

THST 213E / ENGL S434E: Writing Dance

Summer A 2024

TTh 9am-12:15pm, remote

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Office Hours By Appointment

## Course Description

The esteemed and wily choreographer Merce Cunningham once compared writing about dance to trying to nail jelly to the wall. This seminar and writing workshop takes on the challenge. Taught by [a dance critic for the New York Times](#), the course uses a close reading of exemplary dance writing to introduce approaches that students then practice in response to an extremely wide variety of dance.

The course presupposes no prior knowledge of dance, though such knowledge can be useful. The skills and talents it requires and seeks to develop are general writerly ones of close observation, precise articulation, rhythm, structure, imagination, wit. Anyone up for the challenge is welcome, especially aspiring poets, novelists, theater artists, performance artists, journalists, critics, and dancers with a literary sensibility.

How can an art that communicates and generates meaning mostly without words be written about? What kinds of writing does dance inspire? After glancing at some nineteenth-century precedents, we will investigate answers to those questions in dance writers of the twentieth century and recent decades. These writers will be studied for their literary craft: their ways of evoking movement on the page (mostly without recourse to a specialized dance vocabulary), their choices of form and style, their powers of suggestion and persuasion.

While examining these options, students will also test them out and invent their own, responding to dance in written exercises, which will, in turn, serve as more dance writing to analyze. Indeed, this student writing will become the principal focus of the class, all of it receiving extensive feedback, both from the instructor and from classmates in writing-workshop format.

To more closely approximate the life of a working critic, most weeks will be organized not by theme but miscellaneously, mixing up styles, geography, and time periods -- exposing students to diverse genres and approaches, forcing them to be nimble, flexible, and quickly responsive, opening up possibilities for fresh connections and expansions of perception and sensibility. We'll experiment -- applying our methods to subjects outside of conventional dance performance: sports, people walking across college courtyards, pets. Student interests and enthusiasms can help guide the course.

The final sessions of the course will be devoted to discussion of final essay drafts (2000-3000 words) in workshop format. Students will be required to submit detailed written responses to their classmates' work.

## Course Format

This class will be conducted over Zoom as a seminar with elements of workshop format. Class attendance is mandatory.

## Enrollment Cap, Selection Process, and Notification

The class will be capped at 12. Priority will be given to THST and ENGL majors and by seniority.

## Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites.

## Assignments

Six or seven short writing exercises (500-700 words), which may include one revision

One final essay (2000-3000 words)

## Grading

Class participation: 20%

Short exercises: 50%

Final essay: 30%

You must document all of your source material. If you take any text from somebody else, you must make it clear the text is being quoted and where the text comes from. You must also cite any sources from which you obtain numbers, ideas, or other material. Use of ChatGPT or other AI composition software is not permitted. If you have any questions about what does or does not constitute plagiarism, ask! Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be treated lightly. Fortunately, it is also easy to avoid and if you are the least bit careful about giving credit where credit is due you should not run into any problems.

## Required Course Materials

All readings and videos will be posted on CANVAS -- in Files and Media Library, with links in the syllabus.

## Syllabus

Highly subject to revision

Class One, May 28: Introduction

READ: Joan Acocella, [Imagining Dance](#)

Class Two, May 30: Historical Precedents, Principals, and Pointers

READ: Charles Dickens, [Tale of Two Cities and American Notes](#) (1859, 1843)

Théophile Gautier, (1837-38)

Stephane Mallarmé, ["Ballets"](#) (1890s)

Akim Volynsky, on [Anna Pavlova](#) (1913)

Andre Levinson, ["Spirit of Classical Dance"](#) (1925)

Agnes de Mille on [Pavlova](#), [Carmelita Maracci](#), and [Argentina](#) (1951)

Edwin Denby, ["Dance Criticism"](#) and ["Against Meaning"](#) (1949)

Sally Banes, ["On Your Fingertips: Writing Dance Criticism"](#) (1995)

Deborah Jowitt, ["A Personal View of Dance Criticism"](#) (1975) ["Beyond Description"](#) (1996)

Arlene Croce, ["Edwin Denby"](#) (1987) [optional]

[Laban Movement Analysis Chart](#) and [Pre-K version](#)

Zadie Smith, ["Dance Lessons for Writers"](#) (2016)

OPTIONAL VIEW: Anna Pavlova in [Fokine's "Dying Swan"](#) (1907, filmed 1925)

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, ["Isn't it a Lovely Day?"](#) from *Top Hat*, 1935

Gene Kelly, ["Broadway Rhythm"](#) from *Singin' in the Rain*, 1952.

Nicholas Brothers, ["Jumping Jive"](#). (*Stormy Weather*, 1943),

Bill Robinson ["Stair Dance" \(1932\)](#)  
James Brown, ["Night Train"](#) T.A.M.I. Show, 1964)  
Michael Jackson ["Smooth Criminal"](#) (1988); [Prince best dance](#)  
Janet Jackson, ["Rhythm Nation"](#). (1989); Madonna, ["Vogue"](#) (1990)  
Beyonce, ["Single Ladies" \(2008\)](#); ["Formation" \(2016\)](#)  
David Byrne, ["Once in a Lifetime" \(1980\)](#); David Bowie, ["Best Dance Moves"](#).  
Mikhail Baryshnikov, [solos from Don](#); [Best of Rudolph](#)  
Mark Morris, ["Strict Songs"](#). (1987)

#### Class Three, June 4

##### Exercise #1 due

READ: Croce, ["American Space,"](#) ["Free and More Than Equal"](#)

Simone Forti, [Forti Chamber Dance Concert](#) and ["On Huddle"](#)

Deborah Jowitt, ["At Home in the Body"](#)

Greg Tate, [The Persistence of Vision](#)

(Optional: Seibert, ["Storyboard P"](#))

Elizabeth Alexander, ["The Trayvon Generation"](#)

Denby, ["Rockettes and Rhythm"](#)

VIEW: George Balanchine, ["Ivesiana,"](#) (1954, filmed 1964) ), Pas de Deux  
from ["Diamonds "](#). (1967, filmed 1977)

Simone Forti, ["Simone Crawling,"](#) and ["Huddle at High Line"](#) and ["Dance  
Constructions"](#).

Storyboard P, ["Black Magic"](#). (2012), ["Flight" \(2012\)](#).

Flying Lotus, ["Until the Quiet Comes"](#) (2012, Khalil Joseph, dir.)

[Battlefest 14: Soup vs. Storyboard.](#) (2011)

Jay-Z, ["4:44"](#). (2017, Arthur Jafa, dir., with Okwui Okpokwasili)

Radio City Music Hall Rockettes, from ["King of Jazz"](#). (1930), ["Toy  
Soldiers"](#) (1932, filmed 2010)

Marius Petipa, *La Bayadere*, Act III, [Entrance of the Shades.](#) (1877, filmed 2000s,  
Bolshoi Ballet)

Justin Bieber, ["Love Yourself"](#). (2015, choreographed and performed by Keone  
and Mari Madrid)

#### Class Four, June 6:

##### Exercise #2 due

READ: Marcia Siegel, ["The Moor's Pavane"](#)

Jill Johnston, ["Time Tunnel: Jose Limón"](#)

James Harvey, ["Astaire and Rogers"](#)

Nancy Dalva, ["The Way of Merce"](#).

Merce Cunningham, ["Space, Time, and the Dance"](#)

Jowitt, ["Confronting the Xerox With Human Grace"](#)

Terry Teachout, ["Pale Horse, Pale Rider"](#)

Acocella, ["What's Good About Bad Reviews"](#)(1992)

Marina Harss, [Bijayini Satpathy profile](#)

VIEW: Jose Limón, ["The Moor's Pavane"](#). (1949, filmed 1955)

Merce Cunningham, ["Sounddance"](#) .(1975, filmed 2007)  
["How to Pass, Kick, Fall and Run"](#). (1965, excerpt filmed  
1967)

["Crises"](#). (excerpt, 1960)

["Split Sides"](#). (excerpt, 2011)

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, ["Let's Face the Music and Dance"](#) .from *Follow the Fleet*, 1936

Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy, ["Songs of Love and Longing \(excerpts\)"](#). (2014)

Bijayini Satpathy, [".Vibhanga"](#). (2021) [Optional view: ["Odissi Lecture-Demonstration"](#).]

Cloud Gate Dance Theater, ["Moon Water"](#) .(1998, filmed 2008) or ["Cursive II"](#). (2005)

[optional read: Amy Qin ["Cloud Gate Dance Theater"](#)., Anna Kisselgoff, ["Moon Water"](#).]

Class Five, June 11

[Exercise 3 due](#)

READ: Acocella ["Bare Truths"](#)

Dalva, ["Naked"](#)

Siobhan Burke, ["A Body in a Cemetery"](#)

Seibert, ["LaTasha Barnes"](#).

Dwight Garner [on Rita Dove's "American Smooth"](#).

Sontag, ["Lexicon for Available Light"](#)

Thomas DeFrantz, ["This is America"](#).

VIEW: Eiko and Koma, ["Naked"](#). (excerpt, 2011) and Eiko ["A Body in a Cemetery"](#). (2020)

[LaTasha Barnes](#), 2019

Lucinda Childs, ["Dance"](#).

[Gabriel Misse and Analia Centurion at Dardo Galletto Studios](#). (2013) and ["Milonguero Homage"](#).

Carmen Amaya, ["Solea"](#). (1945)

Carmen de Lavallade Geoffrey Holder in ["Banda"](#). from House of Flowers (1958)

Carmen de Lavallade and Dance Theater of Harlem in [Esperanza Spalding's](#)

["Formwela 12"](#). (2022)

["Mambo Madness"](#). (1955)

Ronald K. Brown, ["Grace"](#). (1999, filmed 2015, Alvin Ailey)

["Jimmy Slyde"](#). and ["Dormeshia"](#).

Class Six, June 13

Exercise Four Due

VIEW: Pam Tanowitz, ["Four Quartets"](#). (2019)

Rennie Harris, ["Lazarus"](#). (Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, 2018)

Kyle Abraham, ["Meditation: A Silent Prayer"](#). (2018)

OPTIONAL READ: Macaulay on ["Four Quartets"](#) Seibert on ["Four Quartets"](#). , Eliot, ["Four Quartets"](#); Kourlas, ["A Choreographer Unafraid of Masterpieces"](#).

[Seibert, "Lazarus," Acocella, "Lazarus"](#)

Class Seven, June 18 Writing From Photographs

Exercise #5 due

READ: Denby, ["Notes on Nijinsky Photographs"](#)

Wendy Lesser, ["Portrait of a Ballerina"](#)

VIEW: [Nijinsky photos](#).

OPTIONAL VIEW: George Platt Lynes, ["Photographs of Dancers"](#).

[Call numbers and links for Beinecke items](#)

Class Eight, June 20: [The Dancer, The Dance, People in the Streets.](#)

[Exercise #6 due](#)

READ: Denby, [“Dancers, Buildings, and People in the Streets,” “Forms in Motion and Thought.”](#)

Sontag, [“The Dancer and The Dance”](#)

Acocella, [“The Soloist”](#)

Optional: Kleist, ["Puppet Theater"](#)

VIEW: Baryshnikov sampler (watch as much or as little as you like):

Solos from ["La Bayadere"](#) .(filmed 1969)

[Solo from "Le Corsaire"](#) . in 1977 film "The Turning Point"

Solos from ["Don Quixote" and "Giselle"; .](#)

Balanchine, ["Theme and Variations" \(.with Gelsey Kirkland, 1978\), Apollo \(1988\).. "La Sonnambula".](#)

Twyla Tharp, ["Push Comes to Shove" .\(1976, filmed 1984\)](#)

["One for My Baby" .from Tharp's "Sinatra Suite" \(filmed 1984\)](#)

Scene from ["White Nights" . \(1985\) and duet with Gregory Hines .](#)

[. Baryshnikov with the Mark Morris Dance Group .](#)

[Baryshnikov with Cunningham .\(2010\)](#)

June 23: [Final Essay First Draft Due](#)

Class Nine, June 25: Final Essay Workshop, #1

[Workshop #1 Comment due](#)

Class Ten, June 27: Final Essay Workshop #2

[Workshop #2 Comments due](#)

July 2: Final Essay due