

# 10 POINTS TO IMPROVE YOUR DANCE FILM PROJECT

## THE DIRECTOR'S POINT OF VIEW

### 1. THE CHALLENGES OF FILMING DANCE

Dance is a subject like no other, or shall I say it is not a subject at all. Some will rightfully say Dance is an Art with its history, codes and rules, a world in itself. A world you need to familiarise with and understand before you start filming it. That's already a challenge.

But what really makes Dance difficult to film, is that it's way more than just an Art. Dance is an embedded feature of the living, it is one of the most ancient form of expression that comes naturally to us humans - look at children - but also to other species, to deliver information (bees), to reveal intentions like intimidation or seduction (birds) etc. Now if we step back and take a broader look, it seems like the whole universe is actually dancing. From the micro – atoms - to the macro – galaxies – it looks like everything is dancing. And that is due to the core fabric of what is and how we relate to it. There is time, there is space there is matter. Subsequently there is Movement, or motion of things in time in space. It becomes "Dance", when consciousness enters the equation: Movement with will and intention or perceived as created with will and intention. So, understanding movement and how we relate to it, is the first step to understand how to film Dance.

Another challenge is that Dance is a language. It reveals what we are, what we feel and what we think. Dance has been used in many forms and styles for tribal, religious, spiritual, artistic or even pure intellectual means of expression. To film Dance you need to get the meaning of what you see, the intention, the form and the essence. Then and then only can you find the right cinematic language and tools to support or even transcend Dance in your film.

And the last and most obvious challenge it poses, is to bring a live moment into a recorded one and to reveal in your film the ephemeral & physical side of Dance while trying to retain all its dimensions. When you are physically in a room where Dance happens, you feel the vibration, the displacement of air, the fragility of what is in the instant and will not exist the in next one. That instantaneity and tension due to the uniqueness and linearity in time of each "movement" is specific to live arts. In Cinema you can play with time and space at will. As a filmmaker, you will want to use the ability of getting rid of that time and space limit, because you can. It gives you tremendous opportunities. But, always remember that the singularity of live arts plays an important role in its perception and you should somehow translate that singularity in your film.

Cinema and Dance together are language in language, movement in movement, art in art. Cinema brings amazing creative possibilities to Dance by getting rid of the "here and now limitation". Dance brings a whole new dimension to Cinema by extending exponentially its narrative possibilities. The two philosophies and approaches might feel opposed, but both are based on movement. They actually complement each other. Every Dancer or choreographer should try to look at the world through a filmmaker's perspective, and each filmmaker through a dancer's perspective. New ways, ideas, and wonders will certainly emerge from doing it.

Cinema /Dance is a marriage made in heaven that is yet to be fully consumed. And every marriage is a challenge.

## 2. YOU DON'T NEED MUCH BUT YOU NEED IT RIGHT

Simply put, you need an idea, equipment, people and money, period. A lot of pre-conceived thinking is out there, like: "it's difficult to make a Dance film. No, it's just complex. You need a lot of equipment and people, no, you just need the proper ones for the job. You need a lot of money, no, it depends on your project and many filmmakers have achieved a lot with very little. You just need to get it right. How? Well it really comes down to a good mixture of creativity, realistic approach and problem-solving.

**The idea.** Go crazy, unleash your creativity that's now or never, and once you cannot sleep anymore because of the excitement, you have it. From there it's all going to be about if and how you'll do it. Know your strengths and limits, do not underestimate yourself, but do not overestimate neither. You will need to master both Dance and Cinema, so depending on your background find the missing skills in other people, convince them and confront your idea with them.

Identify the needs & resources for your idea. Can it be done realistically? Challenges and craziness are fine, as long as you can find solutions to answer your needs. Everyone might like the idea of filming Dance on the moon... but can you make it happen? Go for what you believe you can achieve.

**People.** You need a team of passionate, competent and positive people, it matters. How many people you need depends on the size of your project. It can be a one-man band, but let's be objective, we talk about film here and it's a very much "team work" thing, especially if you want to reach quality at every step on the way. In the end it's not much how many, but how good people are, and if they cover your needs to achieve something great.

**Equipment.** I mean film equipment, props, costumes everything. Again here, it depends on your project, but you can make a film with as little as a camera, a light, a room and a dress. See what you need and can realistically have access to. Forget about the most expensive gear, you simply need the right one for the job, and most importantly, you need the right people to operate it.

A 1000 \$ camera can achieve results that top Hollywood professionals would have a hard time distinguish from a 50k camera. Movies can even be shot in RAW recording format with inexpensive tools. It's more about the relevance of the gear than its price. Be smart, talk to your DOP, your art director and choose what serves your film not your G.A.S. That being said, sometimes having expensive gear in your budget can be useful to actually look more serious to investors, and thus leveraging more money. The calculation of saving on equipment is very relative... which brings us to:

**Money.** That's the problem, right? Is it? You will need some, indeed, which is why being realistic with your objectives is key. The bigger the project, the bigger the money you need. Start with a simple idea, using what you have, show your talent, convince others to invest on you and grow from film to film. Look for funds in Poland or even European Union, funds dedicated to Cinema or Dance. Visit Art foundations, or even crowd-fund your project. Solutions exist.

Also you can explore how your idea can reduce its spending needs, what can be replaced or modified without losing the spirit. Can I do it in a desert instead of on the moon? Money limitation forces you to be creative, to find ways you would have never thought of otherwise. See it as an opportunity to grow your experience and creativity. The day you'll be on a big project you will almost regret the lack of challenges, or maybe not, but you will be stronger.

If you want to produce your own project, remember that your time is valuable, but you 'll never get paid for the extra hours. And if some people work for free on your project – remember it and respect it. Their time is not free neither and is valuable to your project.

### 3. MOVING FROM THE IDEA TO THE FILM PROJECT

Let's get practical, shall we? You have an idea, and you want to turn it into a movie. You'll need to define it. If you cannot pitch it you cannot shoot it. Try to write down the basics of your idea.

**The subject.** What do you want to say, what's your message, your main subject? If you are a choreographer/Dancer explain your vision, your intention, the atmosphere, the meaning of your choreography, it will help the director to work with you. If you are a filmmaker, explain what Dance is supposed to express and what place it will take in the film. Is Dance the main subject, or a dimension of your film?

**The story.** The way your subject becomes a narrative. You might not need a story but at least, since both Dance and Cinema are time related, there is de facto a dramaturgy. Make clear how your main subject reflects into the story/dramaturgy, what happens, changes, evolves, how things unfold. What's your angle?

**The characters.** What are they, who are they? Their story, interactions, goals and their background and psychology. If your characters will be dancing during the film, it is extremely important that the choreographer/ film director knows everything about them to adapt the movements or the acting accordingly.

**Time and location.** Where does it happen and when? Are there changes, evolution, jumps?. Even for an abstract film project, you still have to explain and define what a no space/no time means and look like to you.

**The style.** How do you want to approach the film? What will be the look and feel of it, the atmosphere, the rhythm? Use references, it will help a lot.

**The form.** What kind of film do you envision? Abstract, comedy, drama, musical, or perhaps you want to create a new format. Just make sure your choice serves your subject to avoid dilution or dichotomy.

And remember that nowhere is a place, nudity is a costume and silence is music.

### 4. IDENTIFY YOUR NARRATIVE FILMIC TOOLS, UNDERSTAND THEIR STRENGTHS, LIMITS AND ROLES

Before you start writing your script, identify the basic tools you have as a film director to tell your story: Characters (Dance & acting) - Art direction (locations, costumes, make up and props) - Image (light & camera movement, the frame) – Audio (music, voices, sounds) – Post-production (editing, grading & effects).

All these tools have as a strong storytelling power and therefore you must decide which mission to assign to each one of them in order to reach a perfect balance in your storytelling. Sometimes, you will need contrast between them to reveal something. Sometimes you might need a complementarity of these tools to emphasize your point. See your toolbox as an orchestra where each instrument (tool) is playing its own line of the score (your script) so that the desired music can emerge (your narrative). And there is no rule, but good taste, on how to use it, as long as it serves your film. The major advantage of approaching film directing like this, is flexibility. If in a scene where you cannot "say" something through acting or dancing, do it with the sound, the colours, the camera movement, the editing. That the beauty of Cinema! It also allows you to give hints or introduce notions gradually to the audience. There are wonderful examples of this subtle exercise, successfully and brilliantly achieved in movies across the world. Look for them, pay attention, and get inspired.

An important part of your job as a film director will be to define what will be delivered to the audience and how it will be delivered to them. It won't happen in a day to master it, but starting studying today is a must.

Explore the impact of using each tool, the strengths, the limits and play with them to see how an intention can be translated in your film with the desired effect. Characters are key narrative vectors - frame is the point of view - sound is strongly emotional – colours influence mood – camera movement bring dynamics to the narrative – places and costumes bring accents and counterpoints – editing is rhythm.

## 5. SCRIPT AND STORYBOARD

- **Intuitive or structured, you'll need a script, here is why:**

Even if your film is all movement & gestures in a fully abstract form, you still need a script. Actually, the more abstract it is, the more you'll need a script.

- **It helps the tech and art teams to understand the structure and details of your film.** It must be clear for each sequence, scene and shot what it means and what you want to focus on. What is the action, the sound, the style, the dramaturgy, be precise with all aspects even the props. Explain how you link into the next shot, scene or sequence. Work with your DOP, your choreographer, your editor, your art director to finalise it.
- **It will support and guide your actors/Dancers.** You want them to improvise? Fine they still need a strong base for that. Intentions, lines of dramaturgy, and/or choreographic direction. The more precise you will be on your guidelines, the better the improvisation will be. In addition to the script, you can also provide background for each character – it can be on the psychology/personality side, and the gesture/movement quality. Since you are filming Dance, add that special additional space in your script everywhere Dance is involved in parallel with the action. Give details about the choreography, the dynamics and how it relates to the action.
- **It will save you time and money along the way and make the prod team happy.** Scheduling, planning, budget and on set organisation. With a good script it becomes possible to rationalise and organise shootings with great accuracy and efficiency.

- **A storyboard is not an option, here is why:**

It **helps you “see”** - if your vision works, if your transitions work. It's also the best way to share your vision

**It helps the prod, art and tech teams** – to understand easily what's in each shot, how it moves, how the light must be placed, and organise the order in which shots will be recorded and what equipment is needed. A huge time and money saver.

**It helps the actors/dancers** - to prepare and adapt their acting/dancing to the frame.

Take time with DOP, art director and choreographer to fine tune this storyboard

## 6. PREPARATION

- **Be a great director**  
surround yourself with competent people - communicate your intentions clearly and inspire others - leave space for input and let people be creative in their field to support your vision - Organise your teams, create a collaborative mindset
- **Work with Dancers**  
**Set the tone** - give your vision and intentions and work with your choreographer, based on the script to define main lines of the choreography together.  
**Involve** - Attend as many Dance work sessions as possible, and invite your DOP and Art Director  
**Embrace** - be empty minded and observe, the physicality, the emotions, the movement, the energy, the strength, the subtleness behind the obvious, the space and time vibration, the atmosphere, the unseen.  
**Interact** - with the choreographer, DOP and art director to define your options and envision how Dance will translate into your film at its best.  
**Respect** – Dance is by far the most demanding art of all. The tremendous amount of effort and dedication Dancers need to reach perfection entitle them to expect the same from you– give your best as a director. Explain Dancers and choreographers that setups will takes time on set so that they can organise accordingly. Remember that Dancers are like formula ones, they cannot run for too long, they need to warm up, they need care. But they are not machines, and when they break down you cannot replace the broken piece - bear this in mind.
- **Art direction**  
**A no choice is a choice for what you don't want** - minimalism, realism, romantism, pick up your style - push it to perfection, it's a visual art!  
**Colour matters** – study and apply the colour theory in film for your art direction. Watch movies and especially American beauty, The Grand Budapest hotel, Lalaland, Shawshank redemption, 2001 a space odyssey, Crouching Tiger hidden dragon.  
**Locations** – space / symmetry / lines and other choreographic needs are important to take into consideration when choosing your locations. Also think about the atmosphere you want to create with spaces. Volumes have a subconscious but very strong effect on the audience.  
**Costumes** – Movement first. A Dance film requires clothes that will not become a limit for your Dancers, unless it is part of your intentions. Do not compromise on style, but do compromise on materials quality (to avoid skin rashes) and elasticity (to ease movements).  
**Props** – they might play an important role in your film. Identify their role. Is it decoration, used by characters during the action or a symbolic presence, or all? In all cases, pick up the right props so that they fit your Film & art direction BUT make sure they will not be a threat to your Dancers.
- **The production side of things**  
As crazy and creative as you might be, if you want the project to see light, you'll have to understand the production side of things. Let your producer challenge you with a "do we really need this?"- It might help you see your priorities and get even more focused on your real objectives. You need to also

understand what impact each of your decision has in terms of time, budget resources and yes, you will make some concessions, for your own good. Fight when necessary, sweat the small stuff.

- **Expect the unexpected.**

When all is planned, organised, then you are ready for the unexpected. It will happen, but at least since you are fully prepared, you will find time to deal with it.

## 7. DANCE WITH THE FRAME – FILMMAKING TAI CHI

Let's dive into your most exciting mission, getting your vision to fit into that bizarre rectangle we call a frame.

- **The frame is a point of view – your main narrative tool**

There is no approximation here, you need to decide exactly what will be in the frame, think like a photographer. You need to decide how action unfolds into it and what will be in movement, the action or the camera or both?. And what does it say to the audience?

- **who is looking through that frame?** Who is your camera? An external observer, a character, god? Is it intended or accidental, active or passive? Define who is the camera and the intention.
- **what must be seen and felt** by your audience through that point of view in that specific shot. Contemplation, fear, amusement, joy, space, speed, frame it for the meaning and the feeling.
- **FOV / distance relation and its impact.** A wide angle installs the scene, shows the relation to the environment, Medium shots focus more on the action itself, the characters, close ups give details and emphasize on a specific notion you might want to share. Now the distance also matters. For example, you can use a wide angle for a medium shot, it will trigger proximity, but you might need to use the sound to support that proximity. Choose your FOV and distance to support your narrative. Also, when filming Dance, always remember that distance is crucial, you do not want to collide. You must adapt your vision to what is possible technically and physically.
- **Camera movements** – Make your frame dance, or not, but whatever your decision is, make sure it gives sense to your narrative. A fixed or moving camera with no intended and clear reason behind the choice will just dilute your film in uncertainty. Study camera movements, spend time with your DOP.
  - **The movement through immobility** – even a fixed camera can give a sense of movement, but your choreography should be intended for it. If you plan this kind of shot, consult with your choreographer to optimise the relation between camera and dancers. Greatness is in the details.
  - **The art of relative dynamics** – If the camera and the action are in movement, it's all about the relation between the moving objects - study the dynamics, and ask you choreographer to treat it like it was part of the choreography, (even when there is no dance, it could become extremely interesting)
  - **The immobility through movement.** Yes, you can do just the opposite of what you would normally do with dancers. Just move the camera. It will be a challenge but that should pay off in terms of both Cinema and Dance.

- **Mind the gap, relative speed and distance.**

The closer you are from an object and the fastest the movement will appear to you. If you want that speed to be emphasized, get close, if not, step back.

It is not something to overlook, since it can have consequences. It can be a problem for editing. But it can also be a mean to express two different perceptions of a same reality... Go explore

- **DOF, blur and Dance**

Who doesn't like an emotional short DOF and beautiful bokeh? Nowadays it's a trend, but use it wisely and remember that it is manageable for static subjects, but extremely difficult for moving ones. If that's your aesthetic choice, be prepared to accept things and people to go in and out of focus, and perhaps decide to keep either the subject or the camera static to get the best creative results out of it.

- **The frame and beyond – hors champs or the power of the untold**

There is so much more than what's in the frame. You don't see it but it impacts your frame dynamic (characters looking away, a sound not related to what's in, entering or exiting the frame) You have a world around your frame to play with. You can even decide to let the action happen completely off the frame and show a consequence, ora contradiction or whatever who feel adequate to support your narrative. A big chunk of your creative thinking in terms of narrative will be "out of the frame"

- **frame ratio – the not so innocent decision**

1.33 – 16:9 – 185 – 239 – Everything is possible in the digital era. But the ratio has 2 attached notions.

- It will give a specific look & feel tainted with the common use and history of these ratios, whether it is classic, cinemascope, video, retro etc.
- and It will physically impact the way you frame your movie and tell your story.

You can also change ratios during a film, but that will need to be backed up by some strong narrative reason. Make sure your ratio fits your story but also your choreography. Do some tests to see what works best.

- **Lens Effects - does it really serve your film.**

Stay simple and talk to your DOP, the best effects are the one the audience does not see but feel. If it takes over the narrative instead of serving it, you have been too far. That being said, Dance is a great subject for DOF distortion exploration. I mean tilt and shift effect or the old but always fun effect of filming through a 4x5 Camera with unlocked focal plan or front plan.

- **Shoot for editing, remember... the storyboard**

You have all these wonderful shots, and you are in the editing room and oops, you cannot edit them. Why? Well movement, speed, and point of attention are all over the place. Follow your storyboard, make sure you have these transitions covered and for the extra non- planned shots that came up while shooting, talk to the DOP and the editor about where you intend to insert them.

- **The DOP is your best friend – I mean really.** He is the guy or girl that will cover you back, save your ass and enlight you with solutions for your crazy visions. He or she will be the closest person to you and the one that translates your script into images. He or she will make your actors Dancers look good, and they know it. Don't play ego trip, collaborate, share, support each other, discuss for the good of the film, fight, but remember, he's your best friend.

## 8. THE DANCE AUDIOVERSE

Dance is all about rhythm and music, since times immemorial, there is always music in Dance, even in the most sacred silence. Dance is the music of movement. Before you decide to add any music, sound or voice to your Dance scene, or shot, or film: **LISTEN FIRST**.

Then, try to find out what will resonate, answer, complement or oppose it. From adding nothing to layers of sounds, music and voices, find the right match in line with your film.

- **The importance of direct sound in Dance** – Dance is movement, movement creates sounds, sounds convey the vibrations of “here and now” to the audience – that’s the invisible essence of reality – You need to identify what these sounds are and how they affect your experience of Dance as a bystander or dancer. Listen to these breathings, pressures, frictions, and their interactions as sounds. I advise you to always record sound and to target and capture these little bits of what make dance more vivid.
- **Music, sounds, dialogues.** - explore what it will bring to your Dance film - choose knowingly. Then decide where it should come from. Is it from the scene, or is it additional?
- **Music is not “decorative”**, it’s a world in itself that collides with Dance and your film. Make it collide for a reason, with purpose. Cinema is the art of all arts, so when using music in your film, know what you’re doing and make it vibrate with your film.
- **Dialogues, voices and breath – Dance to the human instrument** – So many creative opportunities are silently awaiting within the triangled relation of voice, Dance and film. An entire movie could be spent just on exploring that. Inspiring human stories could be created based on the movement/voice relation, or absence of relation.
- **Get a real sound engineer!** I said it.

## 9. WE’LL SEE IN POST!

You know that sentence, right? Well, been there, done that, not a good idea, especially with Dance projects. That’s the best way to disappointment. Not everything can be fixed in post, and you need to anticipate as much as possible, because once you are in the dark room it’s too late.

Try to show some love to your post production people from day one. Half of your movie will take shape there, and if you listen to them and involve them in the process, they will save you a great deal of trouble.

Discuss thoroughly with your editor about the vision you have and how you want your dramaturgy to unfold. Check shot transitions plans together, ordering of sequences, rhythm and pace.

Bring your Art Director DOP and Colourist together to nail that look & feel you want. Make sure you have a solid workflow, from both technical and artistic points of view.

Invite the Editor and Colourist on set and make sure that your VFX artist (if any) is here on each shot that involves VFX. Do not improvise there, be rigorous.

And don’t panic once in the dark room, it will be fine, it might get ugly before it eventually gets stunning.

## 10. ON SET DO'S AND DON'TS

- Be on time, set the example and give your best
- Be good be positive - a good atmosphere will help.
- No ego trip, everyone is important, valuable and necessary - it's a team work
- Give clear directions and make well-thought but fast decisions
- Consult if you don't know, do not decide without knowing the consequences
- Follow the script and if you want to diverge or add a shot, make sure you will have enough time, or, do it when the planned shots are secured.
- Set up the Dance shots with precision - Dancers will not be able to redo it a million times.
- Let Dancers know when to be on set well in advance, they need to warm up and prepare
- Do not keep people waiting – let them rest if you don't need them
- No need to shout, create drama or get stressed, it will only make your team lose trust and respect in you
- Please, sorry and thank you are words you might consider using, it does not hurt.
- Try to concentrate on your monitor while the shot is being recorded, that's what the audience will see, not the set.
- Be close to, and available for your Actors and Dancers, they will need your feedback and your tips, but give them space as well.
- Let your teams do their job, do not over control
- And most importantly, go for it and ENJOY!

Thank you for your time!



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