

# Theatre People: Choreographer

Choreography by definition is “the composition and arrangement of dances”. This definition used to be very accurate back in the early days of ballet, opera, plays, and musical theatre, but recently, choreographers have been contributing to theatre in many other ways! These can include:

**Staging or blocking:** It can be useful to have a second set of eyes on the big picture while the director is working on the details and specifics of scene work. It’s also helpful to use a choreographer’s skills in formations and coordination in larger cast shows with big and complicated transitions from scene to scene.

**Movement coordination:** Sometimes a production doesn’t require a full show’s worth of dance and choreography, but has a ballroom scene, 80’s aerobics class, or soccer practice. Anything you can imagine that would require some movement expertise, a choreographer can be involved in.

**Full choreography:** Kick lines! Tap numbers! Dance breaks! You name it, choreographers do it. Think about the iconic opening number to *A Chorus Line*, or “Seize the Day” from *Newsies*: all part of the gig. These pieces can incorporate technical movement like lifts and tricks, or be simple in style, but either way, these are the most involved of the choreographer’s roles.

## Tasks and activities in a typical day

- Prep work is key! Before rehearsals begin, choreographers familiarize and immerse themselves into the world of the play. It’s imperative that they, the director, and the music director are all working toward the same end goal! What is the story we are trying to tell, and how can movement facilitate that? Create pieces that reflect the needs of the story, performance space, and skills of the performers.
- Attend rehearsals. Usually, the day will begin with some music rehearsal time. Sitting in on these allows the choreographer to be on the same page as the music director. Doing things like matching the movement with vocal dynamics makes for a cleaner, clearer story, and allows the actors to execute the music and movement at the same time!
- Lead rehearsal of dance pieces. Choreographers teach the movement to the dancers, and then place them in their spots (spacing). Sometimes pieces are taught out of order, such as doing an intense dance break first, so performers have more time to settle into the busier, more engaged forms of movement. Once the cast has learned the number, they usually run it from top to bottom one or two times. This helps the artists connect the movement and music/brains and bodies. Sometimes video is filmed so performers can look back on it and practice until the next time the piece is run.
- Communicate with the dance captain. A dance captain is a member of the cast - usually an ensemble member - who takes notes on movement and spacing for the choreographer. They are then the ones responsible for making sure things go well after the choreographer leaves the show on opening night.
- Attend production and other meetings as needed - sometimes a choreographer might need to talk to a designer or craftspeople about how a set or costume piece is involved in choreography.
- Watch technical rehearsals to help space pieces onstage after rehearsing in another room and take and communicate any notes needed.



Left: *Gone With the Wind* was not a musical, but the choreographer taught the actors how to dance appropriately for the time period in a party scene. Right: *Cabaret* is a musical about being a performer, so the “onstage” dances were full of lifts and tricks, like the one being rehearsed here. (Both choreographed by Tracey Flye)

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## 5 skills that a choreographer uses:

- **Self-motivation:** You are responsible for the creation and teaching of the movement, and that happens outside of rehearsal. It's important that you find ways to get yourself up and creating!
- **Visualization:** When you're choreographing at home or in studio, you don't have access to the actors in order to try things out and test the formations. Visualization is key to your prep work.
- **Communication:** Everyone learns differently, and it's important to know how to adapt your communication methods to suit the artists in the room.
- **Patience:** Everyone learns at their own pace. Not only that, but you owe yourself grace because you are doing a really hard thing! When it's not going how you want it to, a deep breath can go a long way.
- **Bravery:** Every single day you choose to be an artist is an act of bravery. You are creating something from inside yourself and it goes on full display. That takes guts. Bravery and confidence take practice, but it's worth it in the end.



For *Matilda*, Kimberley Rampersad choreographed diverse dances including an intense ballroom routine and a gym class. She came up with a vocabulary of strong movements that echoed the themes of the show that could be used in different songs to reinforce the story and characters' journeys. (Set and costumes Cory Sincennes, lighting Gerald King, photos Dylan Hewlett.)

## Building Abilities

There are probably lots of things you are already doing, and things you can start to do, that will serve you in a career in choreography. Some of these are:

- Watch dance clips online – all the styles you can find! Tap, hip hop, jazz, ballet, lyrical, contemporary, ballroom, salsa.... Find what inspires you. Try it out!
- Research choreography as an art form - who are the pioneers of this field, and who didn't get the recognition? How have they shaped choreography to be what it is today, and what can you learn from them?
- Make up dances in your room. Choreographer Jillian Willems says "my first choreographic job was in the schoolyard. I made all the students in grades 3-6 learn my version of Hard Knock Life from *Annie*. Opportunities are everywhere."
- Ask a choreographer whose work you like to correspond or meet up for a conversation. Says Jillian: "We love it when people want to learn about our journey! We all began as students - heck most of us still are."
- Try your hand at teaching a dance class. If you chat with local studios in your city, there's a chance they'll be looking for subs for their regular teachers, or maybe they want to add a class that's in a style you teach. The more you can get in front of a class, the better prepared you'll be for the rehearsal room.
- Ask if you can apprentice on a show at your school, in your community, or even professionally. It might seem like a longshot, but some early opportunities come just because you ask, and you can learn a lot from observing and "tagging along."