

2019

Swings and Their Relation to Resiliency

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Swings & their Relation to Resiliency

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Presentation Date: **May 3, 2019**

Graduation Date: **May 2019**

ABSTRACT

Are Swings, or dancers that memorize many parts of a show, more resilient than dancers who are not Swings? When casting a show, it is difficult for creative teams to decide which dancer should be the Swing. If the personality traits that are necessary for Swings can be uncovered, creative teams will have a better understanding of whom to hire for the job. Additionally, new dancers will be able cultivate the necessary traits.

In this study, a group of sixty-four dancers participated in the Resiliency Questionnaire for Adults (Appendix A). The scores of Swings and non-Swings were compared. On average Swings scored a 69.6% on the resilience questionnaire while the non-Swings received 68.6%. This one percent difference was not a large enough deviation to determine that the Swings are more resilient than the non-Swings. Additionally, Swings who had more experience did not have higher resilience scores than Swings with less experience. Lastly, scores for the category of “impairment” were a full point higher for Swings which uncovers an important aspect of resiliency for Swings. Swings are not more resilient than non-Swings. However, with this trait eliminated, other studies may be able to uncover other traits that are necessary for a Swing to have.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	3
Introduction	4
Research	7
The History	7
So, what makes a good Swing?	9
What is resiliency?	10
Is resiliency considered during casting?	12
Hypothesis	15
Methodology	15
Participants and Procedure	15
Results & Discussion	16
Figure 1	17
Figure 2	18
Figure 3	19
Conclusion	20
Works Cited	21
Appendix A	22

List of Figures

Figure 1: Average Resilience Scores	17
Figure 2: Swing Resiliency Scores in Relation to Time Spent Swinging	18
Figure 3: Swing & Non-Swing Scores in Categories	19

Introduction

Often referred to as “Broadway’s Navy Seals” (Eyer xv), a Swing is a dancer who learns many different tracks, or roles, in a show; Swings are “ready at a moment’s notice to do whatever it takes to save the show” (Eyer xv). According to the Actors’ Equity Association—the union for actors and dancers in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom—a Swing is “a non-performing member of a Chorus who Swings all, or fewer than all, Chorus performing in Chorus numbers in the production” (Eyer xvi). Typically, Swings learn all of the ensemble tracks of the show. A track is, “a term used to describe an Actor’s individual responsibilities through an entire performance of a show” (Eyer xxi). This includes locations on stage and tasks to perform while in those locations. This term is mostly used for the ensemble roles that do not have character names. While Swings cover these ensemble tracks, it is common that these highly skilled performers also cover leading and supporting roles as well. The number of parts a Swing learns “can sometimes range into the teens and twenties for any given scene in a show” (Eyer xvi).

Many people who work as a Swing in Broadway shows and national tours are often very good at what they do. Consequently, they are hired time and time again to swing shows. There are also many people who admit that they do not have the “Swing brain” and do not feel comfortable doing this type of work. It is understandable that not everyone can take on the responsibilities of a Swing because “these versatile, incredibly talented men and women fearlessly take the stage, fit into formations and vocal harmonies flawlessly,

and do it all with that show-biz flair so that the audience is none the wiser” (Eyer xv). Some believe that the Swings are the dancers with the best memorization skills. However, all professional dancers must be inherently excellent at memorization; if a dancer lacks outstanding memorization skills, he or she would never make it past the auditions and rehearsal that lead to a professional career in dance. Others believe that Swings are the most intelligent and organized dancers in the room. This is because the job requires that each Swing create her own, almost mathematical, system to remember each of the tracks that she is assigned. Some draw color-coded charts of everyone’s spot on stage in order to see where they fit into the bigger picture while others will write detailed outlines that map out each spot and focus on where they belong rather than where others belong. Regardless of what way Swings decide to record each of their tracks, it takes hours of preparation and homework. When rehearsing, Swings often work through lunch and dinner breaks to review choreography or to work on their charts. It takes a lot of focus and discipline to create these tools. Of course, a successful Swing must undoubtedly be organized and intelligent, but I believe that what Swings do also has a lot to do with resiliency—the ability to react to problems quickly while remaining calm. So my question is: are Swings more resilient than the average ensemble member?

Answering this question is relevant to both the performers and casting directors in the fields of dance and theater. Performers who simply cannot handle the responsibilities of being a Swing are often hired for the job. Shortly after starting to rehearse, it becomes

clear that the performer cannot do this job and is then fired. This puts a performer out of a job and causes the casting team to scramble to find someone who can fill the spot. There is simply no way for casting directors to know that they have picked someone who is reliable enough for the incredibly difficult job. Perhaps they should consider giving auditioners the resilience questionnaire I am using in my research. Casting directors need to better understand the type of person that they are hiring. Additionally, dancers who know that they are inherently resilient may request to be a Swing or list that skill on their resumé. These upcoming dancers may also be able to practice resilience in the same way they practice dance steps. I am very interested in finding an answer to this question because there are many dancers—myself included—that believe they would be good Swings but have not been given the opportunity to get the experience as a Swing that is often required to be hired.

This thesis considers, first, the history of Swings in the theater, and then analyzes the character traits needed to be a Swing. Next, resiliency will be examined as both a dynamic process and a personality trait. Additionally, resiliency will be compared with the traits of Swings. Interviews from professionals in the theater industry will bring light to current casting practices for Swings. Finally, a study that includes dancers and their resiliency scores, as determined by a survey, will be reviewed in hopes to find a correlation between Swings and resiliency.

Research

The History

Swings were not always recognized as such a crucial part of theater. This is because shows did not run for months or years as they do now. Unlike today, actors would not get injured or take vacations during the short one-night engagements and week-long runs that were common in earlier times. In 1936, *Black Rhythm* was the first musical to record using a Swing. They had one male Swing—Sinclair Brooks. This show closed after only six shows so, it is assumed that he did not get to perform during this short run. Even after the use of a Swing in *Black Rhythm*, very few shows chose to hire Swings: “Other early shows that hired Swings included *Oklahoma* (1943), *Porgy and Bess* (1953), and *Peter Pan* (1954)” (Eyer 1). Instead of Swings, many early shows used either a “Dance Alternate” or “Ensemble Understudy” (Eyer 2). Other shows would utilize the Dance Captain or other ensemble members as “Partial Swings” to fill in if anyone was ill or injured.

Though now we refer to these performers as Swings, it is not clear when these performers began to be called Swings; no one knows the true origin of the name. According to Leah Horowitz, a Swing of four Broadway shows, the name comes the performer’s ability to “swing from one part to another, like a monkey in the jungle” (Eyer 3). Larry Fuller, a choreographer of seven Broadway shows, believes that the name was inspired by a term from World War II: “There was something in the World War II called ‘the swing shift’—basically when the men went off to war women stepped in for the men to do the work in the factories” (Eyer 3). Some believe the origin stems from Broadway’s predecessor—vaudeville. In the days of vaudeville, shows would have a set lineup of acts

each night. If any act did not show up, there would be “Swing Acts” waiting in the wings to fill the slot in an emergency.

Regardless of the unclear origin of Swings, Actor’s Equity recognizes “Swing” as the official title for the job. In the 1960s, Actor’s Equity became stricter with the rules of contracts for Broadway shows; this is when Swings began to be mentioned in these contracts. However, it was not until 1974 that Actor’s Equity required any show with an ensemble to hire Swings. Broadway shows today must have at least one female Swing and one male Swing, but most shows hire more Swings at the discretion of the directors and choreographers. Normally, Broadway shows will have two female Swings and two male Swings.

Actor’s Equity has created four categories of Swings: Offstage Swing, Internal Swing, Vacation Swing, and Universal Swing. The most common type of Swing is an Offstage Swing. Offstage swings are backstage at the theater during every performance even if they are not needed for the show. They can be called upon at any moment before or during the show to jump into any track for a performer who may fall ill or get injured. The next type of Swing is an Internal Swing. Internal Swings are members of the ensemble who perform in every show. In addition to knowing all of the tracks of the show, Internal Swings also have their own tracks. The third type of Swing is a Vacation Swing. Equity requires that each ensemble member is allowed one week of vacation every six months. When a performer decides to take his or her vacation, a Vacation Swing fills in for the week. This means that Vacation Swings are not full-time employees of productions. The Offstage Swing is not typically used during these planned vacation days because there is a high chance that

another ensemble member will be injured or ill. Finally, Universal Swings are used for shows that have multiple productions running at the same time. For example, the musical *Hamilton* currently has productions on Broadway in New York City and in Chicago as well as two different national tours that travel the country. A Universal Swing for *Hamilton* might help out in New York for a month and then fly out to join the tour for a month. Because these productions maintain the same choreography and direction, the Universal Swings can jump into any production that needs help.

So, what makes a good Swing?

A dancer's ability to swing is often referred to as the "Swing Brain." J. Austin Eyer—Assistant Professor of Theater at Pennsylvania State University, Swing of six Broadway shows and co-author of *Broadway Swings*— says, "This factor can be difficult to teach and is basically a combination of organizational skills, a 'level head,' spatial awareness, and a 'go-with-the-flow' attitude" (10). Swings are often very organized, type-A people because they are expected to document each track in a way that makes sense to them. This can be anything from color-coding each cast member's spot on stage to writing detailed outlines of each track. Because of this aspect of the job, many people believe that this job solely relies on the ability to memorize. However, Eyer describes Swings as "chameleons" that are able to change at a moment's notice (10). Additionally, he says, "good Swings are able to block out the panic and nervousness and focus on achieving the task at hand" (10). Based on Eyer's ideas, being a Swing entails much more than memorization; it also entails resiliency.

When casting Swings, creative teams often hire the most experienced performer for the role (Eyer 13). Justin Greer, a Broadway Swing, believes that Swings are not only hired for their dancing and singing abilities but also for their “universality and adaptability of look, voice, and talent” (Eyer 8). Randy Skinner, a choreographer of five Broadway shows, says that he hires Swings who are “relaxed, focused and able to go with the flow” (Eyer 12). Eyer mentions, “Creative teams can often sense this personality type” (10). Could it be that casting directors have been sensing the personality trait of resiliency without directly putting a name to it?

What is resiliency?

Throughout the extensive research that has been done regarding resiliency, psychologists have deciphered two ways to categorize the term: a dynamic process and a personality trait. The dynamic process of resiliency is often utilized when discussing the development of resilience after a traumatic event occurs. The personality trait of resiliency is utilized when examining life-long resiliency (Figley 94). For the purpose of this study that will examine dancers, the focus will mainly be on the personality trait of resiliency because the need for resiliency in dance does not stem from trauma. Because a dancer’s career can last decades, long-term, personality-based resiliency will be examined.

Resilience is “the adaptability of an individual in the face of adversity” (Figley 90); someone who is resilient has an innate ability to “bounce back.” An even deeper description of resiliency comes from E.C. Klohnen in her study, “Conceptual Analysis and Measurement of the Construct of Ego-Resiliency.” She says:

A resilient person is one who uses resourceful adaptation to changing contingencies, has effective problem solving skills, demonstrates flexibility, actively engages her or his environment, and demonstrates effective cognitive appraisals.

For dancers, this means that they will be able to react in real time to what is happening on stage, including making mistakes and taking in new surroundings in different areas of the stage at every performance. People who have high levels of resilience “are considered to be more adaptive within the perpetually changing workplace” (Rice 326).

Resiliency is made up of “a constellation of personality traits such as self-esteem, sense of humor, optimism, positive temperament or adaptability” (Figley 95). According to Figley, “these personal qualities are a part of resilience that helps individuals handle adversity” (92). Klohnen distinguished four traits that characterize a resilient personality: confident optimism, or “an optimistic, positive and energetic outlook and approach to life,” productive and autonomous activity that “involves productivity, persistence in the face of adversity, initiative, and independence,” interpersonal warmth and insight or “the capacity for close relationships and for being insightful and socially perceptive,” and skilled expressiveness explained as “an expressive interpersonal orientation, being at ease in social settings, and being skilled in interacting with others” (Klohnen 1071). Additionally, people who are resilient state that they feel more positive emotions than negative emotions (Figley 92). According to Rice, a “can do” attitude, the ability to improvise, and dispositional optimism are aspects of resiliency. As Skinner mentioned above, these specific characteristics are often found in successful Swings (Eyer12).

The characteristic of resiliency is evolving: “Rather than being a singular quality that one is born with, resilience develops over time” (Rice 326). As a person has to adapt more, he or she will become even more resilient. This is especially important because Swings are often rehired based on previous experience. According to Figley, “Resilience is also conceptualized as the capacity of the individual, which changes over time; that capacity includes managing life challenges effectively and is improved by internal and external factors.” For a Swing, this means that the job will get easier with more practice and experience.

Is resiliency considered during casting?

Casting a show is a very difficult task. For many directors and choreographers, the process of casting a show is about trust. They must trust every single actor whether it is the lead or a member of the ensemble. Swings are often the last people to cast because they must be able to believably fit into any track. For example, if the ensemble is relatively short, the Swing must also be short so that they fit into the show when they have to cover a track. Casting teams may either select Swings from the regular audition or hold a separate Swing audition. Tara Young, choreographer of ten Broadway shows, likes to hold a separate Swing audition:

That’s actually a really easy way—an Invited Call for Swings. Because then, the people who show up want to be there. And usually it starts off with those who have swung before. But that doesn’t mean that if they haven’t swung before they couldn’t get the job (Eyer 12).

Young prefers to work with experienced Swings; however, she also wants a Swing who wants to take on the challenge. She also says that she can see who should be the Swing because “they’re quick on their feet” (Eyer 12).

Lauren Gaul, the assistant director of the BFA Commercial Dance program at Pace University, was a Radio City Rockette for ten years; she spent three of those years as a Swing. She covered six to eight tracks in the *Radio City Christmas Spectacular*. However, before she officially became a Swing, she offered to jump into someone else’s track in a few emergency situations without prior rehearsals. Consequently, she did not have the rehearsals or the written notations of the track that Swings would normally have. In these situations, she said she relied on her muscle memory and organizational skills. Most importantly, however, she had to keep herself calm.

According to Gaul, the most important trait for a Swing is calmness: “Swings have to have a lot of skills like memorization, organization, and fast memory, of course, but really the number one skill is being calm.” She said that she has worked with a lot of Swings who get “panicky” which she believes is problematic. She also believes that Swings have to be confident in themselves. She says, “There were a lot of times that maybe, deep down I wasn’t really sure if I knew what I was doing and I was maybe in a full panic but I really had to play the part and tell myself you can do this and keep myself calm.” She says that a Swing must stay calm and believe in herself so that the rest of the cast members feel like they can trust the Swing: “It is chaos. It is terrifying. But, if you can’t suppress that chaos and panic that you feel, it’s going to come out on stage and it’s going to come out to your

cast and then, they stop believing in you.” This shows how a successful Swing can influence the outcome of an entire show.

When picking Swings for her own pieces, Gaul works students who do not have experience as Swings yet. Instead of choosing Swings based on past experience as a professional choreographer would, she looks for dancers who are “self-reliant” and “self-assured.” She says, “When I see a dancer that can pick up really fast, especially pick up the details and the things that I’m not saying, I pick him or her for the part.” She notes that Swings often have to work and learn without being told what to do.

Adam Cates is a Broadway choreographer who used to be a Swing in several different shows. Since he knows first hand what it is like to be a Swing, he knows what to look for when casting Swings for his shows. He believes that each person is different when it comes to being able to handle the duties of a Swing. According to Cates, Swings must be able to learn quickly and efficiently which is personal to each individual: “Different people learn in different ways and that’s why it’s important, if you are a Swing, to know what kind of learner you are.” He also emphasizes the importance of organizational skills for Swings.

Cates rejects the practice of only hiring Swings based on their previous experience. Instead, he hopes that he is able to hire someone that he knows and trusts. He said, “Hopefully I know that person because you need someone who is incredibly smart and incredibly on top of it.” He recently helped cast the Broadway production of *Anastasia*. He said that he was able to hire a dancer that he has worked with before. In order to convince the creative team to pick the dancer, he told them, “I know her and she is one of the smartest people in the room. She doesn't have Swing experience on her resumé but she can

do this.” Cates needs to know that the person is intelligent enough to handle the job which can be extremely hard to tell in a few hours at an audition.

Hypothesis

Dancers with higher resilience scores have the necessary personality traits to be a Swing. Additionally, the dancers who have been swinging longer will have higher scores. The more resilient a dancer is the better Swing he or she will be.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Utilizing the Resiliency Questionnaire for Adults (Appendix A), a pool of sixty-four dancers was tested and scored for resiliency. The pool of dancers is a mixed group of Swings and ensemble members, or non-Swings, working on the professional level. The result of the non-Swing scores provides the baseline upon which the Swing scores can be measured.

In order to make the study blind, the dancers were given the survey without knowing that resiliency would be tested or that Swings would be compared to non-Swings. Additionally, individual identification as a Swing versus non-Swing was not requested until the end of the survey. After the survey was completed, the dancers were asked if they had

worked as a Swing. If the dancer was a Swing, they were asked how many total months they were Swings. Leaving out these two pieces of information was very important because the subjects were able to answer the survey with authentic answers rather than answers that they believed a Swing or someone who is resilient would choose.

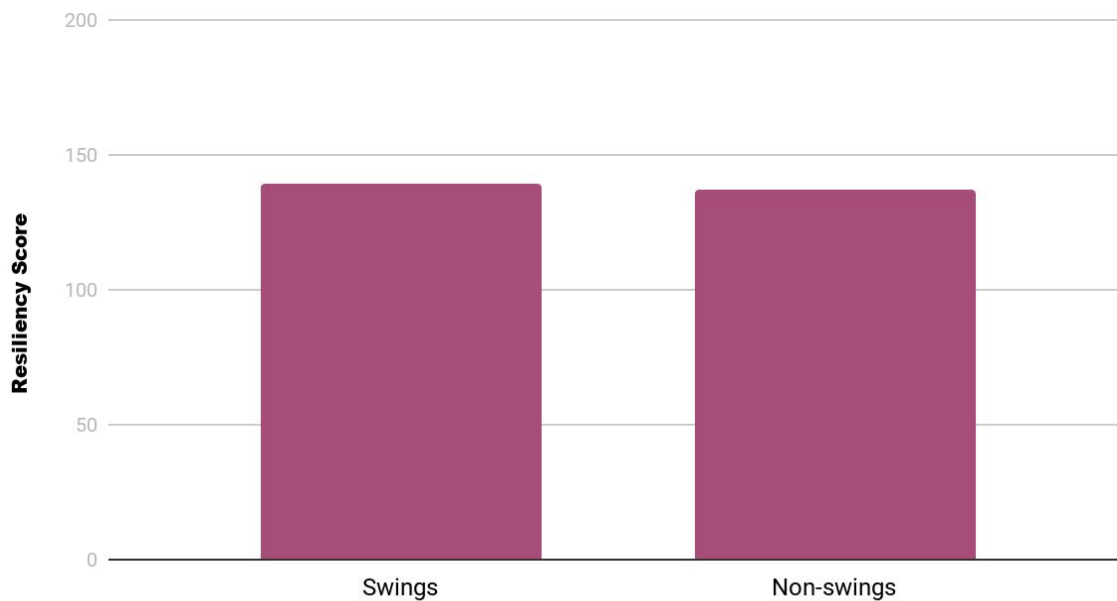
If the hypothesis is correct, there should be a positive correlation between those who are Swings and the resiliency scores. Additionally, the Swings who have more experience will have higher resilience scores. The survey was also broken down into categories: optimism, adaptability, trust, support, comfort, tolerance, sensitivity, and impairment. Each subject also received scores for each category, which could indicate the specific aspects of resiliency that are most prevalent among Swings.

Results & Discussion

Of the sixty-four participants that completed the survey, there were thirty Swings and thirty-four non-Swings. The pool was a mix of both male and female identifying dancers. The average score for the group of Swings was 139.2. This score is out of 200 possible point which means, on average, each Swing received a 69.6%. The non-Swings had an average score of 137.3—an average of 68.6%.

Figure 1

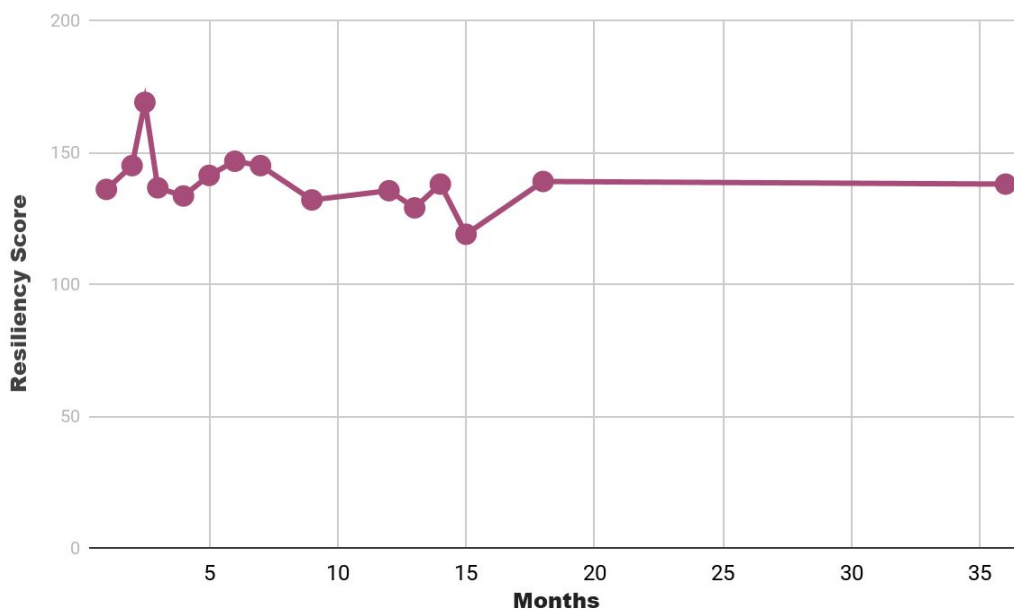
Average Resiliency Scores



Though the average Swing score is higher, the difference between the two scores is not significant enough to conclude that the group of Swings is more resilient than the non-Swings. Additionally, when reviewing only the Swing scores, it is clear that spending more time as a Swing has no correlation with learning resiliency.

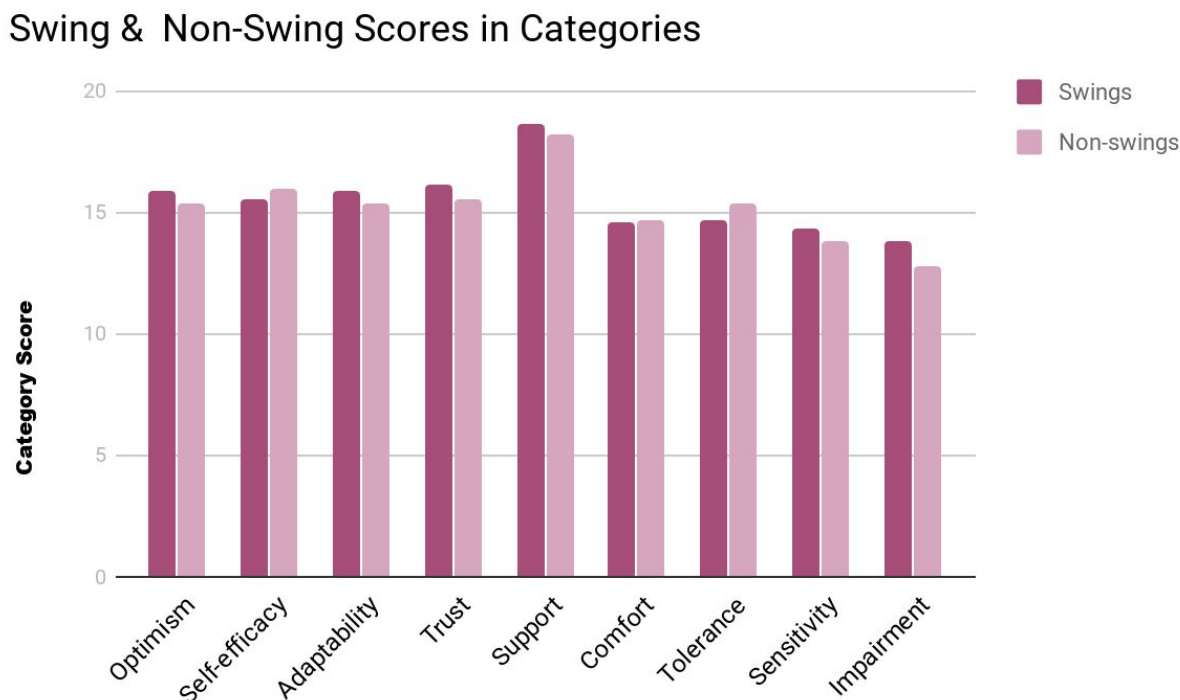
Figure 2

Swing resiliency scores in relation to time spent swinging



When scored by categories from the questionnaire, the results were still very similar, with deviations between Swings and non-Swings staying mostly below one point.

Figure 3



The category with the most significant deviation was impairment, or the ability to maintain mental clarity despite distracting situations. The questions in this category focused on the ability to think clearly in difficult situations. On average, the Swings received 13.8 out of 20 possible points in this category while the non-Swings received 12.8. The higher scores for the Swings in this category is related to what Gaul referred to as “calm.”

Even though the participants of this study only represented sixty-four of the thousands of dancers in the theater and dance industries, I believe, if the pool were expanded, the results would be similar. However, it would be interesting to see a study focusing on the “impairment” aspect of resiliency to find out if it would reveal any new information. Because the hypothesis has been found to be false, creative teams do not have

to worry about finding someone resilient as that might be difficult to test in a casting setting anyway. Additionally, since resilience has been ruled out when it comes to “Swing Brain,” more studies can be created based on other ideas about Swings such as Cates’s focus on intelligence, organizational skills needed to learn so many parts or the ability to remain calm like Gaul mentioned.

Conclusion

Though the history of Swings remains unclear, these performers are vital to the success of shows today. Swings are highly-skilled performers in the theater and dance industries that are expected to memorize many tracks in a show as well as be ready to jump into the show at any moment. Because they are constantly reacting to their ever-changing surrounding during a show, one would assume that Swings are extremely resilient, or able to maintain calmness while reacting to problems quickly. However, when a sample of Swings were compared to a sample of non-Swings in the study presented in this thesis, both pools had similar resilience scores.

This study did not conclude that resiliency is the most important trait for Swings. With resiliency eliminated, the other possible necessary qualities of a successful Swing remain to be identified. Through this study, however, we have learned that flexibility, calm, and intelligence are valuable for Swings. Future studies may help creative teams select successful Swings based on these and other criteria with confidence. Additionally, these qualities may be developed in the training of upcoming performers.

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Appendix A

Resiliency Questionnaire for Adults

Note. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree
[The sign '(-)' indicates inverse items]

Optimism

- 1. In general, I tend to think that things will go well
- 10. If anything bad can happen to me, it probably will. (-)
- 19. When I have a problem, I tend to think that it will resolve satisfactorily.
- 28. I often think that things tend to get worse in life. (-)

Self-efficacy

- 2. When I make decisions, I make mistakes very often. (-)
- 11. In general, I think I am a person who can overcome problems successfully.
- 20. When a problem arises, I often think that there is little I can do about it. (-)
- 29. I see myself as a person that can make the right decision in most cases.

Adaptability

- 3. I do not find it very hard to adapt to changes.
- 12. Every time I have to face a new situation, I have a hard time. (-)
- 21. I usually adapt quite well when I have to face a new situation.
- 30. I have a hard time when I have to adapt to changes. (-)

Trust

- 4. People usually take advantage of me at every opportunity. (-)
- 13. People tend to accept me as I am.
- 22. People don't usually like me. (-)
- 31. I think people are essentially good.

Support

- 5. I have people to lean on when I have difficulties.
- 14. I generally have no one that I can ask for help when something bad happens. (-)
- 23. There are some people to whom I can confide in.
- 32. When I have problems, I usually feel that I have no one to count on. (-)

Comfort

- 6. I usually find it difficult to carry a conversation with new people. (-)
- 15. If I have to confront someone, I feel uncomfortable (-).
- 24. When I am with others, I often feel uncomfortable. (-)
- 33. I usually feel at ease when I am with other people.

Tolerance

- 7. I am usually able to forgive after an argument.
- 16. I can't tell somebody that I do not agree with him or her in a calm way. (-)
- 25. I can accept that another person may have a different point of view.
- 34. When someone hurts me, I find it difficult to forget about it and carry on as before. (-)

Sensitivity

- 8. When things do not go as I'd like them to, I immediately feel frustrated. (-)
- 17. There are few things in my daily life that make me feel bad.
- 26. If anyone upsets me, I easily lose my temper and get defensive. (-)
- 35. People say that it's hard to make me angry.

Impairment

- 9. I usually can think straight and keep pace when a problem makes me feel uneasy.
- 18. I tend to make mistakes when I am upset. (-)
- 27. I usually can think clearly even if I'm upset or worried.
- 36. If something makes me feel bad, I am not able to concentrate and make decisions normally. (-)

Source:

Alonso-Tapia, J., Garrido-Hernansaiz, H., Rodriguez-Rey, R., Ruiz, M., & Nieto, C.

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