

To Be a Selfish Choreographer or Not: That Is the Question!

By Phillip Mills

Through the years I have choreographed for almost every type of music there is and have tried to interpret the composer's music in the style they intended. This is an artistic obligation most choreographers feel to all composers. When choreographing a specific ballet the authenticity of the movement is pivotal in how the program is approached. If I am doing a Broadway show and have not seen it I research the show to keep the movement authentic to the style of the choreography from the show.

Choreography is an outward expression of an inner thought, idea, inspiration or replication of a past, present or future specific genre of movement. Movement can be set to music or presented in silence. The question remains does the choreographer produce his or her work for the betterment of the skater or for the betterment or enjoyment of themselves? There have been many programs done for so many successful skaters who have been through the choreographic process under both motivations. I tend to choreograph with the composer, skater and audience in mind.

Ultimately the choreography is for the judges and the audience who partake in the experience. In the dance world the choreographer is king. The choreography is strictly the interpretation of the choreographer's vision. The dancers are not considered unless a specific dancer is used as the muse of a choreographer. In skating, however, the choreographer's challenge is to keep the composer's intent in mind while carving out a program that best suits that particular skater's strengths. We have additional obligations to the rules governed by the International Skating Union, the coaches and the judges who will be giving the marks which can make or break a skater's result.

Many things can inspire and evoke choreography from a choreographer. I am personally inspired by art, dance, color, music, children playing, leaves falling or blowing in the wind, or the mood and emotions of the skater I happen to be working with at that time. Every choreographer has had prior experience in their careers which affects the choreographic expression they use. Having been a professional ballet dancer for over thirteen years I find my center for movement in the classical genre. Sneaking off from American Ballet Theatre School to take class at the Martha Graham School or Phil Blacks Dance Studio certainly helped me with contemporary and jazz movement. Dancing in the operas and operettas in Germany exposed me to many different styles of music and character movement.

In choreographing a contemporary piece like the Jackson Pollock short program I created for Ashley Wagner I used one of his paintings to motivate the line and design of the choreography. Like George Balanchine, the legendary choreographer for the New York City Ballet, neoclassic movement is simply movement motivated solely by the composer's music with no specific character in mind. Mr. Balanchine was clear that if it's a polka, make it a polka. If it's a blues, make it a blues, and so on. I follow this advice to a tee.

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I always express to the skaters I am working with that there are selfish and unselfish performers as well. The selfish performer cares not what the audience and many times judges think; they just want to embark on the journey of their program and if you choose to observe and go along for the ride then so be it. The unselfish performer loves skating first for the audience and second for the judges. You can see how they reach out to the audience judges and television cameras to bring you into to share their journey. The question is which path the skater will choose.

Can you tell whether the choreographer's work or the skater's performance you are observing is delivered selfishly or unselfishly? Does it really matter what their motivation is? Or is there a bigger issue such as what are they trying to say to you. What ultimately matters is if the message, feeling and meaning of the program are clear and inspiring.