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## The Lack of Recognition for the Film Choreographer in Hollywood

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**The Lack of Recognition for the Film Choreographer in Hollywood**

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## **Abstract**

The following research directly addresses why the film choreographer has lacked adequate recognition within the Academy Awards, popularly known as the Oscars, presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Additionally, this study aims to fill the research gap in relation to the minimal documentation that exists regarding the role and contributions of the film choreographer within the film industry. In order to move forward in assessing how the film choreographer can be recognized within the Oscars, one must address why they have not been sufficiently recognized within the history of the Academy Awards.

By assessing the film choreographer's value within the film industry through semi-structured interviews and data analysis methodologies, it was concluded their lack of recognition within the Oscars is due to the lack of dance's presence in film, the undefined role of a film choreographer, and the general lack of awareness revolving around their contributions to film. All of which directly contribute to the film choreographer's disproportionately perceived value within the film industry.

Overall, this research intends to increase the dialogue revolving around the film choreographer as well as validate their value within the film industry. In conclusion, it is demonstrated there is an evident need for steps to advocate for film choreography to be recognized within the Oscars. It is time to give film choreographers recognition by the industry in which they work for, and this thesis hopes to serve as a catalyst for this change.

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## Literature Review

### Introduction

This literature review will explore why film choreographers have not been recognized within the Oscars by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS). To understand this topic, the review will consider the history of dance on film, the relationship of the film choreographer and film director, and the past and present status of recognition for the film choreographer. Through an understanding of literature and online sources; these topics will examine dance's influence within the roots of the film industry's history, film choreographers' involvement in the vision of films, and the recognition film choreographers have received.

It is important to consider the research gap that exists in writing about film choreographers. There is limited literature covering the specific work of a *film* choreographer; however, there have been separate pieces of literature regarding the film industry, and separate pieces of literature regarding the dance industry. Therefore, much of this review will be sourcing information from these specialized fields in hopes to better understand the role of those that choreograph for motion pictures, a job that requires an understanding of both film and dance.

### History of Dance on Film

In order to understand the reasoning behind why film choreographers have not been sufficiently recognized within the Oscars, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of dance's influence and presence throughout the roots of the film industry. The first use of dance on camera began during the early twentieth century. In the early years of the film industry, the Lumiere brothers, both pioneer filmmakers, worked with dancers to capture indigenous forms of dance on film. This was one of the first instances in which film allowed for dance to be

documented and viewed on a new medium other than a stage (Chun, 2017). Dance was one of the first things to be captured on film because early filmmakers sought to discover subjects that moved. Dance “flowed, it twirled, it leapt, it pulsed and throbbed with the rhythm of life;” thus becoming an easy candidate to be filmed (Billman, 1997, p.17). Early filmmakers often worked with dancers. They became a natural subject to be filmed because of their inherent movement quality. For example, the Lumiere brothers often collaborated with modern dance pioneer Loie Fuller. They captured her historic “Danse Serpentine” (Brooks, 2017). Additionally, in 1894 Thomas A. Edison filmed Ruth St. Denis doing a skirt dance outdoors (Brooks, 2017). Later, in 1896 the first exhibition of Edison’s Vitascope showed the Leigh sisters doing an umbrella dance (Brooks, 2017). Not only did this mark the beginning of dance on film, but it was also a significant milestone within the film industry. As dance appeared on the screens of cinema, choreographers became an asset to film.

Throughout the silent film era, there was a focus and a need for physical performance. During the vaudevillian times, people became fascinated with capturing dance because the lure of the body was irresistible to directors (Towers, 2003). The use of the dancer created a relationship between dance and acting that later translated onto the works of more contemporary films (Brannigan, 2011, p.16). The first feature-length movie *The Jazz Singer* (1927), a movie musical choreographed by Ernest Belcher and dance directed by Neely Edwards, ended the silent-era and thus began the “talkie” era of film (Sollinger, 2017). It should be noted that the first genuine movie musical would not emerge until MGM’s *The Broadway Melody* in 1929. However, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) is considered a landmark film. Its introduction of the “talkie” paved the way for the movie musical (Dirks, 2008). Musicals have been a part of the film

industry's history ever since. In her scholarly project, Dayna Chun discusses the "Golden Age of the Musical" in regards to the film industry's history:

With the end of the "silent era" circa 1928, a whole new genre for the film industry was created: "musicals." From the 1930s–1950s, major Hollywood film companies produced musicals with elaborate song and dance routines that served important narrative purposes. Dance was choreographed specifically for the camera... The relationship between the dancer and the camera was one of the top priorities in creating exciting musicals. (Chun, 2017, para. 6)

This golden age of musical film included innovative and prolific amounts of dance. It should be noted that early dance on film was not choreographed for the camera, instead, it was stage choreography that was being recorded for the film. In his book *Film Choreographers and Dance Directors*, Larry Billman added:

As with the earliest dramatic and comedy films which were simply photographed stage performances, these early dances were existing routines from shows that the dancers were already in. The idea of creating something special for the camera would lay in the future. (Billman, 1997, p.17)

With new technological advancements, movie musicals allowed for choreographic collaboration between the camera and the dance. Busby Berkeley, former Broadway dance director turned film industry legend, "was the first to truly realize that a filmed musical was totally different from a stage musical" (Dirks, 2008). Berkeley realized that the camera could become "an integral participant with the choreography" (Dirks, 2008). If dance directors and choreographers were not permitted to explore new musical-sequence concepts, technical advances, or camera



collaborations, they would still be expected to create dazzling dance sequences that worked with the camera (Billman, 1997). With time, choreographers and dance directors started learning how to seamlessly incorporate dance within film. For example, Fred Astaire was one of the first to integrate musical numbers into the storyline (Dirks, 2009). Gene Kelly would later dive into the cinematic possibilities between the dancer and the camera (Dirks, 2009). Eventually film choreographers started to understand the choreographic possibilities for creating dance on camera, and the movie musical was the best outlet to do so. From classic musical films like *Cabaret* (1972) to 21st-century movie musicals like *Chicago* (2002) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001), musicals have been an active genre throughout American movie making history (Jardin, 2003).

The first film choreographers were originally called dance directors. Their credits in films were titled “dances staged by,” “dance direction,” and “dances and ensembles by” (Billman, 1997). This is because the early film choreographers came from Broadway. They altered, directed, and staged previously existing choreography from stage to film (Billman, 1997). Billman later went on to discuss the dance director’s role within the studio, stating “each and every department at the film factories now had a titular head, and the dance directors reigned supreme in the music departments of the major studios” (Billman, 1997, p.61). Additionally, dance directors would hire teachers for a class or to coach the dance stars. They would also assign “specialists” to create original choreography for films. Later, these “specialists” would be titled choreographers. Many dance directors were capable of choreographing and staging their own musical numbers, but others were not (Billman, 1997). In contrast, many choreographers often directed their numbers with no dance direction screen credit. For example, dance critic Debra Levine discussed Jack Cole’s choreographic and directorial role within *Gentlemen Prefer*

*Blondes* (1953), directed by Howard Hawks. She specifically referred to the classic number “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend,” starring Marilyn Monroe:

In fact, “Diamonds” belongs to Cole. He directed it. Feeling unqualified, Hawks opted out of “Gentlemen’s” musical numbers. Russell told McCarthy, “Hawks was not even there.” Verdon agreed, telling McCarthy, “Jack decided where the camera should be, setup by setup, in consultation with [director of photography] Harry Wild. He also synced camera angles with [editor] Hugh Fowler. Hawks stood by and let Jack do what he wanted. (Levine, 2009)

Even though the term dance director is no longer used today, film choreographers often encompass the same jobs as the dance director did from the past.

### **The Relationship of the Film Choreographer and Director**

In trying to understand why film choreographers have not received adequate recognition by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences within the Oscars, it is also important to recognize the codependency of a choreographer and director in order to successfully portray the vision of a movie involving dance. Once the video camera was invented, the collaboration of dance and the camera evolved. Not only did directors and choreographers recognize the use in documenting dance with a camera, but as film techniques evolved, their eyes became open to other possibilities in how to film dance. Directors and choreographers were able to collaborate with each other to create complete pieces of work (Chun, 2017). They sought to learn how the choreography can motivate the camera direction, and how the camera direction can motivate the choreography. This involves participation between both the choreographer and the director. Some have defined this collaboration as video dance:

Video dance is a hybrid of an old art form, dance, and a relatively new art form, video. These two create a new art form called “video dance.” In this case, the video camera is not a passive element left on a tripod to wide-screen shot a performance like a documentary, but an equal partner to dance. This means the dancer must be respected by the camera and vice versa. There are no rules in this type of art. There is an infinite amount of variables to play with including time, space, and energy. Encapsulating a project of video dance is a lot of responsibility, considering the expectations of not one, but two art forms. (Chun, 2017, para 30)

In order to create a successful dance on camera, both art forms must be executed with an understanding of one another. It takes time and a well-thought effort to produce quality dance on camera. It is hard to capture the intricacies and energy of dance through a lens; therefore it is difficult to achieve successful dance films (Towers, 2003). However, many accomplished leaders in the film industry, including George Melies, Sergei Einstein, Busby Berkeley, Charlie Chaplin, and Kurosawa, were successfully able to use film as a tool to highlight the language of dance through bodies on camera (Towers, 2003).

During the 1980s, as movie musicals progressed and film techniques evolved, the hyperactive camera movements and edits paired with limited budgets for musical numbers lowered the quality of dance in movie musicals. The work of choreographers and dancers was masked by decisions made by the directors and editors who had a lack of understanding about the musical numbers. The cohesiveness between directors and choreographers began to weaken, and the success of the movie musical declined (Billman, 1997). This demonstrates the importance of having a strong relationship between the choreographer and director. In Larry

Billman's book *Film Choreographers and Dance Directors* (1997), he went on to discuss Gene Kelly's goals for the future of dance on film. Kelly is a well-known dancer, choreographer, producer, and director of the mid-1900s. As a young actor-dancer in Hollywood, Kelly noticed that no director in Hollywood was seriously interested in engaging with the cinematic possibilities of shooting dance on camera. He acknowledged that there was a lack of care in finding new and improving old techniques when creating dance on camera. Kelly claimed that this lack of awareness in creating for the camera is what ultimately inspired him to pursue a career in dance on the big screen; stating "that this would be my work" (Billman, 1997, p.66). This separation between film direction and choreography is reflective of current structures of institutionalized thought, meaning the film industry is of a separate work than the dance industry. In reality, film choreography successfully combines the use of the camera and choreography to create a codependent work of the cinema and dance (Brannigan, 2011).

An article on the Directors Guild of America's website, written by Xenia Jardin, discusses the art of directing musicals: "Grease director Randal Kleiser believes musical filmmaking's top challenge involves coordinating choreography and music" (Jardin, 2003). While working on *Grease* (1978) not only did two art forms need to collaborate, but the tasks of the director and choreographer became coordinated. The job of a film choreographer encompasses much more than creating dance steps. For example, Patricia Bush did the *Grease* film-adaptation in 1978. She was very familiar with the show because she had also choreographed the 1972 Broadway production. Bush would work with the dancers in the morning, and director Randal Kleiser would work with the actors. In the afternoons they would switch. When they were on set together, Bush would focus on the dancers while Kleiser worked with actors and cameramen

(Jardin, 2003). Similar to the film director, a film choreographer's task also includes working with stars. They must ensure that the stars are executing the choreography well. For example, the celebrated film choreographer Jack Cole worked with stars including Betty Grable, Mitzi Gaynor, and Marilyn Monroe. He shaped them into not only screen personalities, but also dance profiles "with unprecedented high style and graphic beauty" (Billman, 2003). In his book, Larry Billman also addresses the fact in which many choreographers go on to be directors, stating "their unique collection of talents allowed them to move easily into the ranks of director, as so many have, for it is basically the same art form: creating, organizing, visualizing, and collaborating. They are authors of movement" (Billman, 1997, p.8). Some distinguished film choreographers that moved into the art of directing film are Gene Kelly, Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse, Kenny Ortega, Adam Shankman, and Rob Marshal (Billman, 1997).

### **The Past and Present Status of Recognition for the Film Choreographer**

Even though dance has been present during much of the American film industry's vast history, film choreographers have always lacked recognition for their work. Larry Billman stated "among the unsung heroes of Hollywood history, choreographers are often overlooked by aficionados of both dance and film" (Billman, 2003). However, there have been honorary Academy Awards for excellence in film choreography. The awards went to Gene Kelly for his work in *An American in Paris*, Jerome Robbins for his work in *West Side Story*, and Onna White for her work in *Oliver!*, and Michael Kidd for his overall contributions to the art of choreography for film (Fuhrer, 2019). Additionally, From 1935 to 1937 there was a "Best Dance Direction" award. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science's website includes a reference to these awards. The category's nominees included well-known and influential film choreographers like

Busby Berkeley and Hermes Pan (“10th Academy Awards Memorable Moments,” 2014 ). When the Dance Direction award began in 1935, it was during a period of time in which movie musicals were being mass-produced and were in great demand by the public. It made sense to honor the work of those coordinating the twirling and leaping seen on the many screens of the time. However, the Dance Direction category lasted for only three short years (“10th Academy Awards Memorable Moments,” 2014). Members of the Directors Guild successfully lobbied the Academy to eliminate the Dance Direction category. They claimed that the term “direction” should only apply to the director of the film, and not the dance director (Dirks, n.d.). Since the discontinuation of the award, there has been no further conversation as to why this conflict existed at the time. It should also be acknowledged that when choreographers were hired by the dance director, they would not receive the credit. The credit would go to the dance director who was under a long-term studio contract. Film choreographers of the time were not under studio contracts (Billman, 1997).

Despite the many hats a film choreographer wears during the production of a motion picture, they still lack adequate recognition for their work in films. In 1992 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences released *Oscar’s Greatest Moments* that included multiple choreographed dance scenes without giving the film choreographers proper credit or residual payment for their work. In response, a group of film choreographers including Rob Iscove, Michael Kidd, Walter Painter, Vincent Paterson, Scott Salmon and Alan Johnson approached the Academy saying “they are tired of the industry’s continuing ‘lack of respect’ for their work” (O’steen, 1992). Additionally, after the release of *Oscar’s Greatest Moments* (1992) Debbie Allen stated that it is time film choreographers received equal time and respect as other creators

involved in the film industry. She claimed that the film industry goes to “great lengths” to acknowledge caterers on set, but still ignores the value in the film choreographer’s work (O’steen, 1992). Since this incident, film choreographers have been looking for a guarantee that this mistake will not be repeated, and that they will receive credit where credit is due. When this event occurred, there was a discussion about meeting with the Motion Picture Academy’s executive staff to discuss credit and residual payments. In the end, the AMPAS did apologize for the incident, but since the release of this reference in 1992, there has been no further response by the Academy (O’steen, 1992). There were additional efforts made in the late 1990s. Larry Billman, founder of the now-dissolved Academy of Dance on Film, and Grover Dale, a fellow advocate of film choreographers and the co-producer of the American Choreography Awards, spoke with Richard and Lili Zanuch. At the time, Richard and Lili Zanuch were the co-producers of the 72nd Academy Award Ceremony held in 2000. Billman and Dale confronted them regarding their decision to produce a “danceless” Oscarcast. Grover Dale responded to the decision by saying:

Your decision has opened a wound that started in 1937 when the Academy chose to disqualify the category of “choreography” from Oscar consideration. If you want to calm the waters that erupt every time dance surfaces as an Academy Award issue, take the first steps towards opening a dialogue that could lead to restoring the category that recognized the contributions of choreographers to motion pictures around the world. (G. Dale, personal communication, February 22, 2000)

Lili Zanuch responded by stating “we love dance, but it’s no longer relevant in today’s film industry” (G. Dale, personal communication, February 22, 2000). Billman refuted the statement

by claiming it “unwarranted, especially when 60 films in 1999 incorporated dance, two of which were nominated in the best picture category (‘Being John Malkowitz’ and ‘American Beauty’)” (G. Dale, personal communication, February 22, 2000). Additionally, in 2016 there were similar efforts for choreographic recognition within the Oscars made by the dance community. It was advocated for film choreographer Mandy Moore to receive an honorary Oscar for her choreographic contributions in the film *La La Land* (2016). As priorly referred to, this was an action that has formerly taken place to specially recognize film choreographers for their contributions (Dance Spirit, 2017). Aside from these few instances, there have been no further public conversations revolving around efforts to honor film choreographers within the Oscars.

Some believe that a film choreographer’s shortage of recognition is due to their inability to find representation in the film industry. Film choreographer Michael Kidd, known for his work in *The Band Wagon* (1953), *Guys and Dolls*(1955), and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), believes film choreographers are continually unrecognized by the Motion Picture Academy due to their lack of union representation. Kidd believes credit and compensation are not mandated by fairness in the film industry (O’Steen, 1992). In order to solve this problem, action has been taken in the past:

In 1984, a group of more than 100 choreographers approached the Directors Guild of America seeking representation. The DGA agreed to include them in its membership, but was not able to reach an agreement on the issue with the Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers. (O’Steen, 1992, para. 11)

Additionally, In 1992, the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers (SDC) board worked with film choreographers to develop a contract with minimum coverage for film choreography



jobs. This would have included health, welfare, and pension. The contract was said to have been completed within a month (O'steen, 1992). It is currently 2020 and there is still no completion of this contract.

## **Conclusion**

By understanding the history of dance on film, the relationship of the film choreographer and film director, and the past and present status of recognition for the film choreographer; the future of my study hopes to continue the discussion regarding the film choreographer's lack of adequate recognition by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) within the Oscars. After researching each theme discussed above, it became obvious that film choreography has been an integral part of not only the motion pictures in which dance is present but also the film industry's history.

This study is valuable to its field because there has been limited written documentation and investigation as to why film choreographers have been unrecognized by the AMPAS thus far. Aside from efforts in the 1990s, there has been no serious recent research or dialogue regarding a film choreographer's role. In general, there has been a gap in research regarding the tremendous amount of work and skill set that is required from a film choreographer. My study hopes to fill this gap by not only starting a conversation regarding the role of a film choreographer but to also create an opportunity for film choreographers to finally be given appropriate recognition for their work.

Although limited prior research exists regarding film choreography, the research that follows will directly address the film choreographer's lack of recognition within Hollywood. Through semi-structured interviews and data analysis methodologies, this study hopes to answer

the following question: Why are film choreographers unrecognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences within the Oscars? In order to understand why film choreographers haven't been recognized within the Oscars, it is necessary to assess their value within the film industry. Semi-structured interviews will be used to ask film industry professionals about their understanding of a film choreographer's role, as well as their perspective on the film choreographer's value in motion pictures. Additionally, data analysis will be utilized to look at gross and net box-office revenues of motion pictures involving dance, in order to understand the economic value of dance in the movies.

### **Methodology: Semi-Structured Interviews**

#### **Purpose**

If the inclusion of film choreographers within the Academy Awards is based upon their value within the industry, the purpose of this research methodology is to collect qualitative data regarding the value of the film choreographer in hopes to further understand why film choreographers have gone unrecognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences within the Oscars.

#### **Materials**

All participants were contacted via email. The email explained the context of the semi-structured interview. Additionally, the email included the topic of study, estimated length of the interview, and the importance of their input in relation to the study. A detailed consent form was sent to each participant that clearly discussed the research study, interview procedure, benefits, risks/discomforts, confidentiality, rights, and contact information. Each participant

signed the form to confirm their understanding of the information provided, agreement to allow the research team to audio record the interview, as well as their consent to include individual names and personally identifiable information to be used within the research study.

The interview was conducted via phone call, video conference, or email. During the interview, participants responded to a series of questions centered on the film choreographer's role within a motion picture and the film industry itself. These questions were developed based on the participants' experience and relationship with the study. Follow up questions were naturally asked when appropriate. The interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

### **Design and Procedure**

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to collect information from participants. Semi-structured interviews allowed for guided conversation in regards to the subject, however, there was freedom allowed for the participant or interviewee to expand on the topic of discussion. This was a beneficial structure for interviews because it allowed for a more natural flow of conversation and an opportunity for the interviewee and participants to share their own insight on the study in a comfortable manner.

Once the interviews were completed and recorded, the interview was then transcribed on a Word document. This allowed for the interviews to be analyzed, compared, and contrasted amongst each other. This process is called coding. The coding process involved a thorough review of the transcribed interview. Coding allowed for themes to be noted and established. The themes found through the coding process included dance's presence in film, defining a film choreographer's role, and a lack of awareness regarding the work of a film choreographer.

## **Institutional Review Board**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Pace University is dedicated to protecting the rights, welfare, and privacy of human participants in research. The IRB committee reviews all research done on human subjects to ensure ethical guidelines enforced in the Belmont Report, the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR Part 46, as well as Pace University policies and procedures are being followed. The goal is that all research is done ethically, responsibly, without undue risk towards participants, and in line with federal regulations. The IRB committee consists of members representing different disciplines. Additionally, they all have expertise in different research methodologies. The committee includes one community member unaffiliated with Pace University as well as one member whose primary concerns are not in scientific areas of study. IRB members are not permitted to participate in reviews of protocol in which they have a notable conflict of interest. This ensures complete, and well-rounded review of research done by or on the community members of Pace University.

## **Results**

### **Dance's Presence in Film**

The most obvious reason behind why film choreography has not been recognized within the Oscars is due to dance's limited presence in film. This was typically the first note brought up by each participant when asked why they believed film choreographers have not been regularly recognized within the annual Oscar Academy Awards. Jennifer Hamilton, an industry choreographer who has worked on numerous films such as Easy A, Fame, Little Miss Sunshine,

Charlie's Angels, and all three Austin Powers films, compared the presence of a choreographer versus the presence of the typical crew on a film set. She said "not every movie has dance. Every single movie has a director. Every single movie has a DP (director of photography). Every single movie has a costumer. Every single movie has a makeup artist, visual effects, and music," thus contributing to a choreographer's limited regular presence on set. Each participant discussed because there is a limited amount of films with dance, there are also a limited amount of film choreographers. Dominique Kelley, an industry choreographer and dancer who has a multifaceted career in front of and behind the camera, added to Hamilton's point. He claimed film choreographers are not regularly recognized within the Oscars "because there's not too many of us (film choreographers)." Kelley deemed "it's basically based on sheer numbers... we're not on every set." Mandy Moore, renowned industry choreographer of the six-time Oscar Award winning film *La La Land* (2016), agrees with Kelley. Moore believes the modest community of film choreographers contributes to their inability to find recognition within the Oscars, claiming "I think that we are such a small part of the whole industry that we become a little bit forgotten."

After speaking with film choreographers about their lack of a regular presence within motion pictures, interviews with above-the-line individuals in filmmaking had similar dialogue. Each interview participant additionally discussed the limited amount of film choreographers in the industry. Another point of conversation was added regarding the inconstancy of the movie musical, a genre that is most obviously filled with film choreography and contributes to dance's presence within film. Director, producer, screenwriter, and the youngest Academy Award winner for Best Achievements in Directing in 2017; most famously known for his films *Whiplash*

(2014), *La La Land* (2016), and *First Man* (2018), Damien Chazelle discussed the film choreographers presence within the history of filmmaking. He most closely associated the film choreographer with the movie musical, a genre that fluctuates in popularity. Chazelle said, “of course the choreographer is essential to the musical, and the musical as a genre has gone through ups and downs in Hollywood.” Chazelle discussed the lack of presence a film choreographer has formerly had within the industry due to the limited demand for dance in motion pictures, therefore creating a limited ability for film choreographers to be involved in film. He went on to say “right now there are a lot of musicals getting made, so my hope is film choreographers are getting more work and more recognition than they maybe had in the prior few decades.” Chazelle finished the conversation by saying “certainly I think choreography is so instrumental to certain movies, the most obvious being musicals, but even certain non-musicals as well, that it deserves to be acknowledged when the work is there,” claiming that despite choreography’s irregular presence within film, it should be recognized when present due to choreography’s value within the entirety of a film.

Film director, producer, screenwriter, and fellow “dance-lover,” Jon Chu had a similar outlook on dance's value within a film. Chu is currently best known for his direction of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). Additionally, he has a history of directing films heavily influenced by dance. These films include *Step Up 2: The Streets* (2008), *Step Up 3D* (2010), and his newest movie musical film *In the Heights* set to release in 2021. When asked about the possibility of including film choreographers within the Academy Awards, Chu responded “there’s only a group of choreographers that are working all the time in that field, or have any sort of established name to be able to discuss something like that,” ultimately claiming that the limited amount of

working film choreographers is one of the largest obstacles in seeking recognition by the Motion Picture Academy. Chu later added to fellow director Damien Chazelle's earlier point regarding the movie musical. Chu said the movie musical genre and “movies driven by music makes sense” to be recognized within the Oscars because they include the most recognizable uses of choreography in film. Additionally, he believes the movie musical “is hot two years in a row and then also disappears for two years” further weakening the opportunity for choreography to be seriously considered by the Motion Picture Academy for recognition due to its inability to build a constant presence in film.

### **A Film Choreographer's Role**

Amongst the film choreographers interviewed, there was a general consensus that not only is the role of a film choreographer difficult to define, but it also encompasses much more than creating dance steps. Each participant discussed the film choreographer's involvement in the technicalities of producing and creating movement, and furthermore their role as an intermediary regarding all production conversations involving dance. Additionally, participants discussed their specific roles within casting, scouting, teaching, managing safety concerns, and becoming a translator of the director's vision through movement. Emmy award winning choreographer Kathryn Burns described some of the additional roles film choreographers must take on set. When it comes to casting, she said “the choreographer is responsible for bringing the right dancers into the project.” She added, “the choreographer knows the style and level of dancer that they need, so they are trusted by production to bring in the right talent.” However, Burns noted in the end “it's up to production to officially book them.” As a leader within the Choreographer's Alliance, Burns further discussed the major role choreographers have in the

regulation of safety measures. She said “since there is no union, it is really hard to regulate anything. It becomes up to the choreographer’s expertise to make sure things are going smoothly, safely, and well-executed.” Dominique Kelley stated that choreographers are often a liaison to other departments when it comes to working with the dancers on set. He said “you are teaching production how to handle dancers because most people don’t know. You’re managing safety concerns, and there’s a lot of things that go into that. A lot of times that’s the choreographer’s job, to alert everybody that is interacting with the dancers on what they need.” Jennifer Hamilton went on to discuss the choreographer’s need to collaborate with all departments. She said “you’re talking to other departments to make sure that your piece works. You’re talking with costumes to make sure the movement works with the costumes. You’re making sure the dancers have the right footing and the right flooring so that dancers can achieve your vision with the director’s vision.” Hamilton later admitted her work “was not about the steps at all. It was about managing every single department to get the picture.” All participants discussed the role they had to play in helping capture the vision of the choreography through the camera. Dominique Kelley said sometimes it is necessary to provide input on how to direct the camera “because sometimes the director may not know how to shoot dance.” Kathryn Burns added, “per the directors request the choreographer can help guide the camera operators and camera movements by speaking the counts loudly, or helping educate the camera operators on the dance.” Burns noted “it’s important to have one voice on set.” Each participant stressed the importance in having a communicative relationship with the director. Jennifer Hamilton went on to add that oftentimes “you are creating the camera shots with the director, if not on your own.” Burns agreed, stating that when developing the scene “sometimes it’s up to you, and they trust



you. You're constructing the dance within the scene, and it depends on the collaboration of how much they want you to take control, but you're definitely the expert in the vocabulary of movement." After discussing the many additional roles a film choreographer takes on, Hamilton went on to say "you're really directing it, it's just you're directing the movement versus the script." She stated in order to find success within her expertise of film choreography, "you definitely have to fall into that director role." Hamilton finished her thoughts by affirming "so whereas the director is directing the staging, the camera moves, and the overall picture; the choreographer is directing the movement." Kathryn Burns added to this, claiming "the title dance director really is appropriate when it comes to the scenes where there's a lot of choreography because... the director really doesn't know the vocabulary of dance like a choreographer does. So they (choreographers) do become the translator of the director." Most participants came to the very similar deduction: the work of a film choreographer and film director is very similar in nature.

Interviews conducted with film directors, writers, and producers included similar definitions of a choreographers role. They emphasized a film choreographer's responsibility in teaching and rehearsing, storytelling, teamwork, and collaboration with the camera. Damien Chazelle touched on his experience working with film choreographers Mandy Moore from his six-time Oscar winning film *La La Land* (2016), and Kelly Kaleta from his debut feature film *Guy & Madeline on a Park Bench* (2009). Chazelle's initial response when asked to define a film choreographer's role was "to choreograph any dance that appears in film." As the conversation continued, he elaborated on the many roles a choreographer takes on for a film. He touched on a film choreographer's role in casting and teaching the dancers and stars. He

specifically referred to Mandy Moore's experience working with Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone. He says "they rehearsed together almost everyday for three months, and that wasn't so much about becoming skilled dancers as it was about testing and trying out different choreographic ideas to see what would feel best." Chazelle described the rehearsal process as never-ending, stating that "the rehearsal process could continue through shooting as well. And during the shoot of the numbers themselves, Kelly or Mandy would be there, right by my side, adjusting things when and where I needed as we would do take after take." He also added that Mandy's creation process for the film began "over a year before we even started prepping the film." Chazelle later went on to discuss the choreographers importance in storytelling. For Chazelle the choreography "always had to tell a story – it had to be an extension of their acting." He described the choreographer as "a visual storyteller who has to be hyper-aware of the camera at all times – the same move filmed one way can look completely different filmed another way." Later on Chazelle discussed the choreographer's importance within the entirety of the film, claiming the two times he has worked with a choreographer "they've been a pretty essential part of the team from the earliest stages." He stressed the importance of informing the choreographer in all elements of the film, claiming "I want the choreographer to be informed of *everything* – the script, the aesthetic, the cast, the logistics, the budget, the schedule, the music, the references, the goals in all departments." He stressed the importance of teamwork. When referring to *La La Land* he said "it often felt like Mandy, myself, the cast and the camera team were, and had to be, one fluid unit; we all had to be in constant dialogue with each other at all times." Chazelle described the relationship between a film choreographer and film director as "one of my favorite relationships on the set." He went on to discuss a film choreographer and film director's shared

responsibilities. He said “well certainly when it comes to ‘directing’ the cast, if the cast is dancing we’re sort of both going to wind up doing that.” Later, Chazelle added “the jobs are similar – both are about expressing emotions or ideas through the placement and movement of human bodies through space, through motion and shape and through time.” Ultimately, Chazelle emphasized the need for collaboration of the choreography and the camera. He stated “for me, the dances have to exist in conjunction with the camera – the camera essentially completes the dance.”

Jon Chu also had his own definitions of a film choreographer's role. Overall, he described the choreographers he’s worked with as “translators” and “storytellers” who use “their language to help me tell the story that I’m trying to communicate.” Chu went on to say “I give them (film choreographers) prompts as I would give an actor, and then they use their language, which is dance, and use our actors to create that piece.” Later on Chu discussed his relationship with film choreographers, directly referencing his dynamic with Christopher Scott, one of Chu’s main collaborators and current choreographer for his up and coming film *In The Heights* (2021). He described his specific relationship with Christopher Scott as dependable, collaborative, and communicative. Chu stated “we have enough trust. There has to be a relationship with Chris where he’s not feeling like I’m ruining his work, and I have to know that his work is contributing to the story that we’re trying to tell of our movie. So both parties have to understand that... understand that both are working together and not competing.” Chu further elaborated on this collaboration of choreography and directing. From his experience, he compared the work of film choreographers to be “very much like dance directing. It’s second unit directing in a way with me.” Nearing the end of the conversation Chu went on to discuss how a film choreographer’s

skillset can naturally transition them into directing. He claimed “there is something to be said about knowing the logistics of how to put together a dance number, dealing with actors, you’re dealing with the talent, you’re dealing with lighting, you’re dealing with the floor, the costume, you’re dealing with all this stuff that a director has to deal with anyway, that you’re very well prepared for the logistics of directing a movie.” Stating that the many roles a film choreographer takes on during the creation of a film greatly prepares them to transition into a director role.

### **Lack of Awareness**

Due to the difficulty in defining the role of a film choreographer, each participant discussed the overall lack of awareness by the film industry regarding what it means to be a film choreographer. Each choreographer interviewed believed this lack of awareness greatly contributes to their inability to find recognition for their work. Kathryn Burns summarized this thought by saying “I think dance is such a wonderful way of expression and a lot of filmmakers don’t even know how to encapsulate all that a choreographer does. They don’t realize the process that goes into it before they show up on set.” It is believed if the film industry understood of the work-ethic and intelligence that goes into being a film choreographer, then maybe there would be a better chance at becoming more respected within the industry, and perhaps viewed as a category worth celebrating. Jennifer Hamilton discussed her feelings of respect when on a movie set. She said “If you have something where they’re relying really heavily on the dance and it really makes the story drive, you are a very prominent and well respected figure.” Hamilton added “I’ve never been totally undervalued, but just sometimes more invisible than unrespected depending on how much they need you.” Kathryn Burns agreed to this, saying “people always enjoy it, but sometimes they don’t know how to actively show

respect,” ultimately stating that any feelings of disrespect is out of lack of awareness towards the true roles fulfilled by a film choreographer. Burns additionally said choreography is “dealing with a language that people don’t speak.” She went on to say “their notes, thoughts, and process of getting what they want creatively from the choreographer isn’t always communicated in a way that makes the choreographer feel respected.” Mandy Moore discussed how the process of film choreography isn’t commonly known or practiced, as other filmmaking roles are. She said, “there’s not really a school for choreography. You can study staging and creation of phrases, but there’s not a school. It’s not like a film school where you can study directing... no one taught me how to choreograph.”

Damien Chazelle admitted that there are aspects of a film choreographer’s job that acts as an enigma. He stated “there is still an element of it that remains mysterious to me, like some kind of alchemy.” Chazelle directly referenced his work with both Kaleta and Moore, saying “I can express what I want the final result to look or feel like, but to see someone like Kelly or Mandy then construct something, bit by bit, move by move, shape by shape, from thin air, that then looks and feels like what I’d hope for, is always a little astonishing to me.” Chazelle went on to explain his admiration for the work. He shared “I find it hard to talk specifically about dance – every human body is so different – so the way that these choreographers can take something that is so malleable and maybe hard to pin down and put it through a process that is so precise, so mathematical – and yet always attuned to the organism, to character, to the imperfections that make something emotional instead of cold – never ceased to amaze me. It’s such a great art form.” Ultimately sharing, the work still exhibits excellence within its field despite any innate lack of awareness regarding a film choreographer’s job. Chazelle ended the

conversation by stating “I think cinema, at its best and purest, aspires to dance.” A beautiful sentiment towards the power and value dance contributes to film.

When Jon Chu was asked what he has learned most from working with film choreographers, he first expressed his need to fully understand the dance included within his movies. He shared “working with choreographers really taught me that I need to understand, and I need to be educated on where the styles are from, and what they mean in order for me to know how I can use it in the best way to tell our story.” When educated, he discussed the power dance can have when used correctly. As an example, Chu shared “if you want to show frustration or whatever it may be, maybe there’s a style that would help communicate that instead of just having someone shake around and move, and then go over there... to me that’s just not understanding the tools that you have.” He referred to his own experience with choreographers, saying “I’ve gotten to know dancers really well... because I knew dancers so much, I understood what they wanted to say. I had a very frank conversation on what they’re trying to communicate.” He went on to discuss how he felt he could help enhance the choreography and create a collaboration with the camera. He stated “there was definitely a language that we could translate with each other together, which was very helpful.” Chu discussed the importance in understanding each art form in order to collaborate together, saying “if you don’t have the language, you don’t know how to explain what you need.” Ultimately, Chu claimed this lack of understanding can create misuse of dance in film. He stated “I do think there’s missed opportunities. If you actually understood the power, if more directors understood the power of it, they could really use those things in a more advantageous way.” Additionally, Chu discussed the misunderstanding that a film choreographer is solely responsible for making up dance steps.

When referencing a choreographer's role he clarified "I think people who have never done it before, may think that it's just making up moves. That's the easy part. Being part of a crew and building something together is a whole other set of instincts." He elaborated this thought by discussing the film choreographer's roles that go beyond making moves. Chu shared "we're talking about budget. We're talking about how to work with production design and costume, hair and makeup. We're talking about a lot of infrastructure. It's a job. It is not just make up stuff and then they go do it." Chu further referenced his own experience working with film choreographers. He said "so to me, it's like we're improving together. We are a team... I am telling you as much story stuff as I am telling my writer, as I'm telling my DP (director of photography)." Chu claimed the relationship he had with the film choreographer was necessary for the creation of his films. He stated that this relationship can often be ignored, claiming "a lot of directors who don't work with choreographers don't know that they need to let their choreographers in... because sometimes you do think it's (choreography) just like a thing, like an object instead of a language, and I think that requires more relationship." At the end of the interview, Chu went on to discuss the potential need for another term to encapsulate the many roles a choreographer contributes to a film. He said "I think saying 'dance director' helps pop it out of what people normally think of a choreographer."

### **Methodology: Data Analysis**

#### **Purpose**

If the inclusion of film choreographers within the Academy Awards is based upon their value within the industry, the purpose of this research methodology is to collect quantitative data

regarding the monetary value of the film choreographer in hopes to further understand why film choreographers have gone unrecognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences within the Oscars. The monetary value of dance within film is important to address because the film industry, like most industries, is influenced by monetary gain.

If dance films create revenue, more dance films would be produced. Thus increasing dance's presence within film as well as pointing out the monetary value of film choreography. This directly correlates to the sentiment that films are primarily produced if they are thought to provide positive revenue. If films including dance provide minimal monetary value, it could inform the thought in which there is a limited presence of dance within films. A lack of dance presence within film directly contributes to the film choreographer's inability to be recognized within the Oscars. In contrast, the results of this methodology could conclude that dance's presence within film does create monetary value, further supporting a need for film choreography's representation within the Oscars.

## **Materials**

All data was collected using *IMDb Pro* and *The Numbers*, an online source that uses OpusData. OpusData directly connects movie data through structured query language and an application programming interface to deliver search and query interface of movie data for research purposes. These sources provided data regarding a film's budget and gross worldly box-office revenue.



## Design and Procedure

The data was collected from movies most likely to include choreography. This was accomplished by cross-referencing the highest grossing movies under the categories of dance, music, and movie musicals. Data was additionally collected from the highest grossing films of all time. This data was then compared in order to examine net box-office revenues of motion pictures involving dance. The net revenue was then divided by the budget of the film to interpret the return on investment. This data was collected in order to understand the economic value of dance in the movies.

It is important to note that the budgets listed below do not include advertising or marketing costs. Additionally, the revenues listed below do not include merchandise, streaming, television rights, or video-on demand (VOD) incomes. The data is simply looking at worldwide box-office revenue.

## Results

Top 20 Grossing Dancing Films:

Title:	Budget:	Gross Revenue:	Net Revenue:	Percent Return on Budget:
Beauty and the Beast (2017)	\$160,000,000	\$1,263,521,126	\$1,103,521,126	689.70%
Mamma Mia! (2008)	\$52,000,000	\$615,514,762	\$563,514,762	1083.68%
La La Land (2016)	\$30,000,000	\$445,111,170	\$415,111,170	1383.70%
The Greatest Showman (2017)	\$84,000,000	\$440,973,522	\$356,973,522	424.97%
Grease (1978)	\$6,000,000	\$396,961,563	\$390,961,563	6516.03%
Mamma Mia: Here We Go Again! (2018)	\$75,000,000	\$395,044,706	\$320,044,706	426.73%
Mary Poppins Returns (2018)	\$130,000,000	\$349,537,494	\$219,537,494	168.87%

Black Swan (2010)	\$13,000,000	\$329,398,046	\$316,398,046	2433.83%
Chicago (2002)	\$45,000,000	\$306,776,732	\$261,776,732	581.73%
Pitch Perfect 2 (2015)	\$29,000,000	\$287,144,079	\$258,144,079	890.15%
The Sound of Music (1965)	\$82,000,000	\$286,214,286	\$204,214,286	249.04%
High School Musical 3: Senior Year (2008)	\$11,000,000	\$252,909,177	\$241,909,177	2199.17%
Saturday Night Fever (1977)	\$3,000,000	\$237,113,184	\$234,113,184	7803.77%
Hairspray (2007)	\$75,000,000	\$203,552,922	\$128,552,922	171.40%
Rocketman	\$40,000,000	\$195,179,299	\$155,179,299	387.95%
Pitch Perfect 3 (2017)	\$45,000,000	\$185,400,345	\$140,400,345	312.00%
Moulin Rouge! (2001)	\$50,000,000	\$184,928,135	\$134,928,135	269.86%
Magic Mike (2012)	\$7,000,000	\$167,739,368	\$160,739,368	2296.28%
Dreamgirls (2006)	\$70,000,000	\$155,430,335	\$85,430,335	122.04%
Evita (1996)	\$55,000,000	\$141,047,179	\$86,047,179	156.45%
			Average:	1428.37%

### Top 20 Grossing Films:

Title:	Budget:	Gross Revenue:	Net Revenue:	Percent Return on Budget:
The Avengers: Endgame (2019)	\$356,000,000	\$2,797,800,564	\$2,441,800,564	685.90%
Avatar (2009)	\$237,000,000	\$2,790,439,000	\$2,553,439,000	1077.40%
Titanic (1997)	\$200,000,000	\$2,194,439,542	\$1,994,439,542	997.22%
Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens (2015)	\$245,000,000	\$2,068,223,624	\$1,823,223,624	744.17%
Avengers: Infinity War (2018)	\$321,000,000	\$2,043,359,754	\$1,722,359,754	536.56%
Jurassic World (2015)	\$150,000,000	\$1,670,400,637	\$1,520,400,637	1013.60%
The Lion King (2019)	\$260,000,000	\$1,656,943,394	\$1,396,943,394	537.29%
The Avengers (2012)	\$220,000,000	\$1,518,812,988	\$1,298,812,988	590.37%
Furious 7 (2015)	\$190,000,000	\$1,515,047,671	\$1,325,047,671	697.39%
Frozen II (2019)	\$150,000,000	\$1,450,026,933	\$1,300,026,933	866.68%
Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)	\$250,000,000	\$1,402,805,868	\$1,152,805,868	461.12%

Black Panther (2018)	\$200,000,000	\$1,346,913,161	\$1,146,913,161	573.46%
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2 (2011)	\$135,000,000	\$1,341,932,398	\$1,206,932,398	894.02%
Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi (2017)	\$317,000,000	\$1,332,539,889	\$1,015,539,889	320.36%
Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom (2018)	\$170,000,000	\$1,308,467,944	\$1,138,467,944	669.69%
Frozen (2013)	\$150,000,000	\$1,280,802,282	\$1,130,802,282	753.87%
Beauty and the Beast (2017)	\$160,000,000	\$1,263,521,126	\$1,103,521,126	689.70%
Incredibles 2 (2018)	\$200,000,000	\$1,242,805,359	\$1,042,805,359	521.40%
The Fate of the Furious (2017)	\$250,000,000	\$1,236,005,118	\$986,005,118	394.40%
Iron Man 3 (2013)	\$200,000,000	\$1,214,811,252	\$1,014,811,252	507.41%
			Average:	676.60%

This was a beneficial method of research because it demonstrated the monetary value dance films provide within the film industry. The data suggests that movies including dance have a larger return on investment by roughly 111.11% in comparison to the highest grossing films of all time; films non inclusive of dance. Because an overall lower budget is given to dance films in comparison to the highest grossing films of all time, a greater return on investment is derived. Thus producing a greater monetary gain once subtracted from the overall gross box office revenue. Therefore, the results of this methodology are in support of the film choreographer's recognition within the Academy Awards due to their essential contributions to dance films; a genre with monetary value.

### Discussion

The conducted research directly addressed why film choreographers are unrecognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences within the Oscars. After interviewing various professionals within the film industry; central themes were developed. The first central theme

developed discussed the limited regular presence of dance within motion pictures. When each participant was asked why they believed film choreographers have previously been unable to receive recognition within the Oscars, this was typically the first and most distinct response. Dance is not in every movie, and therefore film choreography is not always needed for filmmaking compared to other professions. The second theme considers the inability to adequately define the role of a film choreographer. Through the interviews, it was discovered that the role of a film choreographer encompasses a vast amount of roles, eradicating the generalized statement that a film choreographer is solely responsible for creating and presenting dance steps. The third theme developed discussed the lack of awareness regarding the film choreographers contributions within motion pictures. Participants referred to the innate oblivion developed through time within the film industry regarding the true role of a film choreographer.

It should be noted, the results of this study provided significant contributions to the research and conversation focused on the film choreographer. Since there was limited literature and online sources found regarding the film choreographer in Hollywood, each interview participant provided new and insightful information in relation to the research subject. Participants greatly contributed to the conversation surrounding a film choreographer's role within the film industry. A conversation long ignored. Furthermore, each participant contributed additional thoughts to the prior literature reviewed regarding the history of dance on film, the relationship of the film choreographer and director, as well as the past and present status of recognition for the film choreographer. Ultimately, by reviewing past research concerning the film choreographer, conducting personal research on the developed research question, developing themes within the participants responses, while assessing the film choreographers

value within the film industry; it can be argued that film choreographers lack of recognition within the Oscars is due to the lack of dance's presence in film, the undefined role of a film choreographer, and the lack of awareness revolving the film choreographer's contributions to film, directly contributing to the film choreographer's disproportionately perceived value within the film industry.

The lack of dance regularly appearing within film creates an inability for film choreographers to regularly be recognized within the Academy Awards. Since there are a limited number of films requiring dance, there are only a limited amount of professionals who can consider themselves film choreographers. Without a film choreographer's constant presence on set and without dance's constant presence within films, it is difficult to argue the need for representation within the Oscars. Additionally, dance is not always needed within the creation of a film. Elements like lighting, sound, costuming, and others will always be necessary for the production of a film. Filmmaking will always depend on those elements. Filmmaking does not always depend on choreography. Furthermore, dance most obviously exists within the movie musical, a genre that fluctuates in popularity, adding to the inability to regularly acknowledge dance as an Oscar worthy category. It should be noted, many participants discussed dance's presence outside of the musical genre. The choreography of many "dance scenes" can become elusive when seamlessly integrated into the plot. Within the literature review notable authors like Larry Billman and Tim Dirks support this view, claiming the most successful dance on camera combines codependent choreographic and camera work. These components contribute to the lack of a noticeable presence of dance on film. Do these factors justify the continual dismissal to credit the professionals who create the memorable scenes that dance upon our movie

screens? It has been claimed that when dance is present within film, it serves as a valuable asset. History demonstrates the ability to honorarily recognize excellence in film choreography when a movie's success greatly depended on the dance. Perhaps the possible ways in which dance is recognized within the Oscars should be broadened? Regardless of dance's regular presence, film choreographers should have an opportunity to be recognized for their film contributions within the industry they are a part of.

Throughout time there has been an inability to clearly define a film choreographer's role. The lack of literature in respect to the work of a film choreographer is definite proof of an inability to clearly state what a film choreographer's role encompasses. This problem is rooted within the film industry's history with the fluctuation of the terms "dance director" and "film choreographer." Though outdated, it has been discussed the term "dance director" properly embodies what we know today as a film choreographer. Film choreographers act as department heads. They are collaborators who work with multiple departments to create the desired picture. Oftentimes they are building their own scenes with the scripted words "and then they dance." It has become evident the film choreographer's relationship with the director is extremely valued. The choreographer becomes the translator of the director's vision, so there becomes a great need for communication and collaboration. After speaking with directors Jon Chu and Damien Chazelle, it was obvious the film choreographer was an essential part of their team. Throughout history, the film choreographer has contributed to some of the most memorable moments in cinema's history. This was made clear by reviewing literature regarding the AMPAS's release of *Oscar's Greatest Moments* (1992); a video including multiple choreographed dance scenes. Or assessing instances in which film choreographers like Jack Cole had a tremendous role in

directing their dance scenes. Or the distinct demonstration of film choreographers naturally transitioning into directors; like Rob Marshall, Kenny Ortega, Anne Fletcher, and others. It was the earliest dance directors like Busby Berkeley, Gene Kelly, and others that taught and demonstrated how to move the camera. However, many of these dance directors had the opportunity to shoot their own scenes. Throughout history, film choreographers have contributed some of the most notable work and have been some of the film industry's most iconic and historic figures. However, due to the inability to clearly define or acknowledge the many roles a film choreographer encompasses within a motion picture, it has been made difficult for film choreographers to receive adequate recognition for their work. Because of the film choreographers many roles within the process of filmmaking, and their influential and notable contributions within the industry, they should have the opportunity to be recognized for their excellence within the craft of film choreography. A role we now know encompasses much more than dance steps.

Because there has been an inability to define a film choreographer's role, and all it encompasses, there has been a lack of understanding of the work a film choreographer contributes to film. Furthermore, this has created a lack of awareness, and a generalized thought that film choreographers are only responsible for creating choreography. Throughout time we have built an improper idea on what a film choreographer's role is within filmmaking. There is no direct person, or groups of persons, to blame for this fact. After reviewing literature, one can claim when the jargon "dance director" was lost and the term "choreographer" was used to replace it, there became a new frame of thought that film choreographers only create dance steps. In reality, film choreographers still encompass the many roles of the dance director, even though

that title is now dated and unused. Additionally, participants discussed the value dance can contribute to a motion picture when educated upon and used correctly. It is important to remember dance's ability to be seamlessly integrated within the constructed reality of a motion picture. However, more often than not the dance is choreographed in a manner that comes across as commonplace. The choreography becomes elusive, yet this elusiveness should not disregard the work taking place behind the scenes. Furthermore, choreography can also be categorized as staging or movement direction. Overall, due to the lack of awareness regarding the role of a film choreographer, the work film choreographer's produce, and the unclear language around the film choreographer's contributions; it has been difficult for the film choreographer to be perceived as an essential contribution within motion pictures. Thus contributing to the inability to find sufficient recognition within the Oscars.

When assessing the value of a film choreographer, it would be negligent to ignore the monetary value of the choreographer's work within the film industry. After comparing dance films to the highest grossing films of all time, there was a clear positive value based upon the return on investment. The data demonstrated non dance films have an overall larger gross revenue. However, since their budgets were much larger than dance films, their overall return on investment was lower by more than half of dance films' return on investment. This quantitatively suggests dance films provide significant monetary value within the industry. A genre of film heavily reliant on film choreographer's contributions. Overall, the data demonstrates dance films are a lucrative investment.

There were some minor limitations within this study that should be addressed. Firstly, art is inherently subjective. One cannot definitively claim what should and should not be worthy of



recognition without involving bias. Therefore, one cannot definitively claim or describe a film choreographer's work to be successful or unsuccessful. Thus addressing a natural bias when discussing why film choreographers have not been recognized within the Academy Awards. There can only be generalized assumptions based upon literature, conversation, and third-party opinions. The same principle applies when defining value. Monetary value can be definitively addressed, however the overall value of a film choreographer's role in filmmaking is subject to bias. Secondly, the film industry is a very large industry. This study was fortunate enough to involve both film and dance industry professionals who are deemed as masters of their craft, however six interview participants cannot speak on behalf of the entire film and dance industry. Lastly, it can be argued there are many essential and contributing roles involved in filmmaking that go unrecognized within the Oscars. After speaking with many industry professionals, it was made aware that the conversation of what is considered to be "Oscar-worthy" is subjective within itself. There seemed to be an overall stereotype when evaluating what categories and style of films go recognized and unrecognized.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study affirmed the lack of recognition for the film choreographer in Hollywood is due to the lack of dance's presence within the film industry, the film choreographer's undefined role within the film industry, and the general lack of awareness regarding all that encompasses a film choreographer's role. By discussing these results, it can be argued the film choreographer has been inappropriately placed at the bottom of the film industry's hierarchy. Through this study, the value of the film choreographer has been made

clear. It demonstrates an evident need to advocate for film choreography to be recognized within the Oscars. As a result, an opportunity for further research can be pursued. Now that there is a general understanding as to *why* film choreography has not been recognized within the Academy Awards, steps can properly be taken to address *how* film choreography can be recognized within the Academy Awards.

Because of this understanding, moving forward we can take more educated steps in fighting for recognition. These steps include: clearly defining a film choreographer's role, creating an awareness regarding the film choreographer's all encompassing work, and making efforts to recognize films that rely on choreography's contributions. Some ways in which these steps could be pursued includes creating a new Oscar Award category or taking more serious steps in honorarily recognizing choreography on film, building a union for camera choreographer's, increasing the dialogue regarding a film choreographer's role within the film industry, and pushing for choreographers to be considered an essential member of the filmmaking team. For example, on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) choreographers are currently listed as "Other Crew." Now that there is a better understanding regarding the immense value of a film choreographer within the film industry, these actions deem necessary and long overdue.

When beginning this research study, there was a frustratingly scarce amount of writing about the film choreographer and their roles and contributions within the film industry. This study hopes to fill the research gap so when others look up "film choreography" there will be more documentation regarding these essential and impactful industry professionals. It aims to inspire more conversation about the film choreographer and to increase the dialogue regarding

the film choreographer's role within motion pictures. At the completion of this study, the great value as well as the lack of awareness regarding the film choreographers role within motion pictures was made evident. In conclusion, this research study clearly demonstrates it is time to give film choreographers recognition by the industry in which they work for, and hopes to serve as a catalyst for this change.

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### **Appendix: Interview Questions**

- Why do you think film choreographers haven't been acknowledged by the Oscars for their work?
- Do you know why the Dance Direction award was removed from the Oscars in 1937?
- Do you know of anyone currently advocating for film choreography to be represented in the Oscars?
- What was the process like getting choreographers represented by the TV Academy with the Emmys?
- Can you discuss your role and responsibilities as a film choreographer when working on a movie?
- Do you feel respected by the Academy?
- How do you personally believe film choreographers will be able to be acknowledged by the Oscars for their work?
- Do you feel the film choreographer is valuable to the industry?
- Could you define a film choreographer's role?
- When working with a film choreographer, what do you need from them in order to create the picture you were envisioning?
- When working with a film choreographer, what did you need from them in order to create the picture you were envisioning?
- When working with a film choreographer, what kind of shared responsibilities do you have, if any?
- How would you define the relationship between a film director and film choreographer?

- Do you feel the film choreographer is valuable to the industry?