself is an intricate dance practice in which participants at each level have autonomy and impact on the final product. Bourdieu brings attention to the external social forces that impact the production circuit. In this regard, competitive dance is as much a product of the participants’ lives outside the practice as it is of the conventions that bind the practice together. Finally, Frith acknowledges that value judgments are made across all levels of artistic creation, whether they are high or popular. Therefore the assumption that competitive dance is a flawed practice because it does not match the values of high art disregards the actual values that participants attribute to the practice.

Before exploring the production circuit that has been created by competitive dance, it is important to uncover what makes this practice different than other forms. The first difference is the preexisting relationship that exists between the dancers and their parents. While these members occupy separate roles, they are innately linked—recall Murphy’s assessment of children’s involvement in sport. While parents and children participate together in other popular art events (movies and music concerts, for example), parents either purchase a ticket allowing the child to attend on their own, or attend with their child and experience the event in the same manner. This is not the case with competitive dance where parents and dancers share some values but maintain fundamentally different expectations. They do not utilize the event in the same way.

The other main difference between competitive dance and other forms is the composition and role of the audience. When thinking about an audience at a music concert or movie, one envisions a member who acts as a consumer by purchasing a ticket for a single showing and, for that allotted

period of time, watches the event. At dance competitions, the only participants who watch the competition in its entirety are the judges, and they are paid to do so. Other participants pay fees, but to participate, not to watch. Each participant (competition, studio, parent, and dancer) moves in and out of being an audience member, shifting the role of audience to a secondary task.

The diagram below illustrates the circuit of production created by the participants of competitive dance. The producers, creators, and consumers interact with each other by establishing a circular form of communication, one that has a direct impact upon progress within competitive dance. While the parents and dancers are linked together under the heading of consumer, they first consult each other when making decisions before combining into a singular voice. Parents advocate for their children, especially in the earlier years; they speak on their behalf with teachers and studio directors when problems arise, and vice versa. While the child may be the one who is actually in the studio working and on the stage dancing, parents are by their side through the entire process. The judges, a paid audience, are offshoots of the producers and have little impact on the system in this role. Many adjudicators are also teachers, studio directors, and parents; it will be in these roles that they are able to effect change. Solid two-way arrows denote economic relationships that influence each other and the progression of competitive dance, while the single dashed arrow denotes an economic exchange that has little to no influence on the circuit. The audience is allotted a position in the centre of the production circuit and has been given a dashed bar. The bar (rather than an arrow) denotes the absence of economic influence, keeping in mind that participants only exercise influence on the circuit while in their primary roles. However, the bar highlights the ability participants have to move between primary and secondary roles.



Competitive dance circuit of production

Competing within the Production Circuit

Bourdieu states that everything is interconnected, where even an agent in a position of dominance relies on its lesser parts to function. Consequently, the final artistic product cannot be read without considering the entirety of its parts. Similar to other artistic undertakings, each agent enters into the circuit of production in the desire of recognition or “specific capital” (Bourdieu 1993, 30). Thick descriptions of competitive dance made earlier in this paper mention four individual sets of people or agents: the competition, the studio, the parent, and the dancer. As Frith maintains, the relationships that exist between participants make it possible to locate meaning and value within a practice, regardless of high or popular status. There are, however, points that make the competitive dance production circuit unique.

The first distinguishing characteristic of a competitive dance circuit is the amount of time that each participant gives to the practice. Within other art forms, the creator is always working toward an end goal, while producers oversee and promote multiple artists, and consumers utilize the final product. In competitive dance, all participants are working toward the same goal over the same period. The goal, or final product, is the completion of an entire competitive dance season. Although the season may vary in length with varying levels of commitment and costs, the overall framework is similar. Training for the season begins during the summer months with summer intensives, and weekly classes and rehearsals commence in September. In February or March, the competitive showcase acts as a dress rehearsal, leading up to two to five competition weekends. In May or June, dancers perform in the recreational dance recital. Attendance at a national final in July (often on alternating years) means dancers continue to train and perform after the recital, seamlessly transitioning into the next season. Some dancers even audition for national dance teams and travel internationally, adding additional rehearsals—at another studio, sometimes in another city—to their regular class schedule throughout the year before competing abroad in June and July. At the same time, the competition directors prepare for the upcoming season. They book venues, plan tour dates, update social media, promote their competitions, communicate with studio directors, and operate anywhere between one and fifteen (or more) competition weekends in a season.

Dance competitions and dance studios are small businesses, a second attribute that defines the competitive dance production circuit. As such, directors rely on positive word of mouth and repeat costumers in order to remain open. While there are studios that operate without attending competitions, dance competitions can only remain open as long as there are studios that wish to compete. Competitive dance is currently experiencing a participation boom in Ontario, and so there are many competitions and studios from which to choose. As a result, these small businesses are acutely aware of their clientele’s needs and desires. It is important to remember that competitive dance is a recreational activity. Yes, students who participate do so at an elite level (similar to other children’s competitive activities); however, for the vast majority of participants, the end goal is not a career in dance. I spoke with another mother and daughter about the young lady’s twelve years in competitive dance and asked which skills were transferable to her experience starting university. Reflecting on a defining moment in her daughter’s competitive career, the mother said:

At Nationals in Disney, she [her daughter] was very upset because her solo was going on and her teacher had no time for her. She [the teacher] didn’t prep them [a group of teammates], left them all on their own. She [her daughter] was sort of upset going on stage. That whole weekend there were 230 soloists in her age category, because

they group them all together at nationals and she came in twelfth. It was like, see, you didn't need her—you did it on your own. Yes, she wanted her teacher there, but I reminded her, you did it, you don't always need someone there to hold your hand, you can do it yourself. (Anonymous 2016e)

Parents don't tend to enrol their children in competitive dance intending them to pursue a career in dance; instead, they value the life skills that are nurtured, skills that young dancers carry with them as they mature.

Unlike other aesthetic sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, and even ballroom dance—each of which is overseen by an international governing board—dance competitions are independent businesses free to set their own rules and regulations. It is up to each studio to be aware of how rules can change from event to event. Both the studio and the competition operate with the intention of gaining economic capital. The studio collects payments for lessons, competition entrance fees, and costumes fees from parents; they then pay the dance competitions to bring their studios to the events. Parents pay the bills and chauffeur the dancers to and from the studio and competitions. While they hope to see their children win, they also mark success by gains in social capital. The dancers, who range in age from five to eighteen, mark value within competition not only by winning but also by how much fun they have or through entertainment capital.

While helping families to navigate a healthier approach to the negative side of sports, Shane Murphy investigated parents and children's expectations of competitive activities (1999). The expectations Murphy lists are all transferable to competitive dance culture. This comprehensive list illustrates the many reasons why parents put their children into sports, as well as reasons why children enjoy staying in competitive activities.

What the parents want	What the kids want
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bonding with child • Providing structure for free time • Excitement and meaning • Helping a child's physical development and health • Teaching a child self-control • Developing talent • Promoting social development • Dreams of glory • Seeing the young athlete as an investment • Competition between parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun • Activity and involvement • Improvement and skill building • The physical thrill • Friendships • Social recognition • Competition • Attention

What parents and children expect to get out of youth sports

Although it may appear that competitive dance is all about awards and winning, this is not the case. In fact, very few of the parents and children I interviewed mentioned winning at all. One mother said: “I love it! There are several reasons why I love competitions. I get to connect with my daughters. It gives you, as a parent, the opportunity to compare the studio you are at with the others. To make sure that you are doing the right thing for your child” (Anonymous 2016f). The youngest

girl I interviewed (eight years old), said: “I like competing because it’s exciting to dance on stage with people competing against you. And the awards at the end, I always get so excited about that” (Anonymous 2016g). Reflecting on the friendships that she has created, a sixteen-year-old recounted her favourite competition memory: “The last competition at Blue Mountain. It was really a nice weekend! If it was the last competition I ever did in my life I would be satisfied. Just being with the people I dance with, like, because my studio is smaller we all know each other. It was just a weekend to spend time with each other” (Anonymous 2016h). Competitive dance is meaningful to its participants precisely because it fulfils more than just winning.

Returning to the participants’ activities within a typical competitive dance session let me flesh out more of Murphy’s tactics at play. While the dance competition does all it can to make the teachers comfortable, the competition is much more interested in the dancers themselves. Functioning as a “pay to use” operation within a capitalistic service based economy (Schupp 2016, 361), corporate dance competitions “seek to achieve financial success, as any business does, by creating a niche within the industry by constructing innovative characteristic and elements that set the company apart from competitors” (Weisbrod 2010, 26). Adjudication and awards have proved the perfect opportunity to do so. Between 1993 and 1997, dance competitions switched from only rewarding first, second, and third places to a points-based system that ensures that everyone leaves with a placement ribbon. At the same time, competitions continued to rebrand their placement ribbons. In the late 1990s, bronze, silver, and gold were replaced with high silver, gold, and high gold. By the mid-2000s, silvers were rarely if ever awarded and platinum took the new top spot. Today, the lowest marks awarded are high gold (usually a mark between 87 and 89 percent), and competitions have added new top awards such as titanium, diamond, and emerald.

Further, some competitions have implemented placement guidelines such as the following: “All routines will place 1st–5th in their regular categories. All categories with 6 or more entries will be divided into two (there will never be more than five entries in a regular category)” (Luv 2 Dance 2008). This ensures that each dancer leaves with an award. The “Special Award” further recognizes competitors; these awards are made up on the spot and are given quirky names such as “happy feet,” “what a handful,” and “up for the challenge.” Because not everyone is able to leave with an overall award, these special awards offer an additional opportunity for the dancers to be recognized. By handing out three to five special awards each session, the dance competition recognizes the hard work put in by the dancers—and ensures that dancers who may not otherwise win overall or win scholarships still experience recognition.

Awards are not the only way that competitions work to please dancers. The time that elapses between the end of a session and the handing out of awards enables competitions to fit in another way to make the competitors happy: games and giveaways. Rushing on stage with their teammates, competitors dance as a group and jump to catch competition swag (water bottles, t-shirts, shorts, and stuffed animals) and other treats (toys and candy). They participate in games such as “who can dress the fastest” and “hula-hooping dance dads.”

A teacher reflected on the different type of competitions she attends with her students. She mentions:

There are a lot of different competitions out there and how they run things. A lot of competitions will, when it’s award time, do a lot of games and draws and fun things for the kids. And the kids really enjoy doing that sort of stuff. Other competitions

are more serious and get right to the results. Our studio doesn't necessarily like going to the comps with a lot of games and interaction as it draws out the time. But the kids, young kids in particular, enjoy that fun atmosphere. (Anonymous 2016g)

The change in the award system and the small games and prizes ensure that each dancer leaves the stage after adjudication feeling good about themselves and having had fun. If the students had fun and come away from the weekend having received great marks, special awards, and maybe an overall award, the studio will consider returning to that competition the following season.

The studio also banks on the results of competition weekends to retain and attract students. Studio websites now provide links to their Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube sites, which they encourage current and prospective students to follow. Here, studios post videos of their routines from competition. Students and parents share these videos with family and friends through Facebook, while prospective students can see the level and type of choreography that the studio produces. Studios can also mention how proud they are of their students and tout their title wins and accomplishments from each competition weekend. These online celebrations, along with the care and support provided backstage at competitions and in the studio, make parents and their students feel encouraged and appreciated—and more likely to return the following season.

Conclusion

Competitive dance is a commercial enterprise, one that is continually marketed to parents and their children on the premise that participation in the dance event will instill a good work ethic, provide an excellent form of fitness, and—above all else—be an enjoyable activity. In line with Frith's definition of popular music events, competitions are created around “routinized transcendence that [sells] what is normally coined ‘fun’” (Frith 1990, 99). It is important to remember that the presence of the word “fun” does not negate the time and effort put into the practice. Rather, once competitive dance ceases to be enjoyable and the negative moments and hard work outweigh the positive benefits, the event changes or ceases to exist. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the conditions in which the form exists, what participants value, and how they utilize the event. In the instance of competitive dance, these conditions become visible in the context of the circuit of production, the complex economic interactions between participants, and the unique composition of the audience. It is also important to remember that competitive dance does not operate in isolation; it is shaped by the social conditions of the time. Crucially, participants in competitive dance have the ability to make their own value judgments, decisions that impact other participants as well as the progression of a competition event. But, really, who doesn't want to win? It is a competition after all.

Notes

1. In addition to using Jacqueline Stuart's chart in “Canadian Competitions: Everything You Need to Know for the 2015 Season” (2014), I conducted online searches and consulted print sources to create a database of Ontario competitions. I consulted the website for each competition in order to determine the weekends each competition was hosting a tour date, which allowed me to create a complete list of competitions and tour dates for the 2016 season.

2. There is no written documentation proving that competitive highland dance was the seed for early competitive dance in Ontario. However, the connection between highland dance being taught in dance

studios (alongside ballet and other forms) and the appearance of a dance division within the Peel and Kiwanis Music Festival during the 1960s is worthy of consideration.

3. The increase in archival material from dance festivals held throughout the 1960s and the recollections of early participants show the increase in attendance at festivals during this time.
4. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality; therefore, names have been withheld.
5. The studio directors I interviewed who ran schools before and after the initial broadcast of *So You Think You Can Dance* all mention an increase in enquiries about lessons as well as an increase in enrolment after the show aired.

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