



# Behind the Table

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## Abstract

Musical theatre, specifically Broadway dance, has emerged from a problematic past. Thus, this research questions what Broadway dance is and how collaborators receive credit for their contributions. These concepts are explored creatively through a choreographic work that brings to light the frustrations of those in front of the table. Historically, white males have been the lead creatives, driving a theatrical production from behind the table. Therefore, this work illuminates the intricate relationships of those not in positions of power and infers the emotional and physical strain endured by dancers. Beyond that, choreography is often collaborative during the early creative process where each individual would and should normally receive credit for their contribution throughout the process. This work brings forward what is incorrect with the ladder of theatre workshops. Within the production team and dancers, acknowledgment is crucial and necessary in order to further succeed in the industry. This concept rings true at every level of the production hierarchy.

## Background

### American Musical Theater

- Workshop Process
  - Pre-production of theatrical works in which creatives workshop ideas on tentative/original cast
  - Goal is to create full length production in hopes of making it to Broadway
- Hierarchy/Division: In Front of VS Behind the Table
  - Creatives are authority figures, while dancers are often powerless and treated as bodies rather than people
  - Collaboration can/does lead to ownership discrepancies
  - Gender and race relations seep into decision making
- Historically has been/is...
  - Dominated by white identities, stereotypes, and assumptions
  - Minority contributors to Broadway dance techniques remain unspoken
    - Women and People of Color
      - Musicals structurally present and hide their racial agendas to the audience
      - Immigrant and minority cultures influence musicals, but are sanitized for white high-class audiences

## Choreographic / Production Process

Thesis Title: Broadway's Blindspots: Authenticity, Ownership, & Appropriation in Theater Dance Styles

- Research Questions:
  - What is Broadway dance?
  - How do collaborators receive credit for their contributions to theatre dance?

### Collaborations:

- Cast
  - Writing prompts, discussions, and lived-experiences drove work
  - Emphasized safe-space creation process for vulnerable story generation
  - Gave outline for movement motivation and dancers co-choreographed short segments, which combined to form sections of the final performance
- Jacob Fjeldheim
  - Composer

### Choreography:

- Haddad intertwined own choreographic style with other Broadway choreographers such as:
  - Agnes de Mille, Mabel Robinson, Twyla Tharp, Marlie Yearby, Hope Clarke, Susan Stroman, Kathleen Marshall, Camille A. Brown
- Choreographed to historically popular Broadway songs to incorporate various dance styles, which was later replaced with original music by Jacob Fjeldheim
- Utilized realism and abstraction to convey different perspectives based on the hierarchy within a workshop space

## Discussion

- The history of collaboration between creative and dancers.
  - Ex: Chorus line where each dancer received credit as it was made from the dancers perspective and truths within the industry.
- The history of underlying race, ethnicity, and discrimination with production staff and dancers.
  - Ex: white creative teams create "new" black and interracial productions of already original works made for only white cast.
- The history of abusive "men/ leaders" as choreographers, directors, and producers.
  - Ex: 42 street producer David Merrick was known to be egotistical and controlling but no one said anything to help him fix his ways.

## Limitations

Lack of recognition and representation of minority artist is a large part of musical theatre and Broadway in today's industry. This research has started a conversation but has not even begun to make a dent in the systematic race and gender basis historically created with the industry itself.

## Completed Work / Performance

Production Title: Behind the Table

- Cast: 21 performers
  - Two white males portrayed the director and choreographer
  - Assistant choreographer was a white female
    - Solo section abstractly expressed desire for recognition and inclusivity
    - Work in workshop goes unacknowledged at end of piece
  - Supporting cast embodied characters based on experiences and musical theater research
  - Piece ends visually depicting the hierarchy of musical theater
    - White male creatives on top, white performers just below, and people of color on the bottom



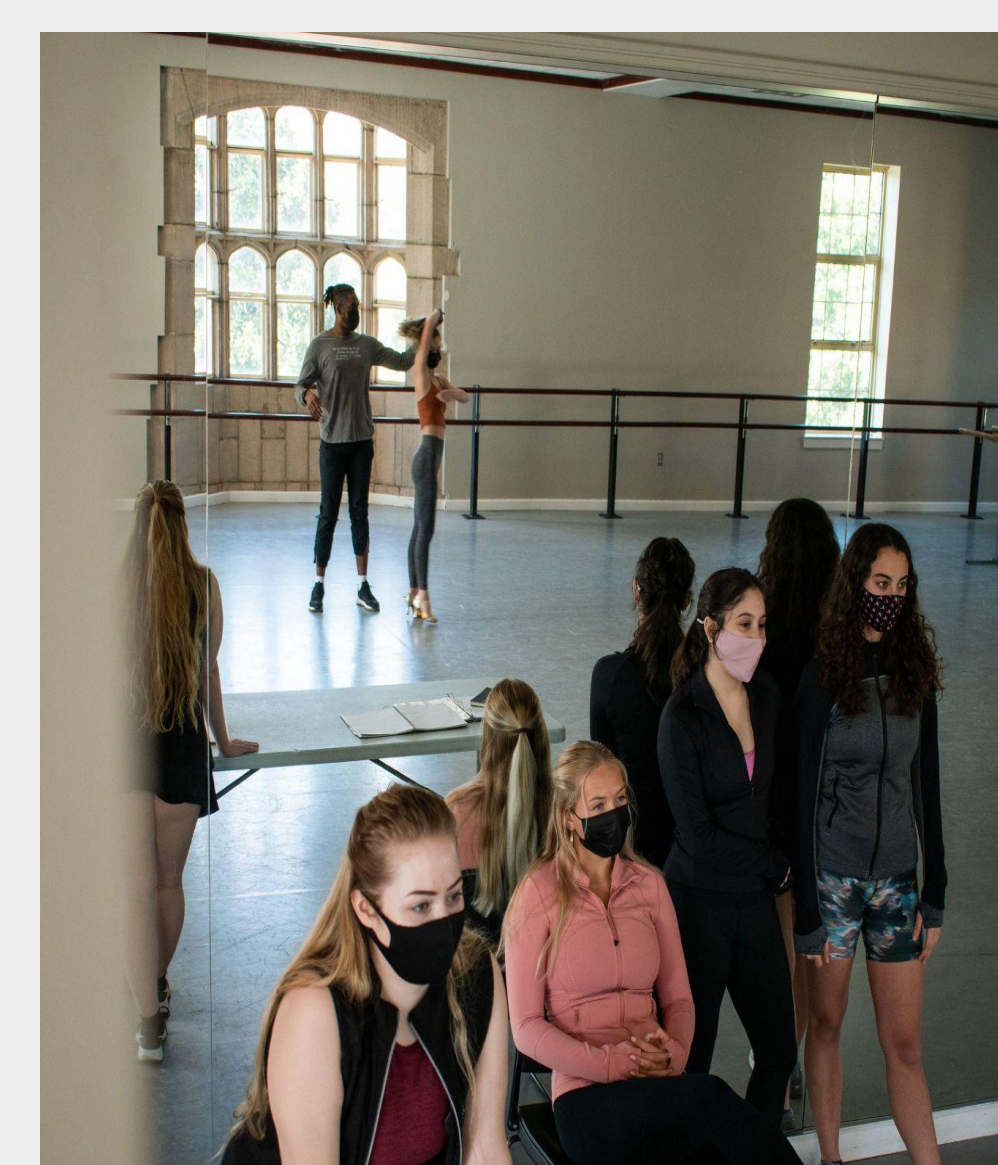
Depicts two characters with contrasting personalities. Left: "The flirt" Right: Assistant Choreographer Photography by Kisa Li



Choreographer gives notes to dancers during rehearsal. Photography by Ryker Laramore



QR CODE: Long version of MFA Show Promo Video Videography & Editing by Kisa Li



The dancers behind the table judgmentally watch the dancers on the floor. Photography by Ryker Laramore

## Conclusion

- Better understand role and treatment of minorities in musical theatre choreography; women and people of color
- Useful to the creation of inclusive academic curriculum in higher education Musical Theater Choreography studies; focused on gender and race
- Actively breaking barrier created by the table; implemented research into process
  - Collaborators are credited
  - Open discussions between the cast and choreographer
    - Pertaining to race and gender relations in rehearsal/performance space
  - Inclusive/Safe-space Environment

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