

A New Kind of Studio: A New Art Form?

Can telecommunications match the direct, personal experience that comes from a live artistic event? Maybe not, but some experiments suggest today's teleconferencing tools may be a closer substitute for person-to-person contact than anybody would have thought possible just a few years ago. If so, people in rural areas soon may have opportunities to participate in the performing arts in ways that previously were available only in big cities. Indeed, they may pioneer entirely new art forms.

Dance Partners, a consortium of the dance school Ballet Arts Minnesota, the media-production company Beyond Broadcast, and a consulting firm called artservices & co., has been using teleconferencing equipment to provide dance lessons to students at a distance. Preliminary indications are that the process works remarkably well. But you may have to see it to believe it.

Picture a traditional dance studio. Now, take away the wall-length mirror that normally lines the front of a dance studio. In its place, put two television monitors; one shows you and the room where you are, and the other shows a remote studio that is similarly equipped. Put two monitors at the back of the studio so that you also can see your own studio and the remote studio when you are facing in that direction. (Ideally, you should have monitors along the sides of the room as well, but

you can get by without these). In addition to the stationary camera at the front of the room, put another at the back, and find a cameraman who understands dance to operate a third, mobile one. This will enable you and your distant instructor to watch your dance from various viewpoints.

Now, start dancing. On one monitor, you see yourself, much as you would have watched yourself in the mirror of a traditional studio. A “switcher” alternates that image with one shot from the back of the room or from the mobile camera, so you can watch yourself dance from different vantage points. Meanwhile, the second monitor shows the instructor watching from his or her distant studio. Like you, the instructor faces two monitors — one shows what you are doing, and the other shows the instructor’s own studio.

Suppose the instructor does not like what he or she sees. He stops you, and approaches the monitor that carries your image. You see him approach your image, “touching,” say, your arm, and demonstrating how it should be held higher, lower or in a different configuration. You respond to the instructions until your position corresponds to what the in-

in La Crescent, Minnesota, more than 200 miles away. Explaining the *port de bras*, or the precise positioning of the arms, Kierlin approached the monitor and with her finger traced the path Erin’s arm should follow. Erin watched the instructor “touch” her arms on her monitor and point to where they should move. The student responded until the movement matched what Kierlin wanted to see.

“At times it felt like the flat surface of the television monitor could have muscles in it, and I could arrange them and fix them,” Kierlin recalls.

A Needed Service

In their proposal to launch the distance-dance project, Dance Partners argued that the stakes are very high, especially for Americans who live in rural areas. “Dance permeates our national culture and consciousness,” they noted. “Movement sells. Our airwaves are lathered with layers of hip-hop, middle-of-the-road rock, swing, nostalgic country ballads that raise social movements. Every major newspaper and magazine has focused on the recent movement craze.”



structor wants. Again, now, from the top...five, six, seven, eight...

This all may sound odd, since we are not accustomed to thinking of television as so interactive or tactile. But early experiments suggest dance really can be taught using this system. In the first test of the idea, Erin D., then a 16-year old dance student from Golden Valley, Minnesota, received ballet instructions from Stephanie Valencia Kierlin, a teacher

Despite the importance of dance, opportunities for dance education are few and far between, especially in rural areas. The 50 largest dance companies in the United States are concentrated in ten of the nation’s largest cities, according to Dance Partners. Of the roughly 4,000 people gainfully employed as dancers, most perform and teach in urban areas. And even in Minneapolis, Dance Partners’ base, only 1 out of 10 schools offers any dance instruction. “For some reason,” Dance Partners wrote

in its proposal, “dance educators are slow to recognize that the pervasiveness of dance in everyday life makes this medium an effective tool for reaching into communities.”

Purists may object that teleconferencing is no substitute for face-to-face instruction in an art as physical as dance. People who have experimented with the system disagree, however. In fact, they believe teleconferencing actually may have some advantages over traditional dance training. For one thing, viewing one’s image on a monitor is, in ways, more telling than looking in a mirror. “You’re so used to seeing yourself in a mirror, you see what you want to see,” notes Marcia Chapman, executive director of Ballet Arts Minnesota. “With a camera, you’re much more vulnerable.”

That may be especially true when the monitor shows the view from the hand-held camera or the camera mounted at the back of the room. In both cases, the dancer sees an image he or she does not normally see by looking in the mirror. And, especially in the case of the hand-held camera, the cameraman’s perspective is introduced, allowing the dancer to see himself or herself as someone else might. In many ways, Chapman adds, the monitor gives the dancer a truer picture of what an audience would see. While the mirror reflects a close-up image, the monitor shows one that is smaller, resembling what a person who is seated some distance from the dancer would see, she explains.

Using the New Tool

That is not to say learning dance by teleconferencing is easy. Listening to a distant teacher and following instructions delivered electronically rather than in person requires close attention and concentration. Chris Aiken, a renowned improvisation teacher, used the system to teach students simultaneously in Minneapolis and in Ohio University hundreds of miles away. He taught the first class in Minneapolis, and a month later taught the same group of students from the Ohio studio. Students felt they had very good experiences both when Aiken was with

them in the studio and when he taught from afar. Interestingly, while some preferred having him in the studio with them, some said the learning experience actually was better when they saw him on the monitor. “They had to go beyond what they usually learn in the classroom,” Chapman explains. “They had to stretch themselves mentally.”

As that example suggests, learning from a remote teacher does require some adjustments. For one thing, as any user of teleconferencing knows, you have to learn to look into the camera when talking so that the person in the other studio sees you as addressing them. Getting to know your fellow dancers also is important; like other people who have used teleconferencing, participants in the Dance Partners project say the system works much more effectively if the users have some personal bond. So project leaders are careful to begin distance-dance sessions with introductions. “It’s very important you get to know each other in advance, to know each other’s space,” says Chapman. “The more you know each other, the more you can make it work.”



Camera people also need special skills. This requires an understanding of both dance and of the dancers’ needs. But perhaps most important, dancers, accustomed to thinking of television as something they passively watch, have to learn how to use the television monitors actively as tools.

“Sometimes, the switcher makes decisions about how to switch, but we need students and

teachers to say what they need to see,” says Margo Berg, project manager for Ballet Arts Minnesota. “It’s not television. We need students to break down barriers. We need students to say, ‘I need to see it from another angle.’” For many students, that requires quite an adjustment. “It’s a whole different way to experience dance,” says Drummond. “In ballet, you usually keep pretty quiet. But this forces you to speak up.”

Democratizing Dance

Dance Partners see videoconferencing as a tool for democratizing dance instruction. Improvisation instructor Aiken spent a day working with impaired students at the Brainerd School District in Minnesota exploring the possibilities, and Bonnie Kriha, the district’s special education coordinator, sees great potential. “We’re always looking for ac-



tivities that can enrich kids’ lives, particularly with motor movement,” she says. “And this could connect them with kids in cities. It could lead to new friendships.” Ballet Arts Minnesota’s Chapman similarly believes that inner-city children and senior citizens groups might enjoy the opportunity to share the experience of dance. For both groups, she says, “dance is part of their culture. It’s a wonderful way to communicate, to tell who you are and what you are.”

This suggests that distance dance ultimately may involve much more than conveying expertise from the handful of experts in cities to disadvantaged groups and rural areas. Early experiments suggest that combining videoconferencing with dance ultimately could evolve into a whole new art form — one involving dancers interacting via television monitors with the active — and creative — involvement of camera people and switchers. It’s too early to predict what the resulting art form will look like. Indeed, even capturing the resulting performances for viewers may be a challenge. But the possibilities are intriguing.

This, you truly would have to see to believe. Student Erin D. in Minneapolis tried it with students in Ohio. “We had a set of steps, and we pieced them together into our own short dance creation with partners from the other state,” she says. After a practice session, the dancers began relating, reacting and responding through dance to the live images of dancers hundreds of miles away. “Here we were, working with someone on Ohio, creating a dance with someone in Ohio,” the young dancer says. “It was really amazing.”

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