

T H I R D E D I T I O N

CHOREOGRAPHY

A Basic
Approach
Using Improvisation



Sandra Cerny Minton

Choreography

A Basic Approach Using Improvisation

THIRD EDITION

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To my parents, who made me aware of the value of thinking creatively.
To all the teachers who encouraged my creative ideas.
To my husband, Clarence Colburn, who had infinite patience
during the completion of this and other books.

Preface

When I first began to study choreography, I was fascinated with many of the dances performed by the professional companies. Each of those works had a unique quality, yet they had a kind of magic and vitality in common. Initially, I thought there was a recipe to be followed that could produce such dances, but later I began to realize no one formula existed with respect to the choreographic process. At best, it is possible to provide some general words and phrases that describe aspects of an effective dance. Eventually, you should come to realize that there are many ways to structure a dance and that producing a successful work depends on how all parts of the work are organized and how they relate to one another and to the audience.

Choreography invites you to share the joys of creating in movement by discovering the infinite variety that can be found within the dance art form when movement is viewed as a medium for artistic expression. At the same time, I hope the information in this book will help you become more aware of the subtleties found in the movements of daily life so you can use those new perceptions to enhance creativity while composing dances. The basic ideas and suggestions provided are adaptable to creative work in different dance forms, and many of the dance concepts can be used for modern, jazz, ballet, and tap dance choreography.

I based this text on my many years of experience in teaching and directing dance. I've used my experiences to help you become comfortable with the creative process of forming movement into dances. This book uses a basic approach and is arranged so that you begin creating by using a discovery process. Whereas the first edition of *Choreography* began with a discussion of form and addressed movement discovery later, with this edition you begin to create with a sense of freedom and without concern for immediately shaping movement into a form.

Improvisation—the key to the choreographic process—is the focus of chapter 1. Improvisation is the ability to explore spontaneously and conceive dance movements that are representative of an idea, a concept, or a dance style. A framework for creating movement and dances has been added to chapter 1 to help you understand the entire dance-making process. Many inspirations are suggested for movement discovery, along with exercises to help you use those inspirations. You'll also find solutions to common problems for beginning choreographers, including the ability to focus, to work through creative blocks, and to learn to remember movement. I hope you can use the information to avoid some of the difficulties that beginners typically experience during the initial stages of creating.

Chapter 2 explains the use of the craft of choreography in designing and shaping the dance. You'll learn how to make more out of less by manipulating and varying the movements you discover through improvisation. Use of stage space is discussed, as is use of the nontraditional choreographic methods of postmodern dance. This edition contains a new section on how various forms of technology can be used in the dance-making process.

In chapter 3 you are given an idea of what to strive for in shaping and forming a dance as well as descriptions of dance forms commonly used by choreographers. In any case, one of the best methods of understanding dance form is to see as much good choreography as possible. Gradually, through observation, you'll begin to discover how to make your own dances and how to apply the concepts presented in this book. One of my former choreography students told me she was very glad I had shown many videos in her class, because it gave her some concrete ideas of how to bring the information presented in this text together with her own creative ideas.

In chapter 4 you are introduced to the steps involved in putting your dance onstage. You will discover the process of holding auditions, creating a rehearsal schedule, choosing and recording accompaniment, designing a lighting scheme, and designing and constructing costumes for your choreography.

You'll find that the chapters are organized similarly. Exercises titled *Developing Your Skills* allow you to apply the knowledge you've learned from the text. Exercises are arranged from simple to more complex; personal and feeling-oriented experiences are introduced later so that you can gradually gain confidence with creative work. The exercises also appeal to people with a variety of learning styles—visual, auditory, kinesthetic (emphasizing movement), and even tactile (emphasizing sense of touch). You'll note that some of the exercises are intended for one person, whereas others are for groups. If you lead a group through the exercises, remember to choose your words carefully so that your descriptions are precise and movement oriented.

Chapters 3 and 4 include exercises titled *Experience in Action*, which guide you step by step through the process of observing a finished dance by focusing on specific aspects of the choreographic craft. Each chapter ends with a list of exercises designed to help you organize your own ideas as they relate to the materials presented so that you do creative work first and then perform the movements or dance you have created, and finally you reflect on your creative work. Another new section titled *Choreography Challenge* concludes each chapter. In this section, you select an inspiration in chapter 1 and then work with that inspiration by creating movements, varying and arranging the movements, and forming them into a dance. By the time you get to the end of chapter 4, you will have created an entire dance for which you will design the costumes, lighting, props, and special effects.

Appendix A contains updated information about sources for dance videos, music copyright, dance floors, and lighting equipment. In appendix B you will find forms to help you assess your finished dance and plan a performance. You can use the form titled *Choreographic Assessment Sheet* for discussion and comparison of works created by various choreographers. I've found assessment forms helpful. Use of such assessments tends to make choreographic discussion and evaluation more concrete and less subjective. Use the *Choreographic Assessment Sheet* in appendix B to help you look at your own work as it develops. New to this edition is appendix C, which contains descriptions of dance and technology Web sites. A glossary is also included. To help you identify glossary terms, each term is boldfaced when it is first used in the text.

Although a book is organized in a linear manner, the creative process itself can best be described as circular. As you choreograph, you will probably find that discovery of movement concepts occurs along with forming those materials into a dance. You'll also find that dance making involves a cyclic process in which you return to and repeatedly use the materials presented in the first three chapters of this book. Movements you discover through the creative process will be molded by your knowledge of craft and form so that you gradually refine your raw materials with increased insight to produce a finished dance. This process should become easier with practice and through observation of the choreography of others. Many of the exercises you'll encounter here encourage you to observe finished dances and to keep a journal of your observations. It is also recommended that you keep a journal of all your choreographic ideas and movement materials throughout the dance-making process.

According to Lavender (1996), writing is an important part of learning to choreograph because it causes you to reflect and thus encourages greater perspective and clarity of thought than simply engaging in an impromptu discussion.

The goal of increasing your understanding of the National Dance Content Standards continues to be a goal of the third edition. The seven standards deal with both the technical and creative aspects of dance, outlining what students should know and be able to do as related to each of the standards. The following are the seven National Dance Content Standards (National Dance Association 1996):

1. Identifying and demonstrating movement elements and skills in performing dance
2. Understanding choreographic principles, processes, and structures
3. Understanding dance as a way to create and communicate meaning
4. Applying and demonstrating critical-thinking and creative-thinking skills in dance
5. Demonstrating and understanding dance in various cultures and historical periods
6. Making connections between dance and healthful living
7. Making connections between dance and other disciplines

The National Dance Content Standards are accompanied by a detailed list of achievement standards that are divided into three age-appropriate groups: those for grades K to 4, 5 to 8, and 9 to 12. The publication also contains an appendix of glossary terms and a second appendix of sequential learning experiences for each standard. (You can order your own copy of *National Standards for Dance Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in Dance* from either the Princeton Book Company at 800-220-7149 or the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance at 800-321-0789.)

Each of the seven standards describes a specific area of dance knowledge or movement skills, but it will be your responsibility, if you become a dance teacher, to bring those standards to life. You can use the achievement standards to design classroom experiences appropriate for the age level, needs, and experiences of your own students. By using the standards as a guide, you should be able to provide meaningful learning experiences in a well-rounded learning environment. Thus, you can use the information in this book in two ways: to improve your present choreographic abilities and as a resource for the future when you might be responsible for teaching the information outlined in the standards.

The concepts presented in this text relate specifically to Dance Content Standards 2, 3, and 4. The dance-making process presented in this book begins with an inspiration. It is possible, however, to use diverse sources as an inspiration. This means ideas, symbols, and stories from other cultures, historical periods, and disciplines can serve as an inspiration, connecting dance making to Dance Content Standards 5 and 7 as well. Use information from the text to increase your understanding of the standards, and then put them into practice by using the explorations, improvisations, and exercises in the chapters.

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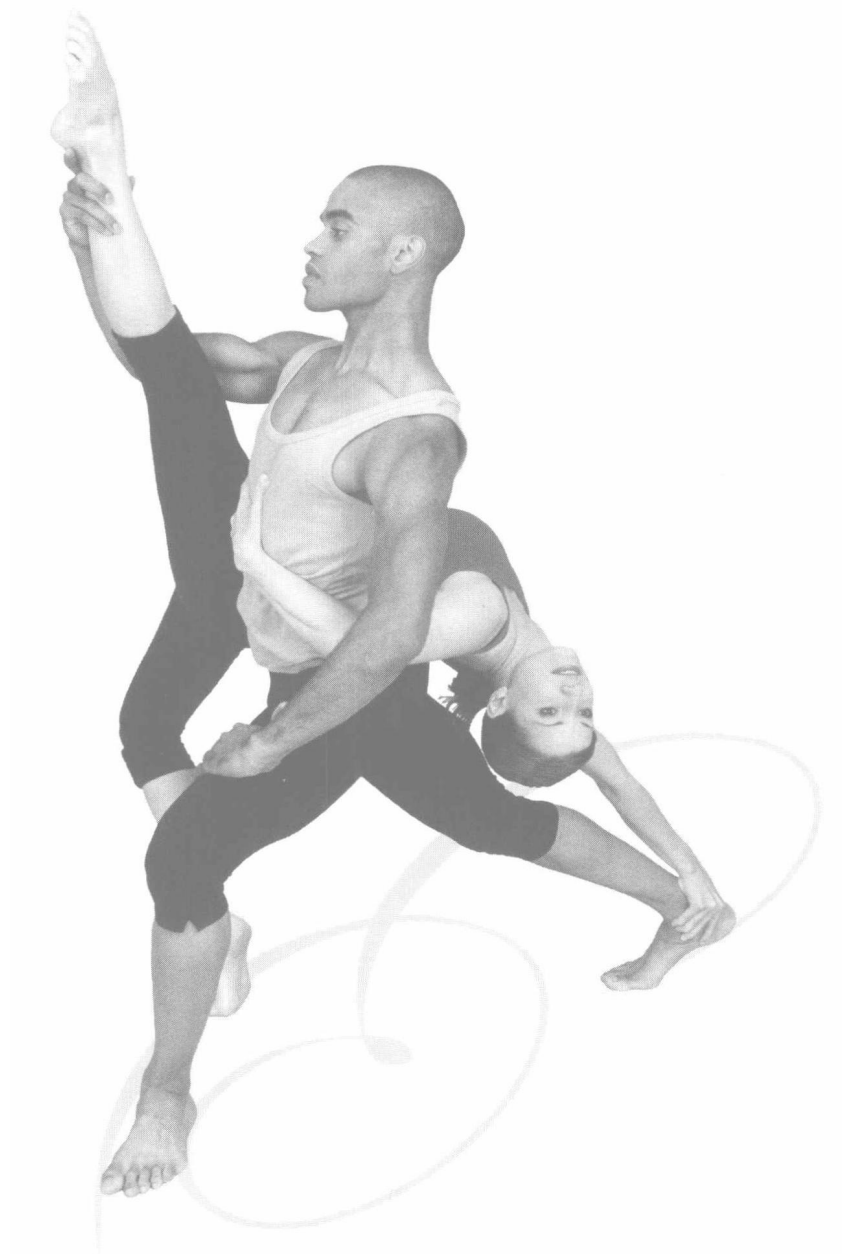
I would like to thank Dan Guyette and Charles Houghton, former University of Northern Colorado faculty, and Brian Garrett and Tim Sutherland, former students, for their advice in preparing the information on lighting in chapter 4. I would also like to thank the five former students, Laurence Curry, Jacob Mora (Artistic Director Mora Por Vida), Jane Sokolik Mora, Tamara Wilkins, and Kaci Wilson, who posed for the studio photographs, and editors Judy Patterson Wright and Ragen Sanner, who encouraged and guided me in writing this third edition.

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1

Exploring and Improvising Movement



I have always found the creative process to be a wonderful yet mystifying experience. It's wonderful because the **dance**, the product, is an entity that can entertain, communicate, and inspire. It's mystifying because through the creative process the **choreographer** is able to energize a previously empty space and make it come alive. With the advent of various computer technologies and the Internet, the possibilities for dance making can be extended and may in the future include not-yet-imagined multimedia forms. Some of the multimedia dance forms combining choreography and technology are described in chapter 2.

Whether a dance includes technological innovations or not, discovering the right movement through improvisation is an important part of the choreographic process. I've noticed that when I felt strongly about improvised movement—when it felt “right”—others felt it was “right” too. Often people would later remark on the section of the dance containing such movements as being appropriate or beautiful or as having meaning.

Chapter 1 explores the goals of the third **Dance Content Standard**—to be able to create and communicate meaning through dance (National Dance Association 1996). This standard is aimed at the initial stages of the choreographic process in which you discover movements that fit a motivating **idea** or express specific meanings. Say you are interested in creating a dance that communicates autumn. To embark on this project, you can read poems about autumn and look at photos taken during the fall season. You can also hike through a park or forest in the fall. All these activities help you focus on your own feelings about autumn. One of my college professors said that autumn reminded her that the year was dying. All of these collected feelings about the fall season make up meanings that are connected to autumn. These are the feelings that you would attempt to communicate through the movements of your dance.

In the beginning, choreographing involves divergent thinking, in which the creative process is important for discovering many possible movement solutions. This chapter begins with an analysis of the creative process and how its stages parallel the steps used in making dances. Suggestions to facilitate creating, such as relaxation and concentration, are also included. Following that discussion are analyses of exploration and improvisation, methods you can use to discover movement, and detailed examples of exploration and improvisation sequences. The chapter concludes with sections on how to meet challenges during the improvisation process, fit movement materials together, and find appropriate music for your dance.

The Creative Process

Choreography is a creative process that requires practice as well as some knowledge of how the process functions. It was once a popular notion that creative work occurred through divine intervention and that only certain people had the capacity to create. Fortunately, today we recognize that although people differ in their capacity to do creative work, anyone can benefit from and enjoy being creative. The task is not easy, but having a knowledge of creative problem-solving strategies should enable you to work through blocks that surface during your choreographic efforts.

There are five steps, or stages, in the creative process (Csikszentmihalyi 1997):

1. A period of preparation
2. Time for incubation
3. Occurrence of insight
4. Sessions in which evaluation occurs
5. A period of elaboration

During the **preparation** phase, the person doing the creating gets immersed or involved in the topic in a way that arouses interest or curiosity. Immersion in a topic can be both a conscious and unconscious process. During **incubation**, ideas churn in the creator's unconscious mind—a process that often gives birth to insights. In the end, the person doing the creating must decide whether the insights are valuable and whether they should be expanded.

Choreography has its own stages of creating. The important part about choreographing, however, is that these stages are fluid and can and should be revisited often so that the dance becomes an ever-evolving creative effort. In dance terms, one could say that a dance evolves through the following processes:

1. Observation of an inspiration: The choreographer notices something, such as an object, idea, or event that inspires an idea for a dance. Anything can spark an inspiration, even works of art, poetry, or music.
2. Feeling response: The choreographer feels a **response** to that inspiration that he or she would like to portray through the dance.
3. Memories + imagination = movement: The choreographer pulls from memories and imagination to help improvise movements to be used in the dance.
4. Dance + visual design: The choreographer enhances the dance with elements of visual design, such as costumes, lighting choices, props, and technology, although sometimes technology is an integral part of creating movements early on.

Figure 1.1 is a visual framework for the creative movement and dance-making process as discussed in this book. In this framework, the choreographer must first carefully **observe** his or her inspiration for a dance. Robert and Michele Root-Bernstein (1999) have written extensively about how highly creative people think, noting that active observation, or taking the time to look repeatedly, is a trait of great artists. After observing, the choreographer has feelings about or a response to the inspiration. This response is, in turn, combined with images and memories and transformed into movement. Later, these movements can be modified and molded into a dance that can be performed, understood, and appreciated.

The only thing wrong with the creative dance-making process is that the process is not linear as depicted in the diagram. Instead, the person doing the creating moves back and forth within the process so that elaboration or variation of movement is frequently interrupted by periods of incubation, added insights, observations, and further analysis of one's response. New feelings arise, suggesting new directions for the work being created (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). In choreographic terms, the person making the dance may have added feelings concerning the inspiration that give rise to new movement insights, causing the dance to take on a different direction or form. Thus, a more realistic model of the framework for movement discovery and dance making is the one shown in figure 1.2. The first three steps of the choreographic

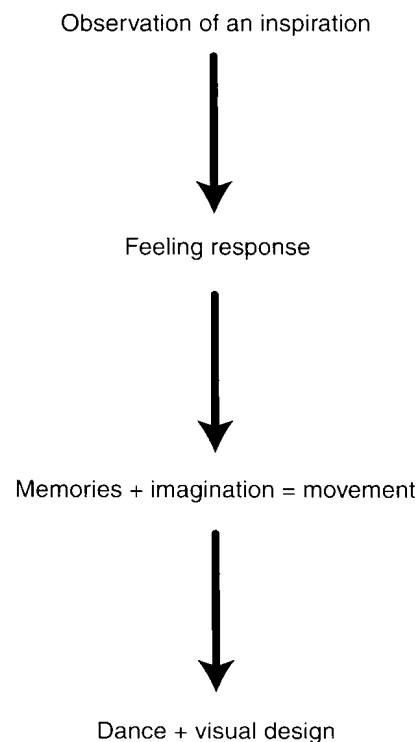


Figure 1.1 Linear framework for the creative movement process.

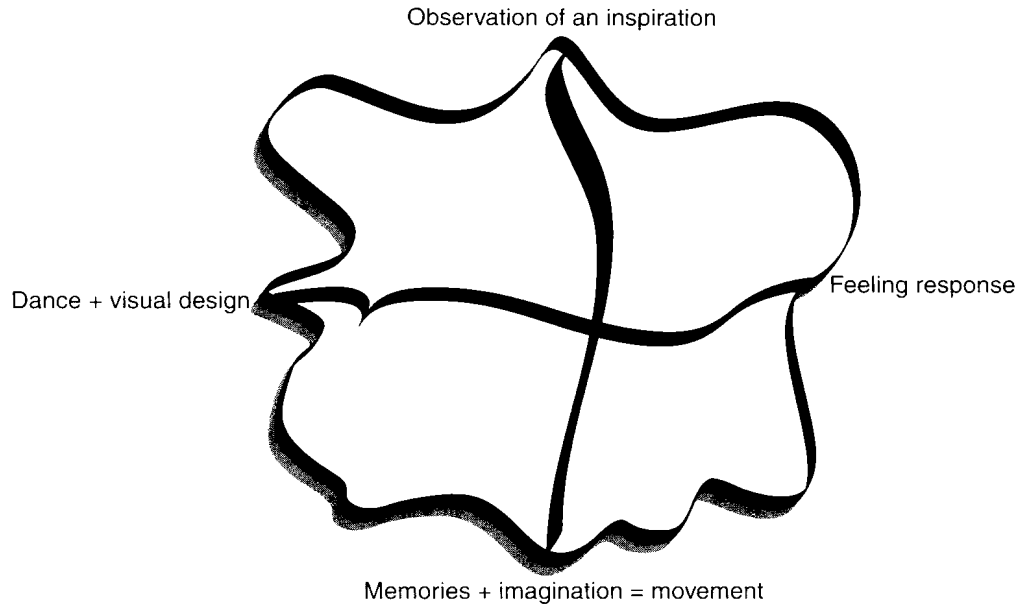


Figure 1.2 This model for the creative movement framework is more realistic than the linear framework because it allows for the more circular process necessary for creating original dances.

process—observation of an inspiration, feeling response, memories + imagination = movement—are discussed in this chapter. The final step—dance + costumes and lighting—is discussed in chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Observation and Feeling Response

Before you begin to choreograph, you need to discover the **inspiration**, or intent, that will guide you through the dance-making process. As a choreographer, you must observe this inspiration and have a feeling response to it. This is also when you set the creative task and decide on the scope, extent, and dimensions of the problem to be solved. This first step in the choreographic process is part of the preparation stage of the creative process, and at this point you are free to select one of many inspirations. For example, if you decide to create a dance based on a painting, you will need to observe the painting from multiple viewpoints and assess your feelings about the painting. The problem to be solved is to capture your observations and feelings about the painting in movement. If you choose to choreograph to a specific piece of music, the creative problem to be solved is to observe or immerse yourself in the music and find movements that capture your feeling response to the score as well as correctly interpret the various qualities and dynamics of the musical score. A piece of choreography based on human gestures would involve observing and exploring the selected gestures and then varying those gestures. Likewise, a dance growing from an emotional base would involve observing or investigating the nuances of those feelings. While the choreographer can alter the scope or nature of a dance at a later stage, you must have an inspiration or place from which to begin. Preparation also generally involves gathering your resources together so that you may begin.

Inspirations can be visual, auditory, tactile, or kinesthetic. Various types of **props** and imagery can also be used to facilitate improvisational experiences. Examples of each type of inspiration and motivation follow.

Inspirations and Motivations

1. Visual
 - Pictures from magazines and books
 - Colored paper cut into different shapes
 - Various kinds of line patterns such as scallops, zigzags, spirals, or a combination of these
 - Interesting natural objects, such as shells, pinecones, leaves, or starfish
2. Auditory
 - Recorded music, particularly modern or **electronic music**
 - Music played live in the dance studio on drums, cymbals, bells, tambourines, or any other instrument
 - Body sounds, such as slapping, clapping, snapping the fingers, or stamping the feet
 - **Rhythmic patterns** made with the body by slapping, clapping, and so on
 - Vocal sounds such as hissing, clacking the tongue, or whistling
 - Nonsense syllables, words, or even poetry or prose phrases
 - Words with **kinesthetic** qualities, such as *ooze*, *melt*, *soar*, *collapse*, or *dart* (Ellfeldt 1967)
3. Tactile
 - Objects with interesting qualities to the touch, such as furry, slimy, slippery, sharp, or soft
 - Natural objects with interesting tactile qualities
 - Objects providing for tactile and spatial explorations, such as a chair, the inside of a large box, or a corner of the dance studio
4. Kinesthetic
 - Pedestrian movements from daily life, including walking, running, lifting, and falling
 - Waving, saluting, shaking hands, and other gestures from life experiences
 - **Axial** (also known as nonlocomotor) movements, such as reaching, stretching, pushing, pulling, swinging, swaying, bending, straightening, and turning in place
 - **Locomotor** movements from technique class, such as running, hopping, jumping, leaping, skipping, sliding, galloping, and turning
 - **Combinations** of movements from dance technique classes
 - **Paths**, or **pathways**, traced on the floor or in the space around the body
 - Writing words or names in space or as a **floor pattern**
5. Props
 - Various pieces of clothing pulled from the costume closet or brought from home, including capes and skirts of various lengths and fullness
 - Pieces of material draped on the body in a variety of ways
 - Hoops of various colors
 - Scooters used in children's physical education classes
 - Sticks and poles of varying lengths and thickness (see figure 1.3)
 - Elastic bands that stretch in many directions (see figure 1.4); the elastic bands need to be at least two inches wide and long enough to form a loop to surround a dancer's body

- Elasticized sacks covering the body (see figure 1.5); such sacks can be pushed or extended into a variety of shapes
 - Scarves and streamers of various lengths to create designs in space as a dancer moves
6. Multimedia
- Slides
 - PowerPoint projections
 - Computer graphic projections
 - Video projections
 - Projected images based on motion capture
 - Images transmitted via the Internet
7. Imagery
- Scenery, such as mountains, lakes, and plains

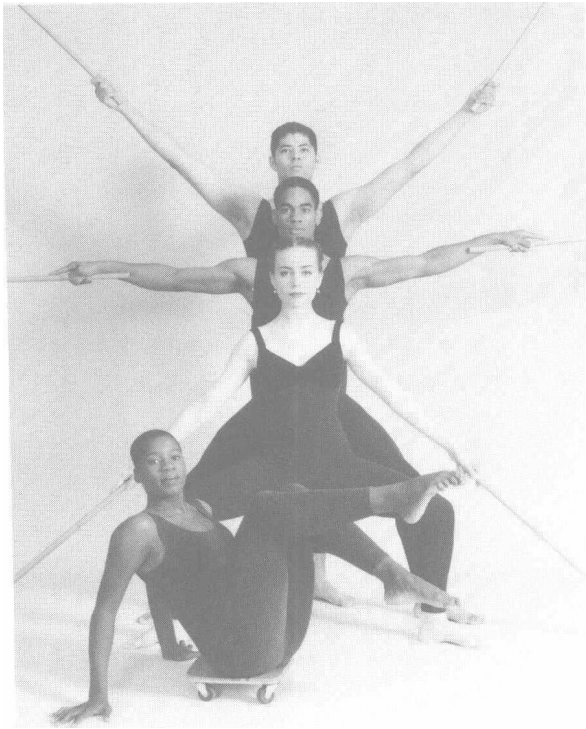
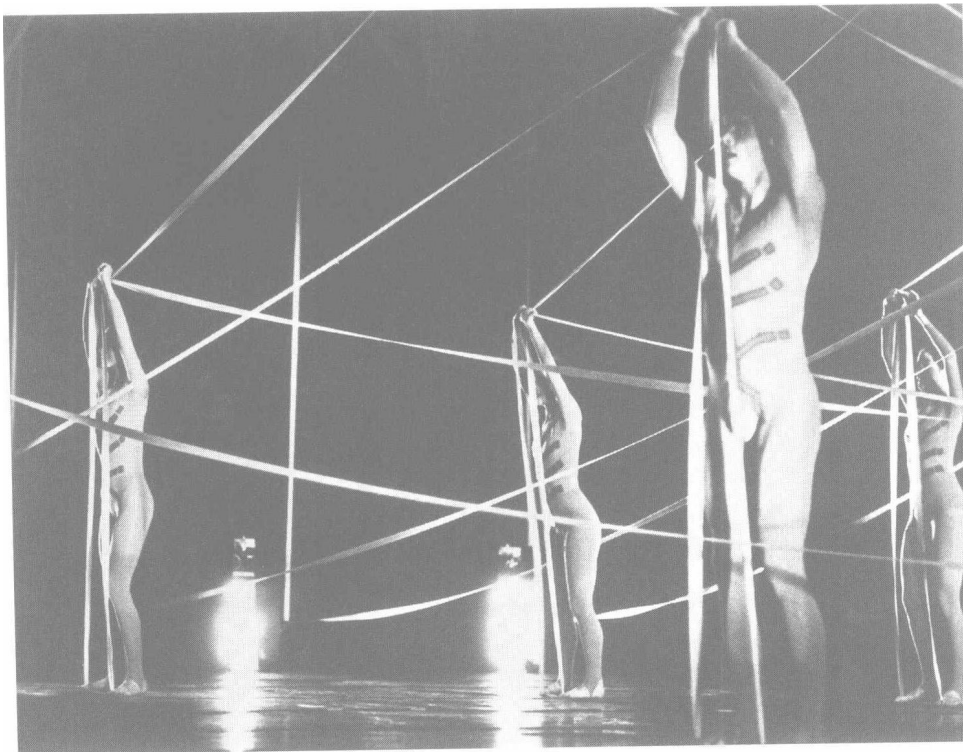
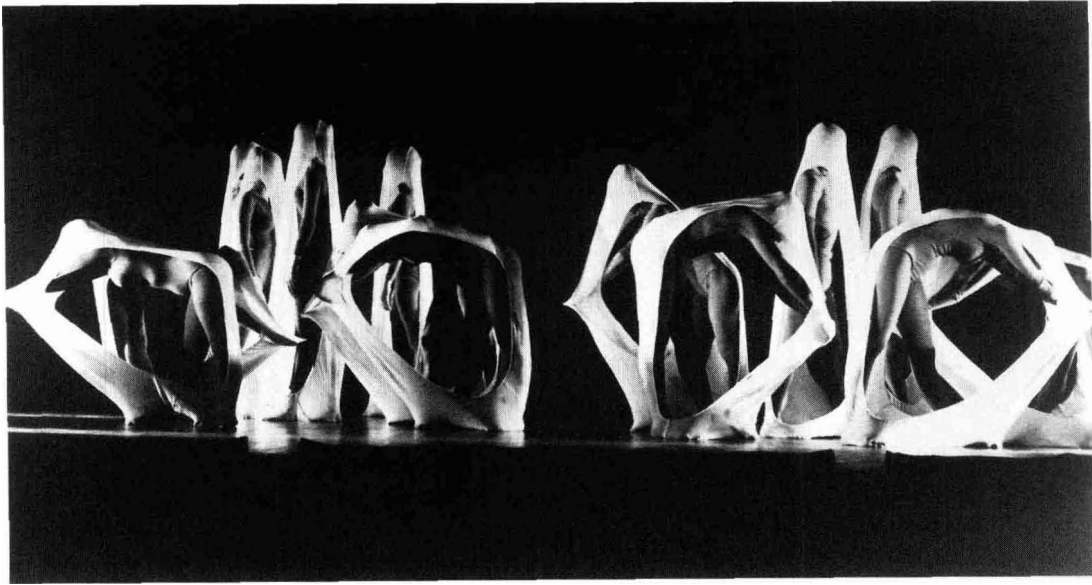


Figure 1.3 The dancers are using a scooter and sticks as props.



From The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Figure 1.4 Use of elasticized bands to create designs in space. Nikolais Dance Theatre performing *Tensile Involvement*.



From The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Figure 1.5 An example of a sack-like costume that can be pulled and stretched in many directions. Nikolais Dance Theatre in Group Dance from *Sanctum*.

- Body feelings, which can include the feeling of lying on a warm, comfortable mattress or of having your feet on a hot sidewalk
- Dramatic situations, such as pretending that you're being chased by someone or that you're finding your way across a darkened room
- Unusual **environments**, such as the inside of a block of Swiss cheese or the inside of a piano (Hanstein 1980)

Imagery depends on memories and past experiences, and dancers are able to use various images as inspiration by relating the image to their memories. Thus, imagery used for improvisation should be meaningful for those involved in the improvisation. If you have spent very little time in the mountains or at the beach, for example, it would be difficult to relate to those images. Instead, choose images that come from your own experiences. I grew up in the Chicago area. My family and I frequently spent weekend days at the sand dunes on the southern shore of Lake Michigan. I can still see images in my mind: waves lapping at the shore, the color and texture of the sand, and dull green vegetation that grew higher up on the dunes. I also remember the texture and taste of the sandwiches we ate while seated on a blanket, the prickly sizzle of the hot noonday sand against my bare feet, and the feeling of relaxation that permeated such a day.

Images can also be quite varied. Select motivating images that are easy to use and that suit the way in which you learn. For example, use **visual images** if you like pictures or diagrams, and use **kinesthetic images** if you find it easy to tune in to bodily feelings. Keep in mind that visual and kinesthetic are only two kinds of imagery; table 1.1 provides a more detailed explanation of the various forms imagery can take.

To a choreographer, preparation means several things. First, the process of creating a dance means developing a sensitivity to and awareness of your body so that you are able to connect with and act on **impulses** for movement. Movement impulses are connected with the inspiration for your creative work.

Keep in mind that the ability to tune in to bodily movements is not the same as having a high level of dance **technique**. It has more to do with being aware of the kinesthetic feelings and visual images associated with each movement or movement **phrase**. Dancers who have

Table 1.1 Types of Imagery

Type of imagery	Definition	Example
Visual^a	A picture in the mind.	Visualize your body as a star.
Kinesthetic^a	Body feelings. What the body should feel.	Imagine the feeling of your feet on a hot sidewalk.
Direct^b	Similar to mental rehearsal or seeing specific movements in your mind.	Visualize yourself performing a leap.
Indirect^c	A metaphor for the movement. Exists outside your body.	Move like a dry leaf as it floats to the ground.
Specific^d	An image directed to a particular part of the body.	Lift one arm and focus on the feeling of heaviness in that arm.
Global^d	General images that include the entire body.	Imagine your whole body as transparent.

^aPaivio 1971.^bOverby 1990.^cStudd 1983.^dHanrahan and Salmela 1990.

a heightened body awareness have a command and versatility of movement—an ability different from having advanced technique. Technique itself can get in the way of creating because it can cause the choreographer to think in terms of steps rather than discover new movements from a fresh viewpoint. Although creating a dance using steps such as pas de bourrée from ballet or a time step from tap dance is possible and appropriate at times, you should go beyond set steps to discover unique movements and arrangements of movements that fit the intent of a dance. For example, set steps could be used in a dance representing a historical period or a specific dance form such as ballet, but you are still encouraged to explore your creativity in such contexts. You can also use set steps as a starting point by varying them through the use of movement explorations described later in this book.

Choreographic preparation also involves learning about the **craft** of choreography. Craft involves elements such as these:

- Understanding the use of **stage space**
- Working with the relationship between dancers
- Using movement variation and **manipulation**

Choreographic craft is explained in chapters 2 and 3. The important point is to use your understanding of the choreographic craft so that craft does not get in the way of creating. If you rely solely on the craft, you will have problems discovering innovative ways of moving.

Researching Your Ideas

Research is another aspect of preparing to choreograph a dance. Choreographic research can take many forms:

- Analyzing your accompaniment for a thorough knowledge of musical form, development, and qualities of feeling
- Understanding your dancers' movement styles and capabilities
- Studying background information on the **subject matter** of your dance