

**DANCING THE MEGAMUSICAL IN LAS VEGAS.  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DANCE IN POPULAR CULTURE:  
EFX AT THE MGM GRAND, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**

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**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in  
Partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of  
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An Ethnography of Dance in Popular Culture:  
EEX at the MGM Grand, Las Vegas Nevada**

by

**Serena Quaglia**

a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of York  
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
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## **Abstract**

This ethnography presents the history and staging of EFX, a Las Vegas show extravaganza that reflects a growing trend. I explore the demands imposed on dancers by advancing technology, higher production values, and lofty aesthetic standards. Dance in Las Vegas has not traditionally been the subject of scholarly review. The association with topless entertainment has receded recently as Las Vegas, in competitive mode, has committed itself to upscale family-oriented entertainment, of which EFX is a prime example.

As an inaugural cast member of EFX, I had privileged access to its creation and early development. This thesis draws on personal experience, survey materials, interviews, and observations recorded from June 1994 to January 1999. I hope that one consequence of this study will be a broader recognition of the high levels of artistry and training demanded of show dancers, who in future may avoid the tedious necessity I and my colleagues faced: having to defend participating in and enjoying show dancing because of its low rank in the received hierarchy of dance forms.

The research contextualizes EFX and Las Vegas in terms of spectacle. First I describe events surrounding the creation of the production, including the overall role of dance in the show. The historical “showgirl” stereotype is addressed and contrasted with present-day performers and choreography. Other related topics include the

intentions of the producers and choreographers, the commissioned music, and aspects of set and costume design.

The dancers' versatility and technical skills are highlighted in discussion of the audition and rehearsal processes, teaching and learning practices, performance discipline, and motivational factors that carve the dancers' experiences. The dancers' physiques provide insight to their cross-training regimes. Lifestyle (influenced by climate), education, and dance training profiles help paint a new portrait of show dancers in Las Vegas.

If EFX called for dancers who would satisfy the Broadway standard, it went far beyond Broadway in costs, largely because of the cutting-edge technology that served as a constant challenge to the performers and source of delight to audiences. All in all, EFX has set an impressive new "industry standard" for musical theater generally.

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## **Introduction**

During the past five years, I have been supporting myself as a show dancer and have performed at many prestigious entertainment complexes in the United States including the MGM Grand and the Las Vegas Hilton hotels in Las Vegas, Fantasy Springs Resort in Palm Springs, and The Rialto Center for the Performing Arts in Atlanta. Show dancers may be contrasted with show girls by the far more intensive artistic and technical demands imposed upon them. Although the remuneration for show dancing greatly exceeds the pay for dancers in more prestigious "high art" companies, I have found that a corresponding price is exacted of us in terms of respect. I and my fellow show-dancing colleagues these days are not less well trained or less technically adept than our colleagues in ballet and modern dance. In fact, show dancers typically have a great deal of experience in both those styles of dance. But old stereotypes die hard, and all too often the mere fact of our having performed on the stages of Las Vegas elicits polite scorn, especially in university circles. An unfortunate consequence of this attitude is that university-trained dancers, like me, have far too little exposure to, and training for, a form of dance that can provide challenging employment and no small measure of artistic satisfaction.

In this ethnographic essay, I explore the demands imposed on show dancers in the context of advancing technology, higher production values, and more stringent dancer recruitment regimens, driven by a new investment climate geared to an aging and more sophisticated audience. All across the board, producers, directors, arrangers,

and choreographers, as well as audiences, are requiring more technical and artistic skill from the professional performer. If there was a division between high and low culture, one of the clear implications of the new investment climate for popular entertainment vehicles is that this division is eroding, at least in some areas.

Few scholars have conscientiously looked beyond the rhetoric surrounding the issues concerning dance theater and contemporary showmanship as a manifestation of popular culture (Nachbar & Lause, 1992). It is the goal of this paper to present the history, context, development, and staging of a Las Vegas extravaganza. Specifically, I employ a range of materials to elucidate the complex interaction of technology, artistry, and technique. Instruments employed include interviews and survey-based commentary from participants in the production of a megamusical on various matters affecting artistic decision-making and performance, supplemented by archival material (newspaper and magazine articles, production guides, programs). A description of the processes involved in the creation of the production, focusing on economic, physical, technological, experiential and personal processes impacting cast and stage performance, is provided. Finally, this essay is informed by a compilation of personal observations concerning how megamusicals may point to where the future of dance is heading. If these implications nudge university dance departments to prepare students with a broader understanding of career dance options, the major goal of this paper will have been achieved, and the bias against show dancers may have been reduced. If informal argument will not convince anyone that there can be good theater with

respectable artistic values in Las Vegas, and that good dancers can find it well worth their while to perform there, then perhaps an ethnography will be more persuasive. Perhaps, too, my discussion of the interaction between performance and production philosophies will shed some light on possible futures of dance.

### **Theoretical Framework and Method**

This study is focused on one show in one location, EFX (EFX), held at the MGM Grand Hotel, Casino, and Theme Park in Las Vegas, Nevada (MGM). 3,600 kilometers west of Broadway, a \$67-million investment illuminates the Nevada landscape. (Note: all dollar figures are in American currency.) With 5005 rooms, 744 suites, covering 112 acres, the MGM is the world's largest hotel complex. Home to a mammoth spectacle, it schedules visual catharsis five nights a week. The headliner show, EFX, opened March 24, 1995, and was immediately "touted as the musical theater of the coming millennium" (Corliss, 1995, p. 58). Such it may well be because with EFX, American musical theater entered the multimedia era in a fully-committed fashion.

Much of the literature analyzing dance in Western culture pertains to ballet, modern, jazz dance, tap, and musical theatre. Virtually every context is examined with one startling exception: Las Vegas. Productions that showcase dance provide jobs for thousands of people in Las Vegas. These include, in addition to dancers, musicians, choreographers, costume designers, seamstresses, dressers, teachers, stage managers,

production staff, technical crew and run-of-show crew. Documenting this impact is rare, still rarer is acknowledgement. This thesis initiates that process of documentation, optimally in the spirit of acknowledgement, using information derived from privileged access to the creation and on-going maintenance of EFX. Some of the less familiar terms are expanded upon in a glossary provided in the Appendix. The goal is to create an analytical portrait of a unique artistic community. This ethnographic portrait may further the understanding of how educational, social, economic, and artistic factors shape, and are shaped by, popular culture, a relatively little-studied phenomenon.

Over two years in the making, EFX represents a new threshold for Las Vegas and musical theater in general. MGM, a unique entity amalgamating capitalism, technology, and democracy in its heyday as the premier producer of cinematic musicals, may have, once again, become an engine of change, this time in musical theater. Technology, democracy, and capitalism—the major themes of this decade—are interacting in EFX to create new paradigms in the visual and performing arts and concomitantly in popular culture.

Included in the grand total of \$67-million it cost to stage EFX are \$27-million in various technological ingenuities: 3-D movie projection; a fog-wall of steam and liquid nitrogen; 2 immense computer-driven, fire-breathing dragons; seance, circus, and space exploration simulations; 10 tons of artificial rock that slide up from beneath the stage to convey an underground world; more than 3000 moving and 2500 fixed lights; 48 channels of sound; a 33 x 110-foot proscenium stage opening and 20 gigabytes of

computer drive to control it all. The company includes one 'star,' four lead singers, 32 female dancers, 14 male dancers, 6 stunt men, a 6-member flying trapeze team, and a run-of-show crew consisting of more than 100 staff (Quaglia, 1994).

This catalog of hardware and software (human) resources indicates the correlation and interrelation between technology, capitalism, design, production, and the performing arts. The ethnography to follow will explain from my perspective why, for better or worse, EFX appears to be a harbinger of the musical theater of the future.

Yet, EFX as a model for future entertainment spectacle must be a discouraging concept to some reviewers. Illustrative of the development of a new computerized infrastructure using digital tools to create a virtual and real-time performance environment requiring instantaneous feedback and precision techniques, its emphasis on automation may be particularly galling for those with expectations that the performers and the visions of author, director, and producer, respectively, receive most of the focus. In contrast, these individuals may be dismayed at the attention paid to what they consider secondary: scenery, props, lighting, special effects in the context of a super-extravagant display. Although it is true that performers must now share the limelight with what may be termed production values to a much greater degree than in simpler times, this adjustment merely means more added artistic expression from more disciplines. It does not, and never should, mean that less is required of the performers. And, in fact, it may actually mean that more is required of show dancers in terms of synchronization, physical stamina, and ability to adopt a far more varied repertoire.

This is not to say that there are no cases where performers are actually overshadowed by production values; however, where these cases pertain, the production's success has been compromised.

A major qualification now disposed of, it is necessary to detail sources and scope for this study. Sources can be distinguished on the basis of personal association. The impersonal sources include newspaper reports, event programs, trade journals, magazines, and scholarly reviews. Personal sources are derived from: production directives; questionnaires and interviews conducted with cast members, production staff and crew, the company manager, and the choreographer; and finally, my personal observations and reflections. Important personal primary sources encompass MGM complex and show executives and include executive producer and senior vice president of marketing/entertainment Richard Sturm, associate producer and vice president of entertainment James Trudeau, company manager of EFX Elizabeth Lieberman, choreographer and co-director Anthony Van Laast, production supervisor Roy Sears, choreographers Arlene Philips and Ralph D. Perkins, assistant choreographer/performance manager Gail Davies-Sigler, original cast members (dancers) Heather Oldfield and Margaret Rampey, head sound technicians Jason Rauhoff and Bill Newcomb, and dancer Kim Barranco. All these people participated in personal and/or group discussions as did some other cast members, production staff, and audience members. Additional material was obtained from questionnaires. 32 questionnaires

were given to cast members, 23 were completed and returned. Copies of relevant correspondence and the questionnaires are provided in the Appendix.

It took roughly 15 minutes for each dancer to respond to the questionnaire, then each dancer returned it to a large file folder located in the female Dance Captain's dressing room. I distributed the questionnaires during warm-up before the first show on December 9, 1998. The dancers, at first, were apathetic to my cause when I introduced myself as a graduate student (I did so because I did not want to introduce any bias). They continued to go about their stretching and chatting amongst themselves. The remaining original cast members, when they recognized no one was paying attention to me, began to qualify me: "She's ORIGINAL CAST! Her Thesis is about this show!" and when crew members simultaneously walked by bellowing, "Welcome back Canuck! Welcome home!" the dancers ran to the pile of questionnaires and pencils, and many introduced themselves and offered interviews without my soliciting them. I was accorded instantaneous acceptance and many dancers were excited to "have an educated voice" documenting their work. I cannot determine the precise cause of the attitude shift; I never asked. Original cast affiliation, my stressing that I was not back to re-claim my old position, or fellow-dancer respect apparently were influential, as was the perception that I was not a purely academic academic.

Secondary sources augmenting my personal experiences include the following. Newspapers: Las Vegas Review-Journal, Las Vegas Sun, The Globe and Mail, and

National Post; magazines: Time, Las Vegas Magazine, Las Vegas Style, Chance: The Best of Gaming, Greater Las Vegas Newcomers and Relocation Journal, Variety, and Macleans; and show programs: 1995, 1996, and 1998.

These published resources are supplemented by personal direct observation as well as reflection on personal experience as an original cast member of EFX. Benefitting from having witnessed the show evolve from its preliminary stage involving paper script, first draft sheet music, and primary costume & set sketches to a show that consistently filled and continues to fill a 1752-seat theater, I have a unique perspective on the show's development. There is a special box packed away at my parents' home in British Columbia which contains mementos from the formative stages of the show: lyric sheets, pencilled harmony lines on coffee-stained paper, ballet shoes, make-up applicators, rehearsal cassette tapes, therabands, and juggling balls. These represent less tangible legacies: relationships and a host of incorporated influences encompassing stylized movement traits, vocal skills, work ethic, and discipline processes. Unfortunately, they can only contribute an indication of the proverbial blood, sweat, and tears [BST] which went into my efforts at the time.

Why undertake an ethnography in the first place? The BST experience set may not be capable of being quantified. But this does not mean that the BST experience cannot provide qualitative insights on the subject of a cultural phenomenon. At the least, presuming success, a cultural context is elaborated in a multidimensional capacity in this essay. In this perspective, EFX is an event with numerous cultural



strands involving the economy, technology, society, communications, and visual & performing arts. Perhaps a mini-example would be helpful.

Tap legend Henry Le Tang owns and operates the very successful “Henry Le Tang’s” dance studio in Las Vegas. When classes are not in session, he rents out the rooms to production companies and shows for auditioning or rehearsing. The studios are always fully booked from morning until night. The lobby bustles like a Greyhound bus station during Christmas vacation. Dance bags are strewn everywhere and dancers on their water breaks contort their bodies over every square inch of the lobby, frantically reviewing newly absorbed choreography. These glimpses of the working dancer in Las Vegas beg for documentation of a vital and growing cultural fabric. I am not alone in advocating such an effort.

Nachbar and Lause (1992), Siegel (1998), and Hirsch (1988) are among a growing list of scholars championing a position for more such ethnographic documentation. I consider myself remarkably fortunate in having the capacity to talk about a spectacle with only tenuous antecedents. EFX represents many firsts among shows in Las Vegas. It was a cutting edge concept and it was the first time many ideas for the production and ongoing maintenance of a production had been implemented. This paper presents those firsts and highlights the new direction shows may be forced to take in Las Vegas for competitive reasons. And, given that Las Vegas is a model entertainment environment, what transpires there soon becomes a norm throughout the global circuit. Indeed, the impact of EFX will be felt throughout

the entire spectrum of venues, from cruise ships and rural repertory theater to internationally acclaimed opera and ballet companies.

Thus, to understand the implications for the future of entertainment, it is imperative to look at the entire context of the production of the Las Vegas megamusical. The spiritual heir to the "Godfather of Critics," Matthew Arnold, is Allan Bloom. In The Closing of the American Mind (1987), he posits that culture is taught rather than experienced and argues that works of especially high quality, regardless of their popularity, need to be studied by each generation as a means of learning the everlasting truth of the ages (Nachbar and Lause, 1992). But truth is elusive; it exists and is experienced differentially. The implication of this, is that the ethnographer must function more like a camera and less as a critic. The camera finds its inspiration in the hands-on sciences of anthropology and archaeology rather than in the theoretical realms of ideology (Nachbar and Lause). The work of ethnography is undertaken in the field; an ethnologist is concerned to describe a society, not judge it.

While working and living in Las Vegas, I realized that millions of tourists saw extravaganza entertainments during their stay, for performances showcasing dance are available ubiquitously. On any given night, a person could see performers high-stepping to music that ranged from Gershwin to Grady and from Hollywood musical production numbers or low-stepping to rueful accompaniments to the tunes of Billie Holiday.

But if it is impossible not to notice the wide opportunity avenues for dancers in Las Vegas, it is also impossible not to notice the status differentiation among dancers. Despite my perception that the overlap in training and rehearsing practices for ballet, modern, and theatrical dancers is almost complete, the social reality appears to assign caste status to their efforts. Siegel (1998) is eloquent on this point:

Western critics have hierarchies, though we may not admit it. Going from the bottom up, we esteem social dancing, pop dancing, jazz dancing, theatrical dancing, concert dancing and ballet. Classical ballet dancing seems accepted as the crowning achievement of dance in Western culture. (p. 92)

Siegel does not believe this hierarchy is justified. Having trained in and assessed multiple sub-disciplines, I respect and concur with her views. Acquiring proficiency in technique and artistry is difficult regardless of form. Ballet, concert, theatrical, jazz, pop, or even some forms of social dancing (e.g., 'West coast swing') are all intensely demanding, even more so for aspirants with professional ambitions. To acquire coordination and the full range of control in these expressions takes time and practice. Perhaps the emphasis on high traditional forms may arise in part because they are easier for critics to evaluate on the basis of an abundance of background material.

Performance critics usually cannot immerse themselves in unfamiliar fields the way an anthropologist can. As Siegel (1998, p. 94) states, "an anthropologist is going to try to get information from the culture itself. As critics, we'd like to have that, but

we don't." I find myself in a position to write about the culture itself—the culture of Las Vegas, for I have lived and worked there and I feel a responsibility to describe the hard work and dedication in commercial shows staged there. Given the lack of published material about my chosen topic, describing the elements and processes involved in producing dance in Las Vegas, a wide base of scholarship is not available. Siegel suggests we examine dance in its context, noting the actions, energies, objects, places, people, and sounds to which the dance immediately draws our attention. Then, she believes, we can have access to the expressed vocabulary. I have applied her suggestion to look at dance as an intente to describe the development of the dance in EFX. I believe that I am uniquely empowered to conduct such a study for three closely related reasons. First, as a member of the original cast of EFX, I was well placed to observe its gradual transition from first rehearsal to its reality on stage. Second, I am uniquely positioned to appreciate EFX as a forerunner of commercial theater of the future. The production efficiently, flawlessly, and seamlessly integrates cutting-edge technology with traditional dance theater, in a collaboration requiring instantaneous information flow. This collaboration is important because it may indicate the direction musical theater will take in the future. Finally, as a show dancer myself, I found other performers far less hesitant in sharing their own experiences. Without this common bond, I am certain much less information would have been forthcoming. Thus, I intend to illuminate the backstage significance of a scarcely mentioned artistic community existing in a scarcely mentioned bastion of dance, Las Vegas. Yet, as a

member of the Financial Post's Board of Economists and a Professor at McGill's Faculty of Management points out, historically many of the eventual producers of high art forms were linked with gaming casinos:

Until about 200 years ago, Italy's great opera houses—Naples' San Carlo and Milan's La Scala among them—were privately run and profitable. They were sustained by their adjoining gambling casinos where rouge et noir was the favorite game. The opera-casino combinations were the entertainment complexes of their times. Monte Carlo, for example, is a reminder of this once-customary arrangement whereby the commissioning of new ballets and operas was financed out of gaming profits (Brenner, 1999, p. C5).

Perhaps we are coming full circle and returning to the exigencies of an earlier era. The players who can afford the huge artistic fees and custom designed spaces are not Broadway and West End producers any longer, but rather are those whose "pockets [are] lined by slot machines" (Jones, 1999, p. 1). Are the shows that exist in Las Vegas considered 'high art?' No. Should they be? Probably not. However, considering how Las Vegas production values are so rapidly exported, Las Vegas can justifiably be considered a cultural barometer. What does the barometer indicate? Millions and millions of people are flocking to Las Vegas to be entertained, and the entertainment that is being provided for them is accepted and approved of by the majority of the population. The always sold-out Cirque du Soleil show O at the Bellagio earns \$1.8-

million weekly. This example, along with other developments, represents enormous change at the core of Las Vegas' entertainment industry. Nachbar and Lause (1992, p. 10) illustrate a new perspective intellectuals are beginning to take: "250 million people can't be wrong, and just because everybody likes something is no reason for us to hate it." They effectively develop the argument that it is necessary to look at popular culture, for it forms the fabric of our everyday lives. Their insights are worth quoting again:

Critics decide what is 'good' and then seek to determine the universal truths inherent in what they have selected. The cameras describe what 'is' and then seek to determine what function it performs and what it can tell us about the people and the culture which produced it. (p. 14)

Hirsch (1988) is another scholar with a perspective conforming to that of Nachbar and Lause, although he has an additional agenda. He is outspoken about breaking the cycle of poorly educated children, the objective being creating a person who is 'culturally literate,' a person who is familiar with the figures and symbols that create context. He states:

To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world. The breadth of that information is great, extending over the major domains of human activity from sports to science. It is by no means confined to "culture" narrowly understood as an acquaintance with the arts. Nor is it confined to one social class. Quite the contrary. (p. xiii)

In his diatribe against the current education system, Hirsch (1988) advocates a “corrective theory” based on anthropology. He writes that an “anthropological theory of education (because it is based on the anthropological observation that all human communities are founded upon specific shared information” (1988, p. xv)), can be useful because it provides a definition of cultural literacy. This definition includes a network of information that all competent followers possess. It is, for example, the background information, stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which gives meaning to what they read (1988, p. 2).

We live in a world of symbols, and of symbols about symbols (script, sound and/or movement). A growing awareness of these symbols involves the acceptance that in such a world, reality inheres not in things themselves, but in the relationships we discern between things; not in items, but in structures; not in outcomes, but in processes. Presenting the complex of forces involved in putting together a megamusical promises to reveal a great deal about the people and the culture responsible for its production.

Hirsch (1988) and Nachbar and Lause (1992) concur with Siegel (1998, p. 91) that entertainment serves a role which may be termed “bridging the critical distance.” Hirsch asserts, in the spirit of the anthropologist, “cultural literacy is represented not by a prescriptive list of books but rather a descriptive list of the information” (1988, p.

xiv). It is this anthropological perspective which is at the heart of this effort. I am answering the call for description: not a literary description but a description of another seldom-studied manifestation of popular culture—dance in Las Vegas.

The significance of popular culture has been studied in many facets and fashions. Hirsch (1988) compiled a list including 5000 essential names, phrases, dates, and concepts linked to popular understanding. The words “jazz, P.T. Barnum,” and “Las Vegas NV”—all words associated with EFX for integral reasons—appear in close relationship with other cultural literacy terms such as “Broadway, ballet,” and “operetta.” Of course, his list is “provisional; it is intended to illustrate the character and range of the knowledge literate Americans tend to share. More than one hundred consultants reported agreement on over 90 percent of the items listed” (1988, p. 146). Given the unanimity with respect to cultural categorization, there must be consensus-creating forces in operation. Without, at the present, following a tangent on what these forces are and how they operate, it is important to note that these forces seem to have coalesced into a new standard for a megamusical.

The term “Broadway standard” contextualizes musical theater and large scale theater production with professional attributes involving multimedia, large specialized casts and technicians, and, of course, high production values. The new standard applies as much in Las Vegas or Toronto as it does in New York City. How did this development take place?



Posner (1998, p. A1) declared that Manhattan is the “global epicenter of culture and entertainment.” He describes Broadway as the “definitive standard” against which talent is tested and “moxie is measured.” Advertisements and articles in newspapers, magazines, television, and the Internet boldly declare that shows in Las Vegas feature the ‘new Broadway standard,’ and all the vitality that surrounds the Big Apple soirées and their glitterati appeal are thereby transmitted vicariously. But now another geographical region, located in the ‘Silver State,’ is presenting shows that rival what has typically been reserved for theaters west of mid-town Manhattan. Las Vegas shows, such as EFX, employ the same concepts, objectives, and artistic teams that produced many of the Tony award-winning shows on Broadway.

Certainly, shows produced for Broadway and Las Vegas dwell in the realm of popular culture. There is no controversy or debate: the primary purpose is entertainment. “Mere” entertainment, and especially entertainment designed to appeal to the general populace, is not usually seen as art. But neither was the early work of the modern dance pioneers. Few of their contemporaries appreciated the new emphasis on free movement and even fewer saw an art form worthy of study and emulation. Paradoxically, as a defender of the artistry of Las Vegas and EFX, I take my stand with those pioneers, justifying the need to look critically and respectfully at a new form of dance, in this case dance that unblushingly situates itself in the realm of popular culture.

The people who produce popular culture spectacles are driven by the comforting knowledge that forms which have worked before will work again. The Christmas production of The Nutcracker is an archetypal example. These forms must reflect audience beliefs, expectations, and values (Nachbar and Lause, 1992). A recognizable trait of popular culture is that it is mimetic of past successes. We can apply the 'imitative beliefs and values' model to musicals. Musical is the subsistence of Broadway. For the most part, American musical theater arose as a form of entertainment produced by the sons and daughters of immigrants, to uplift the spirit. Consequently, Broadway has "become a castle of hopeful fantasy" (Rosenberg and Harburg, 1993, p. 280). When producers develop a musical, they want to project it to as large an audience as possible. To do so, producers act on both business factors and artistic insight. With information at hand in the form of a knowledge-base as to what works and how, producers have perfected the ability to cater to audience desires. The themes of Broadway shows do not seek to mold the audience mindset; rather, they celebrate, reflect, and/or refract characteristics of Americana subcultures in a combination of popular music and theater. After all, in conformity with Mordden's (1993) insights, the history of American popular music is the history of its public. Examples of showcases of the public appreciation of social-history can be found in some of the most popular productions in this century: Showboat, Oklahoma!, South Pacific, 1776, West Side Story, Ragtime, and Chicago.

In musicals on Broadway and now in shows in Las Vegas, a multilevel collaboration between artists, craftsmen, and technicians provides the creative means for an audience to take a journey—a journey to a New World. As Laurents (as cited by Rosenberg and Harburg, 1993, p. 174) remarks: “the musical takes you where nothing else will.” They are grandiose, high-tech modern versions of what Aristotle called ‘spectacle’ (Rosenburg and Harburg, 1993, p. 143). What makes the musical so exciting is the way tradition and innovation are spliced together. The shows often draw upon an American subculture’s heritage, developing it to produce a characterization of its future. Musicals don’t tell a story in a straight, linear fashion. They let song and dance occur where the action calls for it; they re-package, reformulate, and re-design the story’s elements so that they are able to stand alone—to become further commodities associated with the musical in the forms of CDs, sheet music, plush toys, and T-shirts. Smart producers have become sophisticated. Those with the smarts understand that you can advertise on television as well as the print media, and that you can go beyond them. They realize that, besides a star, there are things you can merchandise. You can sell an idea; you can sell a song. You have plenty of promotional techniques at your disposal (Rosenberg and Harburg 1993, p. 199).

### **Iconic Las Vegas**

Nachbar (1992) distinguishes between a sign and an icon. A sign is synonymous with a signal while an icon signifies the path of the future. It is within this perspective that

Hannigan (1998) describes Las Vegas as the ultimate American icon. What is the icon's transcendental meaning? Money, entertainment, and luxury! The ethic of 'giving people what they want' has resulted in a transformation from what was once a small, devout Mormon settlement into one of the world's most famous cities, famous for sin. What follows is a brief history outlining this development and a review of the physical, environmental, sociological, and economic context.

In 1931, the Nevada legislature legalized gambling and licensed casinos began springing up all over the Las Vegas Valley. Since the completion of the Hoover Dam in 1935, the area has seen consistent residential growth. During World War II, the nearby joint military/civilian base expanded to 3.3 million acres and increasingly large military contingents were housed, thereby adding to the population density. Las Vegas' modern demeanour began to take shape after World War II with the construction of the first mega-resorts promoting world class entertainment as a draw. The opening of the El Rancho and the Last Frontier in the early 1940s marked the beginning of resorts in Nevada as opposed to gambling halls. 1955 saw the first high-rise resort in Las Vegas, the Riviera, and the Chamber of Commerce, realizing that the city was becoming a top vacation destination, built the giant Las Vegas Convention Center in 1957. The city now had the capacity to hold international-sized trade shows, fairs, and exhibits.

Throughout the 1950s and '60s, the city continued to build a reputation as a glitzy getaway renowned for housing tiny wedding chapels and topless showgirl

revues, boxing matches and blackjack tournaments, and featuring Sinatra, Jones, Davis, and Newton. However, in the mid-1970s, Las Vegas entered a downward spiral. The younger generation lost interest in the big band sound of earlier crooners. Hannigan (1998) presents a concise analysis of the postindustrial city as an entertainment hub. He cites the following as reasons for Las Vegas's decline: the burgeoning women's movement had criticized 'risqué' floor shows as well as beauty contests for objectifying women. Further, in 1976, the State of New Jersey legalized gambling in Atlantic City, and the owners of the Nevada sandboxes were in a position of having to share their toys for the very first time. Another blow came to the Las Vegas business community in 1980, with a nationwide recession.

At the end of the 1980s, resurrection began. A major factor in the positive shift was a change in the attitude of the lending industry. Wall Street and other investors no longer scoffed at the idea of financing gaming resorts. With money available as never before, the city saw rapid growth levels resume.

Currently, the Las Vegas skyline is full of cranes and beams straining upwards towards the clouds; upwards towards prosperity. Construction sprawls in every direction. Suburbs and strip malls ravage the desert, paving over cacti and sagebrush. The 'gated community' cul-de-sacs tease and entice potential home buyers with titles on their stone entranceways that read Silverhawk, Tournament Hills, La Mancha Estates, Canyon Ridge, Vista Del Oro, The Lakes, and the like. They are glorified row houses built in peach and pink stucco.

Las Vegas developers have mastered the ability to abstract an image of desire from the landscape and reflect it back through the vernacular. In this instance, 'vernacular' refers to our everyday consumption and usage of commodities, not just language. Zukin (1991) analyzes the creation of functional landscapes that have risen from fictitious ideals. She writes, "the vernacular constitutes a powerful control over sociability when imaginary territories are produced by design self consciously. We see these landscapes by modes of visual consumption that play with image and reality" (p. 241). In this case, heat and hedonism translate into terra cotta trimmings on adobe shaped buildings. Low maintenance, crisp, clean looking dwellings that stand out against the vivid blue sky cannot be built fast enough to keep up with consumer demand. Minimal landscaping, tiny lawns and trees which don't require much watering are favored in this arid desert climate. Fade-resistant ceramic roofing tiles are the builder's shingles of choice. In compensation, cement, rocks, and fountains are arranged inventively for visual consumption. This trend is omnipresent in the city, from the new city hall complex to the dormitories on the grounds of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Ultimately, despite compensatory attempts, the city's residential areas have a monothematic look.

Las Vegas' evolution from an adults-only entertainment Mecca to an international destination resort has meant a boom in housing as a result of resort development. By the year 2000, Las Vegas will have 127,000 hotel rooms; more than New York, Paris, or Los Angeles (Booth, 1998). Las Vegas has had to broaden its

appeal because gambling has been legalized in locations all over North America, yet the city has managed to remain fiercely competitive in its worldwide appeal. How? It proclaims the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse takes the form of entertainment (Twitchell, 1992). And all these forms of entertainment are going upscale (Dimon, 1998). As another journalistic colleague of Dimon puts it:

Five years ago, The New York Times came to a startling discovery. A headline revealed that men in Vegas were actually “wearing jackets!” to dinner. This, to Manhattanites, was akin to the moment when anthropologists revealed that the apes came down out of the trees and started to walk upright. (Fotheringham, 1999, p. 76)

Sophisticated research conducted by demographic experts has shown how visitor demographics to Las Vegas are changing. The target audience is now 50; people at that age have the highest household income and the fastest spending rate. Theme consultants who create mythical dream worlds are shaping Las Vegas. The new Las Vegas is less concerned with chuck wagon buffet fare and more concerned with slick, trendy eateries. Newly paved, palm tree-lined thoroughfares such as “Paradise Boulevard” and “Howard Hughes Parkway” promote the conceptualization of eternal wealth for both dwellers and tourists. In Las Vegas, where gambling is called “gaming,” language reflects life in unusual ways. The new language offered a new vitality. As Fotheringham (1999) notes, the city of the '80s was looking a little “tired and tacky. A new vision was the key to the future.”

Art deco motels that used to occupy real estate along Las Vegas Boulevard south of Tropicana—one advertises a “glass bottom pool” as its draw—are, one by one, being steam rolled. Strip Malls, Mandalay Bay, a new \$950-million dollar resort owned by Circus Circus Enterprises which opened in March 1999, and an executive airport have gobbled up the landscape surrounding the famous “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” signpost. Topless showgirl brouhaha is being replaced with multi-million dollar production shows, chock full of designer costumes, new age music, and evocative imagery. Examples of these include EFX, Mystère, O, and Imagine, A Theatrical Odyssey. Rent is headed for the Las Vegas Hilton, and Mandalay Bay is staging Chicago, the six-time Tony Award-winning Broadway musical. The show will occur nightly only after Luciano Pavarotti christens the hotel and its 12,000-seat event center in April 1999. And if this is not enough indication of an up-scale focus, consider the impact, first noted by Lane (1999) of the television commercial advertising the Bellagio which features Andrea Bocelli singing “Con Te Partiro”. Elvis and “Viva Las Vegas” really have left the building. Bellagio is named after a town on Lake Como in Italy and translates to mean “a place of elegant relaxation” (Reilly 1999, p. 24). This is quite a departure from the titles of lodges from a previous era: La Concha Motel, Lucky Strike, and The Westward Ho.

What is this telling us about the fabric of American, and increasingly, world culture? Our tastes and desires? This ethnography serves to present the artifacts and



events as they appear and to examine the underlying cultural mindset, which those artifacts and events both reflect and mold.

### **EFX: Marketing of the Las Vegas Spectacle**

The eminent art historian and social critic Robert Hughes (1998) quotes CEO and resort owner Steve Wynn: "If you give people what they're after, they'll make their way to you without fail." Manifestly, the face of Las Vegas is changing as the big players adapt to meet audience needs and desires. Wynn, a hotel mogul (Chairman of the Board of Mirage Resort), has been one of the leading forces instrumental in changing the couture of Las Vegas from folks wearing Sears Roebuck to audiences wearing Armani. He was the Executive Producer for the elaborately staged Siegfried and Roy at the Mirage which raised the roof off all previous Las Vegas spectacles. The transition from leggy showgirl displays to full theatrical productions derives from Wynn's penchant for "things that are good for the soul: fine art, gardens, flowers, fashion" (Lane, 1999, p. 54). The shows that grace Wynn's stages at the Mirage and Treasure Island served as precursors for owner Kirk Kerkorian and Executive Producer Richard Sturm's vision of grandeur for their 'Grand Theater' at Kerkorian's emerald-colored, MGM mega-resort. Kerkorian invested one billion dollars of his own money to fill the niche for a one-stop destination. It includes a Hollywood image theme park, ten theme restaurants, a spa, tennis courts, a youth hotel, a 15,000-seat arena events center, a 22,000 square foot nightclub, and a 171,500 square foot casino (MGM

Brochure, 1995). Is this excessive? He thinks not, deeming that MGM is catering more precisely to public desire. And his views are not solitary either. Along with MGM, Circus Circus Inc., Hilton Hotels Corporation, Mirage Resorts Inc., and Harrah's Entertainment Inc. are spearheading change.

### EFX: the Genesis of the Las Vegas Spectacle

Spectacle is synonymous with Las Vegas. Engineering large-scaled projects dates back to the 1950s. It was the Stardust Hotel that built the first custom showroom when it imported the Lido de Paris in 1958 with its six hydraulic stages, swimming pool, and ice rink. The Dunes followed suit in 1963 with the "Octuramic" stage in its show Casino de Paris. The octuramic stage resembles a giant frisbee that female dancers sat upon while being transported through the air. The frisbee or saucer part is attached to a giant arm resembling a tentacle of an octopus; thus its epithet. But as innovative as the octuramic stage is, it is not the sole example of magnificent staging. Hallelujah Hollywood in the then MGM Grand, now Bally's, treated audiences to a burning, sinking pirate ship stage in 1974. Updated in 1982, after a hotel fire, the show reopened as Jubilee, then the most expensive show ever staged in Las Vegas at a cost of \$10-million. Here the Titanic sank and Samson destroyed the Philistine temple on a nightly basis. (The temptation to compare modern with ancient Philistines will be suppressed.)

Siegfried and Roy at the Mirage in 1991 kick-started the ‘new’ Las Vegas production show, bringing what I, and others, have called a new Broadway standard to the city at a price tag of \$30-million. John Napier, best known for his Broadway staging of Cats and Sunset Boulevard, served as production designer for the upscale extravaganza. Mystère, the awe-inspiring celebration of great human achievement created by and starring Montreal’s Cirque du Soleil, settled into Steve Wynn’s Treasure Island resort in 1994. In the same year, MGM opened their one billion-dollar trailblazing door accompanied by their slogan, “Watch Us Roar in ‘94!” In EFX, the producers—Richard Sturm, Jeremiah Harris, David Mitchell, Michael Crawford, Anthony Van Laast, and Don Grady—articulated Las Vegas theatrical production into a new shape. Their emphasis was not on producing masterpieces. Rather, spectacle was the production goal.

Postmodern dancer/choreographer Yvonne Rainer (as cited by Carter, 1998) opposes theatricality in her manifesto, ‘No’ To Spectacle, composed in 1965. Rejecting all superfluous decoration of pure movement, she proclaims:

No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and  
 make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no  
 to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to  
 involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to  
 seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity  
 no to moving or being moved [sic]. (p. 35)

What Rainer rejected, Las Vegas welcomes as its cultural imperative, the aspects of production that lure and entertain audiences. Consider the emphasis on complex entrances. Budgets appear unlimited. Glitz is the total emphasis from the moment of first encounter: circular entrances leading to marble lobbies. At the moment, there's such an epidemic of lobby fever that one begins to wonder how much marble can possibly be left in Italy? Like other Las Vegas shows, historical and contemporary, EFX brazenly proclaims the exact opposite of Rainer—Yes to spectacle, yes to virtuosity, yes to transformations and magic and make-believe, yes to glamour and transcendency of the star image, yes to the heroic, yes to the anti-heroic, yes to trash imagery, yes to involvement of performer or spectator, yes to style, yes to camp, yes to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer, yes to eccentricity, yes to moving or being moved. Of course, I apologize to Rainer for using commas.

### The Crystallization of EFX

#### the vision of its creators.

This research has raised the issue of categorization. Is EFX an example of a Broadway musical or a Las Vegas spectacle? Its creators hope audiences find it both. After more than two years of planning and production, the show has finally solidified its position as a destination event (Paskevich, 1995). The show is a major collaboration of creative vision lead by Landmark Entertainment Group and Harris Production Services. It enlisted major Broadway talents to direct, choreograph, design, costume, and light the

show. This was the first time in Las Vegas that such a collaboration was employed, as noted by director Scott Faris (as cited by Production Art's web site, 1998): "Our background is legitimate theater and musicals. We approached this as a legitimate piece of theater, and that's the way we staged it."

EFX is MGM's contribution to the voracious consumer appetite for theater whose primary objective is not to educate or enlighten or persuade or instruct, but rather to amuse, enthrall, beguile, and pique. It caters to the entertainment appetite and desires of "legitimate" theater (in terms of technique, production, professionalism, etc., with reference to its effectiveness; as, the play was good theater). For some, looking for professional theater in Las Vegas is the quintessential anachronism.

EFX enlists formula alongside art. Pyrotechnics detonate while the Sinfonia of London's flutes and strings resonate over the massive sound system. Choreographers of the past such as Ron Lewis (*The Dunes*) and Jeff Kutash (*The Riviera*) were replaced by Broadway-seasoned choreographers: Anthony Van Laast (*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Chess*, *Into the Woods*), and Arlene Phillips (*Starlight Express*). Nachbar and Lause (1992) have made a note in their analysis of popular culture that can be applied to Las Vegas. They imply we can study the popular culture of past times to unlock the mindsets of people in earlier eras and then compare past mindsets with the present in an important effort to define the most deep-seated and enduring beliefs and values that characterize a culture over time. Shows in Las Vegas have gone from topless 'girlie' exploitations to high-class state-of-the-art

entertainment. Las Vegas is changing its image and the new market prefers “pure entertainment” where production numbers are overwhelming. In retrospect, one can see an evolution of consumer expectation, but whether this evolution is accompanied by a new mindset or whether it is the same old mindset in a more sophisticated environment is still open to debate. My bet, irony intended, is on the former: a new mindset is evolving.

The context of the evolution of increasing consumer expectation is a function of pure capitalist competition. MGM is sited among a dozen major destination resorts each vying for market share. For a show to stand out in Las Vegas, it must create its own niche. Success is measured by consumer demand, and the shows that attend to audience interests and desires most effectively are the most successful. Thus, EFX includes major themes in popular culture reiterated in six of the top ten American movies of all time: ET, The Star Wars trilogy, Batman, and Ghostbusters. These elements are escapism, fantasy, command of technology, and a happy ending (Nachbar and Lause, 1993, p. 50). EFX’s theme song lyrics (by Wayne and King, 1994) emphasize these qualities:

There’s a world beyond reality

a place of light and dark.

A world beyond infinity,

a realm of mind and heart.

It’s a shadow world, a fantasy,

upon which dreams are born,  
a kingdom where illusion's given  
light and sound and form!

This illusory world has no intention of inflicting on its inhabitants the problems of the real world. The eagerness with which the public visits this virtual world is visible nightly in a full house of patrons, most paying \$70 a ticket.

#### How I came to be involved in EFX.

It was happenstance that I came to find out about the audition for EFX. I was a senior in my final weeks of study at the University of Utah. On a break, in between technique classes, a sophomore dancer was reading a newspaper her mother had sent her (the dancer was from Henderson, Nevada). The paper was The Las Vegas Sun, and my eye caught a glimpse of the advertisement sprawled across the entire second page; an audition notice about EFX starring Michael Crawford at the MGM. I had never seen a show in Las Vegas, but one of the most gifted dancers in Utah's dance department then was a graduate student who had received her undergraduate degree at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and worked in shows at night to finance her education. Idolizing Natalie Berger (the graduate student who currently dances with The Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company in Salt Lake City), and wanting audition experience, I decided to venture towards Las Vegas to try my hand at auditioning for a

“real dancing job.” Imagine my surprise at being accorded an offer to perform as one of the dancers! Details on the audition process are forthcoming (see page 56).

In Act 2, the EFX Master (the star, name brand entertainer, or feature entertainer) of Time, Spirit, Laughter, and Magic describes the world of EFX and the power of imagination—the uniting theme of spectacle-world. Little did the Master realize that, nightly, my world was transformed as well, from a world of reality to illusion and back to reality. As a very young child, my dream was to dance in the land of Camelot, the land of fire-breathing dragons, castles, magic, and charming princesses. The dream, although fading as I grew older, persisted. After years of dance studies and rigorous technique classes, I found myself on stage with the Master as he transformed himself into Merlin, the great master of magic from medieval times. Nightly, I was transported into an incredibly wired world of fire breathing dragons, fairies, sprites, and castles. I danced with Merlin the Magician! It was as if my childhood belief in magic had, like the applause that saves Tinkerbell, made it possible for my dream to come true. As a performer, the world of EFX was my world of work, demanding work, meticulous work, stressful work. What follows is an elaboration of dance in the megamusical context.



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## **Dance: Illumination or Illusion**

### **Showgirl vs. Dancer**

There is a moment in the production when the entire cast focuses on one character, who was selected on the basis of his faltering beliefs on the subject of pure love. The Master paraphrases this character's dilemma: he has given up on the power of love: he has stopped 'believing.' When the character attempts to deflect this unwelcome attention, he paradoxically quips: "Aw, let me go guys! Bring out the showgirls!"

It is paradoxical because there is not one typical showgirl feather in EFX; there is not one heel on any dancer's foot, and there are no strands of rhinestones gleaming nor cleavages displaying. My experiences testify to a distinction engendered by the new Broadway standard, a distinction between showgirl and show dancer [herein dancer]. The dancers onstage are not there for the sole purpose of displaying legs for entertainment's sake: they are not there as objects for the voyeuristic gaze (Manning 1997). The costumes are androgynous. Many are masculine in their shape but feminine in their color. In the opening scene, masks conceal the faces, and in two other dance breaks, the heads are covered in hats, further concealing gender identity. The blatant costume difference between EFX and the typical 'showgirl' show is a point of departure for describing EFX choreography—choreography that is not indigenous to shows in Las Vegas, but rather movement that is typical of dance companies or Broadway shows. The choreography in EFX is unique to Las Vegas, because the range of motion is greatly increased when high heels are not used. Remove, also, an

extremely heavy headdress that restricts all sightlines except forward, feathers that tend to get tangled around the hands and the shoulders, and backpacks that cause hyperextension of the lumbar spine, and the possibilities for movement are endless. Range of motion is also greatly increased because of the size of the proscenium stage. In contrast, far reach space sideways and backwards is limited on many of the smaller Las Vegas showroom stages, and the choreography staged there necessarily reflects the lack of space. Much of the movement on smaller stages takes place on the spot, combining poses and sequential body isolations, or alternatively the movement uses the space directly in front of the dancer. In EFX, dancers must use as much space as possible in every part of the kinesphere. To cross the stage in a given number of counts requires wide strides at a fast pace. There is nothing small, subtle, or intimate about the theater. Besides calling for movement that is as large as possible, the choreography in EFX requires that dancers be versatile and skilled in various dance disciplines, including ballet, modern, hip-hop and classical jazz.

EFX, though the dancers hate to admit it, is not a dance show per se. It does not 'feature' dancers onstage throughout the entire performance as Tap Dogs, Riverdance, and Stomp do. The dancers share the evening with the star of the show, four principal lead singers, a flying trapeze team, and massive virtual imagery. This mix requires accurate timing, precise attention to detail, immediate visceral response to sound and virtual stimuli, commitment to collaborative endeavor, and the ability to synchronize to real and virtual imagery. The performance skills entail an integration of

attitude, stamina, visual and mental acuity, and technique. Patrons who purchase tickets are expecting to see a “great show” (Quaglia, 1999c). They do not see any one element as the inspiration for the purchase of their ticket. Executive Producer Richard Sturm (Quaglia, 1999d) feels strongly that the star of EFX (Michael Crawford, David Cassidy, and Tommy Tune in succession) is the main draw. Some dancers will stress that the dances and spectacle are the primary drawing features. Whatever the perspective, the choreography stands up to all the multi-million-dollar effects that explode, ignite, flash, fly, fall, and rumble. There is overwhelming applause after the dancers have performed the quick, intricate, athletic chopping and slicing of the air with their feet in the Celtic-inspired Jig. Similarly, the audience claps with great enthusiasm after the percussive Stick Dance with its explosive attack and its drum rhythms, beaten out on the floor with oversized sticks and mallets.

As one dancer describes the show, “in a sense, EFX is much more a grand variety show” (Quaglia, 1999a). Liz Lieberman, the company manager, believes that dance is “a calling” and that EFX allows gifted dancers to “perform their art here,” thereby conjoining “art” and “Las Vegas” in a way that would be incomprehensible to those who equate Las Vegas dancers with back-up acts in a lounge or a piece of female anatomy reflecting glitter and sparkle (Quaglia, 1999d). The show is hyped “Miss It And You Miss Las Vegas!”

### Movement To Music

Rosenberg and Harburg (1993, p. 173), in an analytical framework interested in the meaning of popular culture, write: "The American musical is in an important way, a combination of pop music and theater. The good musical exceeds that. Music and movement pulse into the pores of audience members and make them feel thoughts through song." Their perspective is not a solitary one. In six large production pieces using as many as forty dancers onstage at a time, the choreographers of EFX have achieved what McNeill (1995) refers to as kinesthetic "muscular bonding" with the audience through dance. McNeill asserts, "keeping together in time arouses warm emotions of collective solidarity and erases personal frustrations as words, by themselves, cannot do" (1995, p. 152). Van Laast, Phillips and Perkins have very effectively combined the fundamentals of choreography—time, space, shape, and energy—affecting each audience member in a kinesthetic way. This attention to choreographic devices is of recent development. EFX Choreographer Ralph D. Perkins described his choreography in The Sprite Dance:

When the 'beetles' as I refer to them [describing the way the dancers move from the wings] come out, that—DUH na na na DUH na DUH na—it put me in Nijinsky mode. Groups were arranged according to the costumes that were there before I started. Before, the piece looked like a big cluster. The audience got confused. They didn't know where to look. I decided each group of dancers would have its own measure of music, and then I just followed suit. It [the

choreography] has to make sense to the audience in order for them to feel something. (Quaglia, 1999a)

Audience members can be seen tapping their feet, pounding their hands on the table at which they are seated, and swaying and tilting their heads to match corresponding choreography onstage. In each dance number the choreographers successfully intertwine dancer patterns and formations around the vast stage with a crowning finale that is approximately thirty-two counts of precise unison. McNeill (1995, p. 152) says further, “feelings matter too, and feelings are inseparable from their gestural and muscular expression.” There is not a still body in the house when the star sings the lyrics to the rock and roll beat of the finale ‘Let It Shine,’ while all the dancers sway back and forth, clapping their hands.

The music in EFX covers a diverse spectrum of styles. The show merges R+B, gospel, Gregorian Chants, traditional Irish music, ballads, futuristic sound effects, and symphonic melodies. All of the music was specifically commissioned for EFX, in itself a cutting-edge development for Las Vegas. The audience was unable to sing along to familiar show-fare unless they had run out and bought the sound track before attending. Most of the music has a discernible beat, and all of it is set in even metric time (4/4, 6/4 and 12/8). The arrangements and melodies, keys and timbres are different, though, so the show does not become a soundtrack interchangeable with trance compilations whose constant beat never waivers. In fact, the production range includes beats per minute ranging from 77–111.

The cast members were provided with sheet music (all of the successive drafts, sometimes numbering three per week) that mapped the development of the show as each element unfolded. For a dancer to possess lyric sheets is one thing, but to have the actual sheet music (when most of the dancers did not read music) full of directives was unheard of in the Las Vegas show circuit. For example, the first draft of EFX, dated 8/28/94, has notes and directives detailing all types of action traditionally not considered relevant to dancers. For example, our documentation contained background information and thematic emphases: “Room is bathed in colored Lights. . . . Lights of every hue . . . Thunder-bolts, Storms . . .” are notations situated on top of the treble clef line. Above some of the actual lines, mood indications are given: “And nature’s magic too! . . . Mysterious . . . Intense,” several of which were emphasized by employing a bold typeface. The song Nexus has “Spiritual Drum, Ritual Drum,” and “Breathy Percussive” printed above the bass clef. The Finale states, “Massive, Majestic, and Mass-ish,” and for Michael “Light, broad, airy” (Quaglia, 1994). When the show opened the following year after seven months of rehearsal and refinement, dancers found that what we read on the sheet music had come to life in the theater. We were astounded at how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. The music was not just accompaniment; it had a life of its very own. Music served a fundamental role as the instigator for lighting, staging, and choreographic cues.

Each dance was not created linearly from start to finish. Anthony Van Laast worked alongside the original musical scores and up-to-date reports of ever-evolving

set design (both of which were being developed synchronously). Working collaboratively with the musical arrangers, composers, producer, and director, the choreographer wove dance together phrase by musical phrase, accent by accent, dynamic by dynamic, whenever the revised score appeared. Some of the choreography could not be completed until the cast was able to rehearse onstage at MGM, due to production and technical changes.

There are few times in the show when all forty dancers are performing the same movement. No two dancers have an identical show; each has unique choreographed roles. When the dancers do come together in time, it is at the end of the dance, creating the brightest exclamation point possible for the prose of movement vocabulary.

### Costuming

I recently walked by a travel agency in downtown Toronto. In the window was a four-foot tall cardboard cartoon cut-out of a showgirl. You could fit her waist inside my gold ring, her hair was buttercup yellow, and her lips were wanton red. She was very well endowed and she displayed a pageant banner that read, "Sunquest sells Las Vegas!" Contrast this image with what actually transpires in a show like EFX and you get an idea about the changes coming to the new Las Vegas.

Cast members came to work in jeans in the winter months and in shorts in the summer months. Backstage, they changed into mismatched, pilled sweatshirts and



oversized sweatpants. Big leather-soled slippers decked their feet, along with scarves and/or homemade crocheted leg warmers. “The older the fleece the better, for cotton softens with age,” remarked a male dancer while he performed splits during warm-up, and pointed to the frayed ankle cuffs. Keeping the body warm prevailed over making a trendy fashion statement backstage. The truth is that the backstage temperature was rather low throughout in order to ensure the fog wall operated at maximum efficacy. In the winter it was doubly cold because cast members and crew kept opening a door by the loading dock in order to satiate their cigarette cravings. How cold was it? Even in summer, the air conditioning never permitted the temperature to rise above 60 degreesF.

Female dancers do not come to work wearing any make-up. They apply their show make-up (which is provided to them by MGM) on the premises. All of the facial make-up colors are the same (except for base and powder, which vary depending on the dancer’s skin pigmentation.) The costume supervisor or the dance captain teach make-up application when the dancer is blocked into the show. The look of the make-up is very different from the more “garish” tradition of showgirl shows. Base make-up and powder are two shades lighter than the actual skin tone and give the cast an ethereal look. Make-up designer Karen Stephens adopted the Romantic Ballet era and the spirit of Giselle to produce the porcelain faces for EFX. The eyes were created using the same techniques as a present day ballerina uses when she’s performing the ballet: black eyeliner curved upward above the cheekbones to extend the lines of the

eye like a cat. White shadow is applied just below the eyebrow and at the inside corner of the eye to give the illusion that the eye is much larger than it actually is. Fake lashes are thick and long; they are specialized industrial strength lashes that are approximately one inch in length and extremely durable. If one takes care of her lashes (not just ripping them off and throwing them in her make-up box so they become misshapen) the lashes can last three months or longer. The lips are defined in deep burgundy. The tones of the eye shadow, blush, and lip colors are brown and cinnamon brown, and give the face a refined elegance. There is no pink, red, and blue make-up on anyone in this show. As one dancer recalled, “We didn’t wear red lipstick—we weren’t supposed to stand out; that was Crawford’s job” (Quaglia, 1999a). The look of the face in EFX is softly feminine and smooth.

The female dancers came to work with their hair up in ponytails or wet from the shower, ready to be placed under nylon wig caps to which wigs and hairpieces were pinned. The male dancers also wore wig caps removing them only for The Finale Dance, when they wore their own hair (which was usually wet and then styled super quickly with gel or thrown in a ponytail).

For each costume, the designer worked with the choreographer to get the essence of the choreography. Mr. Van Laast would say “whimsical” and Theoni V. Aldredge would create her idea of “whimsy.” All of the fabric for each costume is shiny and all the fabric is trimmed with shiny beading, fake jewels, gold and silver

cuff links and sequins that are sewn on sparingly and individually, not in rows or patches or anything that resembled gaudy 'dance competition' costuming.

The opening parade section of EFX is comprised of a procession of futuristic aliens and animals all measuring over two feet in diameter; the fabrics and construction materials are all dyed or painted white, silver and blue. There are no other colors onstage. The dancers manipulate the costumes. For example: there are two dancers dressed as peacocks onstage whose combined wing span, when open, is 40 feet; two-headed aliens whose heads turn opposite directions; giant seven feet tall heads that look like Mardi-Gras characters who have crashed into the Baroque era; and, hobby horses in which dancers have to stand in the 'saddle' and manipulate the horse head that extends six feet in front and a tail that extends six feet behind. Following the opening parade is the circus-simulation section, where the colors are vibrant and bold. Here, Aldredge used deep royal blues, lime greens, orange, hot pink, red, gold, stripes, polka dots, hats, masks, frills, and pom-poms. The effect is fun, bright, loud, and playful. It was distressing to the dancers that each costume took days to construct, required incredible attention to detail and finishing, yet audience members in the back of the house would never see, up close, all the fine craftsmanship that was involved in creating the costumes.

The costumes in another major section, Sprite, had an ethereal, supernatural, weightless look. The dresses were light, flowing, and feminine. The wigs were constructed from human hair; they were very heavy, 3 pounds or more, due to the

quantity of hair strands and were reputed to cost in excess of \$1,500. They were individually styled in ringlet curls designed to implement a cascade effect ending just above the dancer's waist. Initially, the wigs were all ash blond; the African-American dancers were justifiably appalled. "Why is virtue always pale and blond" they asked? Producers responded by re-costuming the visible minority dancers in racial-group-appropriate hair and make-up, in stereotypical terms.

Currently, the Sprite costumes reflect the star's character: more rock-n-roll (David Cassidy) or more mainstream (Michael Crawford) correlated with overt or subtle sexuality as an environmental feature. The rock costuming used materials which clung to the body to accentuate female curves, and the colors were bolder. The costumes changed again when Tommy Tune became the star in January 1999. Tune's character now determines how the females will be portrayed. Crawford wanted purity; Cassidy wanted hip; Tune wanted Broadway finesse.

The Stick Dance section reveals flesh for the only time in the show. The female dancers wear bra tops and small skirts with additional material that covers the thorax to give the illusion they are wearing animal hide coverings. The midriffs are exposed, but the long hair of the dark black, wild, teased wigs covers the majority of the exposed areas. The male dancers wear short, skirt-like hides and are bare-chested.

All the shoes and any orthopaedic insoles are provided for the dancers by MGM, as in large ballet companies (where dancers have shoe allowances). Tights are also provided for the dancers, but with the stipulation that once the tights are no

longer presentable for the stage, costume attendants discard them. A dancer is not allowed to keep ballet shoes, tights, and the like for personal use even if still useable for class or lounging purposes.

The costumes were impeccably crafted. This was a function of precedent and demand. Early costuming attempts failed in the laundry; at one time, over \$15,000 in costuming dissolved during dry-cleaning (Quaglia, 1999a). Short-cuts were proven uneconomical and the highest attention to detail in terms of durability and stress were operationalized in garment and prop construction at every turn. The 60 dancers had 25 costume attendants, a ratio high even by Broadway standards. Expenses were attenuated, however, by the demand that all cleaning be done in-house by the costuming attendants.

### The Choreography

Creativity, regardless of field, cannot be defined or limited by rules and conventions. In the case of dance, rigid segmentation may be more myth than reality. Dance is always a flexible collaboration between numerous “external” contributors including: choreographer; producer; costumer; and light, sound, and stage designers and technicians. Of course, dancers too make a major contribution, which in turn is shaped by each dancer’s experience, attitudes, and perceptions. At EFX one thing was certain—the starting point was that each member of the dance cast started at the same point, learned the choreography, and continued to learn as the production evolved. The

learning process represented an on-going continuum. “It is never over until it’s over, and even then it’s not over” (Quaglia, 1999a) was the sentiment expressed in sympathy by several colleagues when a dancer was chewed out for a miscue.

Although dance is integral to the megamusical, it is only a prominent factor in six out of ten acts. But if this seems like dancers are only busy 60% of the time, nothing could be farther from the truth. When not on stage, dancers are changing their costumes. In the 90-minute show, every dancer has at least six costume changes.

The Appendix includes a copy of the entire program. This section details the most relevant choreographed sequences. The first act, Nexus, is comprised of a few, separately and sequentially performed spotlight dances. The choreographic style emulates mime; character stylization is not correlated with musical counts. The dancers are costumed to reflect their acolyte status with respect to the Master. Numerous possibilities for confusion and misappreciation exist. But, as Liz Lieberman (Quaglia, 1999d) observed: “[It is a Broadway style show] We incorporated more dialogue. It was risky because of all the non-English speaking visitors. But they are so attentive. It has worked.”

Nexus is designed to get audience members moving in their seats. Action is frenetic. The dancers enter from every direction on ramps, side-stages, podiums, aisles, even from an overhead flying device. Care is paid to frame the principals dramatically and the vast, surreal stage—engulfed in white fog that reflects laser effects—is stratigraphically proportioned augmented by a contingent of dancers employing surreal

gestures and wearing surreal costumes. The costumes are the audience's first glance at the plethora of colorful, expensive materials Tony Award winning designer Theoni V. Aldredge used. Some of the opening act costumes include hand-painted unitards, battery operated overshirts that light up, flowing capes, embroidered masks, Medieval and Elizabethan wear, and an entire array of inventive body wear including flapper skirts, tulle tutus, jester's attire, and other costumes made with textured lycra, velvet, embroidery, beadwork, plastic, chiffon, and wood. Audience members may well forget they are attending a Vegas show due to the complete abandonment of traditional bikini costuming.

As mentioned earlier, the theater is so cavernous that intimacy is precluded. The abundant nitrous oxide is occasionally engulfing, obscuring sight. However, the sound designers worked in a theater of thousands of cubic feet to simulate the intimate sound of a high-end CD player people might hear in their own homes. It works, for no matter which seat one occupies in the theater, it is as though there is a walkman headphone installed right in one's ear connecting one to the show at all times. Never before had this elaborate a sound system been constructed for a show in Las Vegas.

The whole opening scene is, in essence, a grand parade of multiple vignettes, where dancers all move to variations on 4/4 time. The music floods the room with chords reminiscent of Catholic hymns and the laser lights cast vivid colors on the pure white fog varying the geometric designs randomly. Audience members are transported into a world clearly distinct from anything in their experience. This out-of-world

experience is reinforced by the fact that the theater is designed to resemble a foreign moonscape. In this context, human scale is portrayed as inconsequential. Sexual tension, for example, is not addressed, nor does any element of the entire atmosphere hold a promise for its relief. Subsequent acts feature dramatic plot development. Audiences are a long way from a “girly show,” as one patron expressed it (Quaglia, 1999c).

The next scene that includes dance is Act Four: Merlin. The set-change from the third into the fourth act is a gigantic automated undertaking designed to slowly reveal an impressionistic scenic aesthetic. King Arthur’s castle in Camelot illuminates the back scrim. “For Merlin, we wanted to create a fairy-tale England,” says designer David Mitchell (Production Arts web site, 1995) who turned to Pre-Raphaelite painting for inspiration. The castle was built as a miniature and shot at Hollywood Center Studios, with two versions alternatively fading in and out to indicate the changing of the seasons. Also onstage are small mountains equipped with water fountains and enormous trees with hydraulically-driven leaves and blossoms which bloom on cue. Thirty-two female dancers enter the stage at different intervals, with movement inspired by Nijinsky’s The Rite of Spring. The music for The Sprite Dance is reminiscent of Stravinsky’s pulsing string section in his score for Nijinsky’s ballet. I echo the description Balanchine and Mason (1975, p. 384) make of The Rite of Spring and apply it to Don Grady’s arrangement for EFX: “The strings sound strong, persistent chords . . . [the dancer’s] movements accelerating at its demand.”



Throughout the section, Perkins has choreographed movements that follow the law of frontality. His characters remind me of the cuneiform characters found in Mesopotamian painting (3500BC–3000BC) presenting impressions of dignity and majesty. In the spirit of Nijinsky, Perkins also employs turned-in feet, the knee slightly bent, and arms that move between classical lines and broken lines at the elbow joint (Balanchine & Mason, 1975). He uses accents deliberately including tricky, asymmetrical rhythmic phrasing with quick footwork and the Martha Graham-inspired motif of cupped hands. In the spirit of Mark Morris, Perkins matches each beat and accent with a corresponding movement. Dancers move between supple and stiff spines, in turn, adding further texture to the movement's vocabulary. There is swooping grand allegro, and moments of held arabesque lines. All the movement culminates with the sounds of strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion to produce a grandiose union of auditory and visual alchemy. The choreography is complex and the female dancers perform the role of supernatural Sprites. Once again, the portrayal of romantically inspired characters represents an innovation for Las Vegas and signifies the new direction in which the Vegas production-show is heading; high heels have utterly been replaced by ballet shoes.

Act Six offers a merger between awe-inspiring production elements and fun, lively dancing. The action commences with P.T. Barnum transporting the audience, first to a futuristic spaceship and then to the moon. The sets represent a substantial investment; they are so preeminent that they envelop the entire proscenium space. "We

looked at lighting systems in filmed spacecraft, like in Close Encounters of the Third Kind, then developed our own system,” said Mitchell (Production Arts web site, 1995). The circus arrives on three 30,000-pound steel bridges with fibre optic lighting inside, the result being the largest, loudest, brightest, light display one has ever seen.

The choreography in Act Six is a mixture of circus hoopla, parade, and musical theater. Here the choreography is fast-paced and sharp. It is a jolly mish-mash of hip-hop, funk, bungee cord propulsion, and detailed, frenetic movement combinations. The dancers are awash in similarly themed costumes (futuristic circus clowns and ornately decorated futuristic animals all in silver and white). The most prevalent sights are the accented movements of their arms and legs. The dancers move about the stage in intricate patterns and groupings. Some have just arrived from a ‘spaceship’ that lands from overhead high above the inside of the proscenium rafters. They embody the stereotypes of their characters (peacock characters act like peacocks, clowns like clowns, etc.). Regardless of character, each dancer’s movements correspond to the up-tempo Intergalactic Circus of Wonders—a high-energy marching song that sounds like a choir overlaid with Sharon, Lois, and Bram and Sesame Street sound effects. Here it is apparent that the producer had a large audience in mind, and one that spanned many ages—another move away from old Vegas fare. Children sit up and take notice here because of the happy music, the delightful costuming, and the impressive trapeze act.

Later in this Act, most dancers must make a quick costume change to perform as clowns complete with paraphernalia. They then perform The Jig, choreographed in

the spirit of an authentic Celtic line dance. It is the only time throughout the course of EFX that the entire stage is bare, with no enormous sets, distractions, or objects falling from the ceiling to occupy the eye. The choreography appears strenuous for the dancers' feet move quickly and exactly. The lines of the dancers interweave with the precision of a marine corps drill line. There is no movement in the torso. The arms are held stiff at the sides as if they're encased. When the arms do move, they are direct in their pathway, and take one or less counts to arrive. Each group has its own unified arrangement, different from any of the other groups on the stage. When all the different layers of arms, legs, and directions of the torsos come into the same plane and perform the identical movement combination, the result of eighty feet brushing and clicking the floor with eighty flexed hands moving together in time is "stupefying" (Quaglia, 1999c). Each dancer had their own iconographic moments. One dancer recalls "dancing [it] over and over while the choreographers were trying to build our endurance." Another dancer remembers a stagehand fondly: "I remember [stage hand] who helped me every night get on my circus apparatus. He'd secretly hand me a cup of water because after The Jig I was parched." Most dancers agree The Jig is the most difficult section of the show, and it is an audience favorite (Quaglia, 1999a).

The Jig was a significant piece of choreography for EFX. It was created at a time when Riverdance could only be seen in New York. For a replica of its athletically challenging choreography to be duplicated in Las Vegas, the one place

where ‘brainless drivel’ could never lose its popularity, was a milestone. Even more impressive, The Jig was being performed twice a night, “something they don’t do on Broadway” (Quaglia, 1999d). Liz Lieberman, in particular, was adamant that I record for posterity that the actual amount of conditioning and strength it takes a dancer to perform two shows a night is formidable. I can attest to this. Dancers have to pace themselves so as not to burn out by the Second Act of the second show. The steel floor, the hot lights, and the heavy costumes all take their toll; and that’s before performing any choreography!

Act Ten brings the character H.G. Wells to the forefront. A combination of projections and scenic pieces create a total environment, a rain forest exterior and a cave-like interior known as the Morlock set. There is a massive set change, where the exterior—based on a stepped pyramid—rolls back and 36-foot high towers move into place on the sides. Dancers enter atop a mountain that rises up through ‘garage doors’ (their actual technical name) located on the stage floor. When the set is in place, the dancers are positioned 40-feet above the audience. Scale, production values, posture, and sound create the totally escapist environment.

The Stick Dance closes Act Ten with driving rhythm and the thunderous resonance of amplified wood striking steel. Dancers from the wings enter, beating out each count on the floor with sticks shaped like dishevelled javelins. The whole dance is centered around the sticks: the way they are held overhead and in front of the chest with arms extended, the shapes the sticks form in the air, and the percussive,

propulsive rhythms they create when beat upon the floor. They are incorporated into the choreography to exhibit strength and agility. It takes rapid response from the muscles to respond quickly to change hands and control the direction change of the long sticks in mid-air, a frequent activity. Strength is further exemplified by body posture. The dancers' shoulders are positioned for a wide stance and their chests are elevated. The focus is directly on the audience throughout the whole section. It is confrontational. The attitude is intense and aggressive.

The dancers work in plié throughout. The definitive characteristics of control, angularity, asymmetry, and dynamism suggest movement that has been appropriated from African-American vernacular dance forms (Malone, 1998, p. 231). It is not African dance, but something that imitates it. As Marcia B. Siegel (as cited in Carter, 1998) posits:

When we're looking [at the work] we're looking at a Western form into which these elements (appropriation from other cultures) have been inserted to make it more interesting, give it a twist, or pay homage to something that the artist has been taken with. It's not multicultural; it's not intercultural. It's using cultural material to revitalize an ongoing form. (p. 96)

In this case, Anthony Van Laast revitalizes the recognizable forms of jazz and modern dance: jazz dance with its explosive, presentational display of strength and percussion, and modern with its overt use of the breath (Quaglia, 1999d). The sternum (and the

corresponding direction of the head) move between facing upwards and projecting outwards. The body posture suggests an active hunter stance of preparedness and combativeness. The dancers stand and move in a position resembling the 'triple threat position' of a basketball player (so-called because the player can dribble, shoot, or pass all from the same position). The feet are shoulder-width apart, the knees are bent, the torso is bent forward, and the arms angle at the elbow joint while flexed hands protect the chest.

The dancers move in circular formations around the stage, and for the first time in the show, they dance in pairs. Male dancers either lift female dancers high into the air or re-position them using exaggerated, stylized movement. The dancers' wigs, constructed of long hair, reach downwards to the lumbar spine. The circular shapes created by the movement of the bodies leave visible 'vapor trails' composed of the trailing hair. The resultant effect onstage is kaleidoscopic—shapes and patterns whirl and spin, their boundaries delineated by the angular sticks. The closing moments of the dance present all 40 dancers crouched in separate groupings beating various rhythms out on the floor with 1-foot mallets, and ending in a big cheer—arms and sticks extended directly to the sky. The Stick Dance further represents something that more closely resembles concert dancing: the body posture, the footwear, and the utilitarian use of sticks. Even though the dancers are dressed in loincloths and half-tops, there is not one 'bevel' onstage (bevel is a showgirl term for the stance where one leg is bent at the knee, the buttocks are cocked, and the lumbar spine is

hyperextended). They wear flesh colored jazz boots, and the sticks are used to advance choreography; they are not just there for visual consumption purposes.

The Finale features a complex arrangement. Here the cast is divided and dressed in a range of differing costumes completely unrelated to one another and to the principal's costumes. Costumes are still in the spirit of colorful circus attire, but there are no masks and the stage is very brightly lit, bathing the dancers in direct spot beams. For the first time in the show, the dancers—even those who are clad in futuristic costumes—are recognizable as live human beings. Previously, they were human forms but clearly disguised. Then, characters were required to extend their bodies in many different shapes signifying a range of time signatures, energies and heights. Nevertheless, the costuming and characterization was of such a scale that the humanity of the dancers was subordinated. They may have been convincingly portraying their stereotypical characters. They were whoever audience imagination believed them to be in all their costumed glory. They really did appear from the trees, or the sky, or the wings, but throughout the show, there were no cues directed at the audience that when the dancers left the stage, they changed and drove home after work. This final act revises that impression. The lighting onstage softens, the house lights increase, thereby reducing the potency of the up-until-then frame of illusion. The disillusioning process is enhanced when, for the first time in the production, dancers enter the house, some travelling right to the back row, thereby eliminating the one-way presentational structure of the proscenium space (Siegel, as cited by Carter, 1998).

The Final Act music is composed of very loud drumming and bass sounds that audience members feel echoed in their rumble-wired seats. It is a mixture of drum machine beats that have very low tones sampled with computer generated notes. The choreography presents body isolations and asymmetry in body position and posture—movement derived from present-day hip-hop culture. The combinations in the Tenth Act are presented for virtuosity's sake. There is no social commentary, no story line, no contrived emotion, no plot, no character development, only movement for movement's sake. The dancers execute lay backs, high kicks with alternating legs, pirouettes, switch kick leaps, sideways leaps, back handsprings, barrel turns, fouettés, fan kicks, and straddle jumps from the tuck position, to name a few 'steps.' The music is big, the set is big (an enormous wooden hand palming all the male dancers performing leaps and jumps), the stage is big, and the movement is big. Extremities of the body stay in the far reach kinesphere most of the time.

The Finale is what Foster would describe as movement performed by “the new multitalented body resulting from training that melds together features from all [the] techniques” (Foster, 1997, p. 253). In the essay “Dancing Bodies,” Foster discusses a dancer's body as being the sum of all the adjectives that can be applied to it. She looks at the body in the context of the following techniques: ballet tradition, Duncan's ideal of naturalness, Graham's dynamic body, Cunningham's matter-of-fact inventory of the body, contact improvisation abilities, athletic body, and finally, the body Foster describes as the “hired” body. Foster categorizes its features: “It homogenizes all



styles and vocabularies beneath a sleek, impenetrable surface. Uncommitted to any specific aesthetic vision, it is a body for hire.”

The Finale is what choreographer Perkins refers to as a dance that is “developing its own signature.” Siegel (as cited by Carter, 1998, p. 93) states: “I like the idea of reincarnation. The idea that to talk about change in culture is not to talk about terminality . . . [rather,] something that is a process . . . everything is in a constant state of metamorphosis and rebirth.” Siegel’s perspective underscores the message of the television commercial for the Las Vegas Convention Center in 1999: “Las Vegas-It’s Anything and Everything!” MGM expands on this theme with its own billing for EFX: “Miss It And You Miss Las Vegas!”

## **Company Dancers**

### **The Audition**

June 6, 1994: I decided to fly to Las Vegas the day after convocation to try my hand at auditioning for a genuine, paying, professionally organized dancing engagement. My professors shook their heads, my parents fell silent during the telephone call until I mentioned the show was to star Michael Crawford, and the jazz dance teacher at university told me she knew “the whole show would be typecast internally within” long before the audition date. My college roommate and I flew to Las Vegas (Morris Discount Airlines sold return tickets for \$69.00 at the time) on the last day of school, and I went to sleep that night (a Friday) in Las Vegas at nine o’clock.

I had just graduated from a university located in the bastion of The Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints—Utah. My dance clothes were all conservative, and I did not own a pair of dance shoes with heels. I decided to wear a black leotard, matching bicycle shorts, my hair pulled back, and pearl earrings. My roommate made me up with slight amounts of cosmetics, preferring me to look natural. I thought I looked like the poster girl for “Pure Innocent White Detergent,” certainly not showgirl imagery. I caught a cab to Henry Le Tang’s Dance Studio and was the second dancer to show up. I was only an hour early.

The management would not permit us into the studio and told us to wait outside. It was 111 degrees (F) already and the other dancer and I decided to seek refuge in the 24-hour gym up the street. She was wearing cowboy boots, a mini-skirt, and what looked like Gucci sunglasses, and she had just flown in from Reno that morning after performing two shows of American Superstars at the Reno Hilton. I felt like a kindergarten student at Studio 54, completely out of my element. After talking awhile, I found out she was a graduate in dance from The University of Maryland and had studied with the highly regarded Robert Dunn. I asked her why she was auditioning and she went on to explain EFX was to be the biggest show ever produced: people everywhere were talking about it. I was convinced that she genuinely believed EFX was to be a breakthrough production. Dance was in her genes, so to speak; her mother was an original Radio City Music Hall Rockette. I had picked cherries my whole life; I felt that cherries were in my genes. I was scared.

The lineup swerved around the building when we returned and there appeared to be hundreds and hundreds of dancers present. There were all sorts of women there: ones with big hair, well-endowed, long legged, bleached blond, tanned, sinewy, and glamorous. Hair was short, natural, wigged, or in corn-rows. Just about every body type one can imagine, short of obese, was represented. The registration process took a long time and by the time we started dancing, it was probably 125 degrees in the studio.

I quickly learned that although luck had helped me find my way to Las Vegas, proven technical virtuosity was going to be the difference between dream and reality. The first combination demanded involved ballet technique and was comprised of a jeté and a double pirouette ending in the attitude position. The phrase was performed in groups of six and the casting people saw the phrase once. There was a massive cut after that phase. Most of the dancers who were cut were “provocative” looking, with long teased hair, skimpy g-string leotards, sport bras, fishnet tights and heavy make-up; dancers displaying weak technique were also dismissed. The next combination contained many elements of modern dance: sweeping spirals and supple spine movements. Another cut ensued. At the end of the second cut, the remaining dancers were invited to a call back the following week, at the same studio, at one in the afternoon. I made it all the way through the first day, and to contradict what the jazz teacher in Utah had said, I did it without even knowing one soul.

The following week, I flew down at eight in the morning and coincidentally met up at the airport with the dancer whom I had met the previous week at the audition. She was also invited to the call back. We caught a cab to Caesar's Palace—because we knew the studio would be locked. I was scandalized by the seven-dollar cost for a bagel, but comforted by the air-conditioning. The Utah U. jazz teacher had advised me “fake it 'til you make it,” so I pretended to munch my food amongst the high rollers with cool calmness. After our repast, we went to the studio, but this time the number of dancers was significantly reduced—perhaps 70 remained. Almost all the dancers wore conservative, traditional dance attire, and all but one wore Bloch or Capezio split-sole jazz shoes. The casting panel had grown by two more bodies and we were introduced to Anthony Van Laast, the choreographer, who sat clad all in black and wore a ball cap and thick, black-rimmed glasses. We were shown additional counts to the phrases we had learned the week before and proceeded to perform in groups of four. There was another cut, and finally we were asked to perform the phrase in-groups of two while videotaped by an unassuming man. We danced the phrase approximately eight consecutive times. I thought I was going to faint. I could taste blood in the back of my throat and the muscles in my legs were giving out beneath me. It was excruciatingly hot, and the performance manager who had taught us the combination was jumping up and down behind Mr. Van Laast motioning us to use our faces to express emotion. ‘Use our faces,’ I thought? I couldn't even use my ears to hear the music, I was so completely exhausted.

The choreographer asked if anyone could do gymnastics and only one other dancer raised her hand. Having studied as a child, I too raised my hand with confidence. Everyone else was excused from the room and the first woman was asked, "What have you prepared for us today?" She then did a series of back flips and front flips. When it was my turn, I attempted a round-off back handspring landing unceremoniously on my head because my muscles were so taxed from the audition. Mr. Van Laast and the videotaper jumped from behind the desk to help me up. I apologized and told them not to worry; I had insurance. They thanked me and told me to stick with dancing (the "videotape man," I came to find out subsequently, was MGM's vice-president of entertainment).

It was late in the afternoon and those of us who remained were asked to fill out employment histories and I again felt inferior because I had half a page to everyone else's three and four pages of professional experience. Nonetheless, I fulfilled the protocol and returned to Salt Lake City later that night. Two days later I received a phone call: "This is Liz Lieberman from the MGM Grand in Las Vegas and we would like to offer you a contract." I may have been awake, but it felt exactly as if I was dreaming. I was chosen to be one of the show's 40 dancers.

### The Rehearsal Process

August 25, 1994: After days of paper-processing and orientation at MGM, the cast assembled at a huge warehouse on Wynn Road, about five blocks west of The Strip.

The stage and additional wing space at this facility exactly mirrored the size of MGM's proscenium stage. Thirty meters of mirrors lined the front walls; the back of the simulated stage was cordoned off with a floor-to ceiling black curtain. The wooden sprung floor was laid 1-foot above the cement surface and lacquered shiny black. Behind the rear retaining wall was the location of ECTS Scenic Technology, responsible for the production and construction of most of the sets. The warehouse was wired for mega-sound and it could have easily doubled as a high wattage nightclub in the evening; in fact, it fulfilled this role on New Year's Eve, 1994. The cast was assigned to this space because MGM was performing a multi-million dollar transformation of its Grand Theater.

Rehearsals were gruelling. The dancers soon became very close. Relationships were forged in the hours spent in the rehearsal space as each intricate piece of staging, song, and dance was woven together. Every day, the schedule was arranged to the precise minute. A 90-minute dance class, for example, was followed by a 15-minute break. After break, 90-minutes of circus training, after circus training 60-minutes of vocal lessons; then a 1-hour catered lunch. Staging choreography took the rest of the time and most dancers worked into the early evening. At the end of the official day, many dancers stayed to work on mastering the demands of the circus section (because none had prior training except the sole gymnast). Those who often stayed the longest were the dancers assigned to master the trapeze, the web, or those training on the unicycle—a deceptively difficult apparatus to manoeuvre. Friendships formed most

strongly in these after-hour rehearsals but were also formed on the basis of common professional interest. For example, in the various vocal sections in singing class, sopranos, altos, tenors, and baritones & basses became acquainted with each other. We got to know our neighbors very well. Some evenings, groups of dancers would get together to practice their harmony lines listening to the small hand-held tape recorders they brought to rehearsal with them. Gossip and banter were always whispered in the “U” formation around the piano, or written on sheet music, for the stage managers were militant, as was Michael Crawford, and suspension without pay was a consequence for disrupting rehearsal. MGM catered lunch on the rehearsal premises. For dinner, many cast members drove to the hotel to eat in the cafeteria. Chat would ensue late, late into the evening over frozen yogurt and decadent dessert. The food in the cafeteria (or Hollywood Café as it is entitled) is prepared by the same chefs who prepare the food for the world-renowned buffet as well as for all the of the other restaurants in the complex. The Grand Benefits package (Quaglia, 1999d) states: “When you work for MGM, your compensation is much more than just your take-home pay! MGM gives you a free meal and unlimited access to snacks every workday.” The quality of the food, I can attest, was superb.

This food subsidy was a huge help economically as well as conserving energy. After a hard day of rehearsals, cooking a nutritious meal would have been beyond the means of most; consequently, a fast food junk diet would have had to suffice. Over time, this could have had negative repercussions for the production. The property over

at the hotel was referred to phonetically as Migma, instead of pronouncing M-G-M. One dancer recalls “hanging at Migma café till all hours eating free food” as one of her most vivid memories of the rehearsal process (Quaglia, 1999a). The naming of the café is an insider code that original cast members initiated and suggests the bond of exclusivity. One dancer who has performed for 10 years professionally had this to say about her memory of our rehearsal time together:

We had so much time together there in the studio. Many bonds were formed. Memories only the 60 of us have together—good and bad times. Looking back—we had a rare opportunity as a cast of a show to get to know each other more than a cast normally gets to know each other. (Quaglia, 1999a)

The afternoons were for learning, setting, and rehearsing choreography. The show was learned piece by piece, so this often meant dancers were not used for significant blocks of time throughout the afternoon. The “spare” time did not mean those not being used were free to go. At a moment’s notice, another dance section could be called upon. The composer and the production supervisor would constantly run back and forth between the stage at the MGM to the Wynn Road facility and the updated material was then incorporated into the staging of the choreography. The Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Managers had to coordinate the complicated scheduling of wardrobe fittings, and physiotherapy appointments. There always had to be complete silence in the rehearsal hall. Talking had to be at the lowest whisper, for



noise disrupted the rehearsal. The Stage Manager implemented this rule with an iron fist. Also, some potential cast members were dismissed as a result of tardiness. Tears were shed on more than a few occasions when one of our own was terminated for a breach of protocol. Precision, organization and discipline were to be all-consuming; or else!

Many dancers took advantage of down-time in rehearsal by napping on the gym mats or in the plush chairs originally intended for executives dropping in on rehearsals. Nearly everyone in the cast, males included, learned how to crochet. Scarves, blankets, baby wear, winter wear, day wear; no clothing style was left unscathed. A dancer who has been performing in shows for years (and who has been crocheting backstage in between numbers for years) single-handedly taught the cast how to read patterns and stitch. The studio was always lined with big shopping bags of yarn, with big needles sticking out from them in all directions. Secret Santa at Christmas time was a big celebration of yarn and chenille innovations. Chenille was reserved for dancers who came from two income households; it was too expensive for the single dancer earning rehearsal pay (Quaglia, 1999a).

### Teaching/Learning Process

In an interview granted to The Globe and Mail, dancer/ choreographer Ann Reinking (Rafelman, 1998, p. C3) observed her dancers rehearsing the opening number of Chicago and quipped to the interviewer, “they’ve just started, it’s not in their muscles

yet.” As dancers must express precognitive moments, much training is required to convert the will of the conscious mind in order for a subconscious muscle process to be inscribed. The newly inscribed muscle memory is certainly not pre-ordained nor written in a dancer’s genetic code. However, when a dancer practices a new movement repeatedly, she makes it her own. It can be called upon on in an instant, a count, or a beat. Schechner (1990, p. 45) describes the process in metamorphical terms: “What is performed is encoded —I want to say nested, trapped, contained, distilled, held, restrained, metaphorized—in one.”

After taking classes and rehearsing with our performance manager over the course of seven months, the cast had picked up the style and nuances of our choreographer. In the beginning of rehearsals, many dancers subconsciously added their own style, flair, and signatures to movement phrases. Those individualistic contributions were eliminated in the training atmosphere of constant correction. The old habits were replaced with accents and stylization scripted by Van Laast and Perkin. Some dancers’ prior training had imprinted aspects not appreciated by the performance manager. For instance, she would not accept an open thumb (making an “L” shape) when the arms were open in second position. She was irreverent about toes that were not pointed. The details seemed endless: when to breathe, the accent on the downbeat, the focus, the placement of the hands, posture, and attitude represent only a few.

Some of those stylistic traits have forever been encoded on my reflexive movement behavior repertoire—for better or for worse. A certain method for preparing for performance, the way I prepare for a grand jeté, the way I conduct myself backstage and in the wings, can all be attributed to the rehearsal impact from EFX. I visually absorbed the way the choreographer moved and then I internalized that aesthetic, translating it to my own body with the help of the mirrors. First I patterned myself after what the move should look like; then to be able to call upon the move, I had to remember how it felt. The recollection of the movement was achieved by my paying meticulous attention to instruction, and the rote memorization of doing the exact same thing the exact same way every day for seven months. The learning process was successful because the intentions of the choreographers were fully realized. The teaching process was very regimented—quite different from professional ballet, for instance. Perhaps the nature of the cast itself, a pick-up group of dancers with varied training, may explain the need for authoritarian rehearsal control.

#### Backstage: Facilities and Activities

Once rehearsals had moved to the theater, other physical influences came into play. The space backstage at the theater is so large, if one cast member is estranged from another, she can avoid confrontation because there is plenty of space to seek refuge. However, the dressing rooms are not very spacious. There are eight mirror spaces on each side of a room, and there are five dressing rooms in total for the dancers and

stuntmen. Huge costume racks divide the rooms right down the middle. It is a good thing Las Vegas rarely sees snow: there would be nowhere to store coats and boots. Sinks and sewing machines also usurp space in the dressing rooms. The dressing assistants (one per room) hover around the entrances and exits and often provide a dose of sanity when the pandemonium surrounding costume changes wreaks havoc. More portable costume racks full of additional costumes are stored in rooms attached to dressing rooms and hallways. Dancers slip into under-garments (leotards and body stockings on top of fishnet tights) before going into backstage hallways to put on additional—often large—costumes. Dressing rooms, too, are places of refuge. Seat swapping and visiting takes place in between shows, but when someone needs to get ready or disrobe, it is understood that visitors will leave and find their own spot. Dressing room stations are individualized with pictures, poems, flowers, and candies, reminiscent of college dormitories and all their cheerful whimsy. Women travel freely between rooms; men and wig and costume managers attending repairs, however, must yell “All decent?” prior to entering. The dressing room spots have bright bulbs around the mirrors, and when all the dancers are busy getting ready, it becomes very hot in the room. The dressing rooms are short of space because of the amount of costumes housed there. Each dressing room spot has a red, padded upholstered chair. Kleenex and tissue paper are supplied by MGM. When dancers started taking it home in mass quantities, dance bags were searched by security upon leaving, to prevent any further abuse. Towels are also supplied for dancers in the dressing rooms so they can shower

and throw the used towels in the laundry. All towels are laundered by an outside contractor in North Las Vegas, but all costumes, leotards, body-stockings, gloves (anything costume related) are cleaned and maintained at the MGM by 'specialists,' the costume attendants.

Principals have their own dressing rooms, as do the Flying Kaganovich trapeze team and the star, cutting them off from the rest of the cast. Access to their dressing rooms is by invitation only. The principals have large doors that they can shut between shows, as opposed to the dancers, whose doors are propped open with curtains falling into the openings as this is the only effective means to get in and out quickly for the scenic changes. All of the backstage area is wired with a sound system so one can hear the show anywhere, from the laundry room to the rehearsal space two floors down. The sound binds everyone together no matter how far apart cast members find themselves.

There are security checkpoints at the doors that open to the hotel, casino, and outside (there are three sets of doors). There is limited/no access backstage for non-cast members before or between shows. If a cast member wants to bring a family member or friend backstage after the show, she must have it cleared with the Company Manager and hotel security. Security guards became good friends with cast members. They were folded into the social web of softball team and club-hopping invites. They knew of all injuries, absences, tardiness, grievances, and management decisions. They wore royal blue blazers with black pants and black ties, they took

their jobs very seriously, and their authoritative manner was reassuring for some performers as a counterweight to the emotionally charged world of the professional performer. The security guards never displayed mood swings, yelled, cried, or shouted while at work in contrast to several of the principal performers and stars. Many of the security guards who came on board in 1994 are still in their positions.

Another area where much bonding took place is the loading dock where cast and crew shared their mutual nicotine dependence. Even within a very closely-knit cast, it seems that smokers share a tighter bond with one another (Quaglia, 1999a). There is an hour between shows, and a dancer or crew-member who smokes will spend around 15–20 minutes out on the dock. The show is so big—numerically and spatially—that a dancer may never get to know all the production staff and crew, because she never comes into direct contact with all of them. The dock is one place where friendships were forged along non-professional lines, for it was the only time dancers were able to see and talk to the crew informally.

### Motivational Factors

Competition is omnipresent in a situation where there are more dancers than roles. Thus, much of the jealousy arising from competition is a function of economic interest; however, on the perceptual level, that of each dancer, the competition is framed as a striving for self-actualization. Frustration is further added to the mix when dancers acquire the technical capabilities for achieving excellence in dance but then

are not rewarded as in the case of performers in more functionary roles. Peters (1997) reintegrates Silverman's interpretation of Maslow's concept (1970) of the full use and exploitation of talents, capabilities, and potentialities in the pursuit of self-actualization:

At first, individuals are motivated to make full use of their capabilities, to do the very best they can possibly do in any endeavor. As development proceeds, the focus of the perfectionism changes from manifesting some perfect something in the world to inner development. There is an emerging sense of mission or purpose of one's existence. At this point, perfectionism is in the service of self-actualization. (p. 3)

Apparently self-actualization in the functionary roles in contrast to the front and centre roles are qualitatively different experiences with concomitantly differentiated self-rewards, an activity reflecting both dancer self-esteem and market value. The discourse may be on inner development, but the fact is that staging overrides role assignment. This will become more clear in the following section when role is more closely assigned to body type.

### A Dancer's Experience

The exhilaration of landing a place in the show lasted a few days, soon to be replaced by the anxiety of competition, but this time inside the 'chosen walls.' Competition arose in rehearsal to be placed front and center stage. The stage is immense. The

proscenium opening itself is 110 feet x 33 feet; the scale is so large that if you were placed in the back row of seats, you felt as though you were a large city block away from the stage. Tall girls were almost always placed in the back row, and one dancer lashed out at the choreographer one day, seething “there is no place for a tall girl in this show!” (Quaglia, 1999a). In rehearsals, everyone danced in a totally committed fashion hoping to get noticed and slotted into the ‘golden places.’

What is ironic is that the dancers forget—I use myself as an example—that the audience is not looking solely at me. They might well be, momentarily, if they are sitting in the first twelve rows and I happen to be in their line of sight. Otherwise, they are too far away from the stage and the stage is too big to focus on one dancer, so in turn, they end up watching more of the overall ‘gist’ of the choreography. In the moment of performance, however, it feels as though you are dancing so artistically, and with so much conviction, that the audience could not help but watch you alone. Also, from the seats in the middle and the back of the house, one can see everyone onstage at every moment so even if a dancer graces the back rows, that dancer is always in plain sight. The most restrictive seats are the seats in the front of the house even though no dancer will ever admit it; the stage is too wide and too high for an audience member who is sitting close to the stage to take in all of it. Nevertheless, there is an implied hierarchy of placement onstage that everybody in EFX understands: each wants to be placed in the front row of dancers and preferably in the center of that row. Imagine sixty people sharing that same thought. In reality, we know that the



stage is being shared with many other people and many other objects. Refusing to acknowledge it, however, made for fantastic energy onstage—the kind that was laced with adrenaline as if we were all about to explode out of the starting blocks for a 100-meter race. The intensity that ensued was powerful. The level of performance the dancers elicited was at its highest point every single night. As one dancer reveals (a dancer who was in the ‘back row’ most of the time):

[It] made everything I did onstage count that much more. There was intensity about making the most of each step each night—for each audience as if it was my first time. That is a performing ideal. I always thought about that and I always performed every show that way. I’d worked with dancers who would mark or be lazy until there was someone important in the audience, then dance full out. At MGM it seemed as though everyone danced full out all the time. It was a nice challenge. It was great to dance with people who seemed to care about their dance (Quaglia, 1999a).

Initially, there was a hierarchy established on the basis of technical merit. Each dancer was able to assess the others during a two-hour technique class held daily. The dancers who shone were cheered and applauded. The less accomplished became subject to assistance which, over some time, came to be proffered in a non-judgemental fashion. Since the cast spent upwards of ten hours a day together during the rehearsal period, camaraderie and respect soon began to replace envy and jealousy and the hierarchy of talent was almost completely eroded between dancers.

Management saw to it that the environment was a positive one. They did not want their dancers pitting themselves against each other. The grand scope of EFX was situated properly: the dancers were imperative to portraying the grandness and were thus integral, and management let the dancers know it.

### Cast Experiences

The dimension of permanence distinguishes two types of dancers in the cast: those who are going to retire in their present role and those who view the show as significant for their curriculum vitae. Though the purpose varies, all the dancers in EFX realize they have a job that has required them to endure years of specialized training. Some take their role very seriously, and some view dancing in the unique Las Vegas cultural climate sceptically. Responses on the questionnaire to question #10, “What is your perception of a dancer in Las Vegas?,” reveal a broad spectrum starting with the expected stereotypical response. Representative samples, dispensing with quotation marks, are direct responses from the questionnaires and are produced verbatim (Quaglia, 1999a).

- I picture a tall, beautiful show girl type. Skimpy costumes and feathers.
- Tall, long legs with fish nets and a ‘g’ leotard. Good extension. Not really a dancer with a lot of punch.
- Long arms and lots of sequins.
- You are in a category: musical theater, showgirl, adult revue or stripper.

- **Very commercial.**

Some responses, however, expressed antagonism to the stereotypes.

- **Don't look for art; this show is rare.**
- **Las Vegas dancers have had an extremely difficult time keeping the standard of a professional dancer aside from an entertainer linked with nudity and pornography.**
- **We are not girls who walk around with feathers on our heads. Real dancers work hard as we do in EFX but we do not get paid nearly as much as we should.**
- **It is nothing like the movies (exploitive and based on sexual favors)!**
- **Underpaid and overworked.**
- **We're not appreciated enough.**
- **It takes talent and training to be able to get here. The competition is very high in Las Vegas. It is very hard to land a big show.**

There were also responses that expressed pride and jubilation:

- **I feel the level of a dancer in Las Vegas is becoming more technical and challenging as opposed to a few years ago.**
- **A working professional.**
- **Some dancers have degrees and some don't but all seem to have good training.**

- The dancers are improving their quality of life by having a steady job that pays well while receiving benefits.
- Someone who enjoys bringing smiles to other people's faces. A well disciplined, hard working individual. You don't make much money; you do it because you love it. It is in your heart and soul.

75% of respondents circled dance as being "VERY" important to the success of EFX. Company Manager Liz Lieberman (Quaglia, 1999d) was very eager to have me record that EFX was voted as having "The Best Dancers" in the Las Vegas Review-Journal (1998) poll for the last two years and she stated:

This is important because it is the readers who vote. Audiences are now demanding more. There is a huge suburban community growing and they are demanding quality. Many have relocated here from other cities that housed a resident philharmonic orchestra or Shakespearean theater company. We need legitimate theater for our community, not just our hotel guests.

She is very emphatic about the fact EFX is different from shows of Vegas past:

The image of the 'Las Vegas Showgirl' we don't do that here.

Historically, showgirls were trained exclusively in ballet. It was all about good lines. But here we concentrate on the whole versatile, technical dancer: you're not just a walking clotheshorse.

EFX has been run in a different way from the get go. “We operate like a dance company,” says Lieberman. There is evidence of this everywhere: from the practice of signing in one hour before the show begins, to the dance studio that the stage manager and company manager pushed to have built. The floor space can accommodate all 44 dancers comfortably in ballet class. It has wooden sprung flooring, portable barres, fixed mirrors, and an expensive sound system. In the corners are large warm up balls, mats, and a universal gym. “It’s perfect for clean ups: you can only do The Jig so many times on a steel floor,” Lieberman—always concerned about the welfare of her dancers—stresses.

Ask any original cast member how EFX differs from other shows on the strip and they will tell you it is the first show to blend different styles of dance—classical, modern and jazz—in a “legitimate theatrical way.” “You can’t date it. It bridges the two forms of commercial and modern,” says a dancer, a graduate of the dance program of the North Carolina School of the Arts (Quaglia, 1999a). The show’s costuming was different from anything in the past, with chiffon dresses and circus costumes that cost upwards of \$15,000 each. Liz Lieberman (Quaglia, 1999d) declares, “you’re dancing for a reason. You’re not just there to look pretty. You are there to perform your art.” She is very serious when she uses “art” and “Las Vegas” in the same sentence. The usage may seem like a contradiction in terms to many, but not to Liz Lieberman and the producers.

Many original cast members were taken with the production elements in the show and the amount of money made available for those elements. Aside from the obvious scenery and pyrotechnics were little things that made a difference, too. These 'little things' indicated the show was going to be around for a long time. They came in the form of an on-site costume shop (a huge room with all the amenities imaginable), and the on-site woodwork and metal shops. One stuntman put it bluntly: "I couldn't believe the amount of money pumped into one show." The time machine that resembles a giant mosquito and flies offstage was reported to have cost as much as \$125,000. That was a source of amazement for many dancers. Many dancers referred to EFX as having the largest stage and the largest sets of any place any of them had ever seen, let alone worked. It was almost inconceivable that the Grand Theater was being completely torn apart, redesigned, and refurbished especially to hold the made-for-EFX sound and lighting systems. The previous incarnation of the theater had only been used once, for a Barbra Streisand 20-year reunion concert. Imagining the cost of using a theater only once was beyond the capacity of many of the dancers to comprehend. Who could have that kind of money? expressed our common awe. When the cast heard that the refurbishment would cost \$27 million to equip the theater with 3-D movie projection, a "fog-wall" of steam, liquid nitrogen, and hot-wired rumble seats (Corliss, 1995), their awe was revisited. Some dancers were excited about the size of the floor at the audition. As one dancer recalls: "My

most vivid memory of the audition was the beautiful floor and thinking how great it would be to perform on such a nice stage” (Quaglia, 1999a).

Many dancers feel privileged to perform in spaces such as The Grand Theater. As a patron stated: “When someone goes to a theater [of this grandeur], they expect to see something great onstage!” (Quaglia, 1999c). The same stage is also a source of concern to some dancers. It is made of steel and is filled with grates, lights, cracks, and tracks in order to transport the hundred thousand-pound sets on and off the stage with computerized precision. If one is not careful, one can get a foot caught in a track. On various occasions, pieces of dancers’ shoes have become wedged in between the grooves. When the show was being mounted onstage in 1995, many of the costumes had matching masks that were later removed because the impaired vision was very dangerous.

Many of the dancers in EFX who are in their mid to late thirties have been performing professionally for more than ten years in Las Vegas. They noted that they notice the talent pool rising with the opening of each new casino. Most referred to it as a “New Broadway Standard,” and they are excited about the future of Las Vegas. One 39-year-old original cast member who is still dancing in the show takes it all in stride as she comments, “Even at its worst, it was higher caliber than any of the other shows I’ve done” (Quaglia, 1999a).

## Physique

### Female Dancers

Most of the female dancers in the show are very lean. It is apparent that they participate in other forms of cross training alongside their dance regimes. Fitt (1988) describes female dancers as mesomorphs, in other words, their body types exhibit intentional, aesthetic muscular development. On many, the effects of rectus abdominus development is apparent. Upon inquiry, many reveal that they practice strengthening techniques based upon Pilates floor work. The questionnaires indicate weight training and aerobics as the most popular forms of cross training, and the rewards of those endeavors are reflected in the articulated definition of the linea alba and external oblique muscles.

Arms that are well defined are another notable characteristic of the female dancers in EFX. Many have developed deltoids, giving their arms a nice shape. Bicep peaks, or the flexors of the arms in the shape of a ball, are apparent on the majority of the females. There is a definitive shape to the arm even in the relaxed position. Their shoulders tend to be broader than their hips. Synergistically working on their shoulders, chest, and back muscles gives them the appearance of having small waists.

The aesthetic of leg development is consistent throughout the cast. The quadriceps is elongated in appearance, making the dancers seem taller than they really are. Their upper thighs appear to be mere extensions of the ilium (or pelvis.) Shapely hips and hypertrophy in the thigh muscles are not characteristics of EFX's female



dancers. Dancers who have predominantly trained in ballet have a developed soleus, giving the calf increased size.

The feet, typical of most dancers, are weathered. They have seen the years of transporting the body over floors of various textures while restrained in uncomfortable footwear or barefoot. Most have bunions on the medial aspect of the first metatarsal, but most do not tape their feet for this show because they wear comfortable footwear: Capezio jazz boots, split sole jazz shoes, and ballet shoes. Of course, “comfortable” is a subjective, relative term. The shoes EFX used are padded, making them more bearable than shoes with two-inch heels typical in most musical theatre shows. Soft shoe ballet slippers are more comfortable than pointe shoes. Comfort is imperative when one is performing two shows a night on a steel stage.

Thus, the overall body contour of the female dancer in EFX is slender and well toned. There are tall dancers and there are short dancers. They come from many different ethnic backgrounds. Some are mothers, and some are youthful, but all of them give the appearance of having elongated extremities and elongated necks. One out of thirty-two current and original cast members has had a breast augmentation. None has had facial surgery to remove wrinkles or jowls (Quaglia, 1999a). They are not glamorous or plain; simple or extravagant; they are physically and artistically capable of dancing two shows a night, five nights a week, for as long as their will and their contracts allow them to do so.

### Male Dancers

Male dancers in EFX also come from a broad array of ethnic backgrounds. They look older than their female counterparts. Pancake stick and powder cannot hide the histories that are etched around their eyes like asymmetrical picture frames. Sexual orientation is not apparent and male dancers do not portray any feminine characteristics in movement or poise. They command the space, holding their shoulders back even during their off-time with me in the green room, or talking with exaggerated arm movements when trying to make a point backstage. They have expressive eyes and expressive hands. Their energy is never static.

Overall, they are less lean and exhibit significantly less intentional aesthetic muscular development than the female dancers. They are not a tall group. In fact, there have been very few in the cast since 1994 who stand over 6'0".

The pectorals region is not overly developed but it is tight. In most cases the upper body region is solid and rectangular in appearance and does not taper into the waist. Abdominal development is apparent (when watching them move through many of the combinations) but size and striation of this muscle group seems to be a lesser concern.

Their leg and hip muscular development is a result of dance training. Here again, hypertrophy of the thigh muscles is non-existent. They have an elongated rectus femoris and taut, cylindrical hamstring muscles. The development of the gluteus maximus and tensor fascia lata muscles leads me to believe that they train frequently

in ballet. These muscles are responsible for extension, abduction, and outward rotation, in other words, coming up from plié, hip stabilization, and while working turned out on one leg.

Their movement behavior also suggests that the majority of the male dancers are ectomorphs, expressed by their efficient nervous systems needed for excelling at quick, sudden movement (The Jig and The Finale.) Their quick reaction times and their extreme elasticity are commonplace among ectomorphs. They do not sustain large, swooping body movement for extended periods of time (as is characteristic of the endomorph); rather, they excel at explosive steps.

The male dancers are older than the female dancers. They have, for the most part, left modern and ballet companies because they want to earn money “after all these years” (Quaglia, 1999a). There is low turnover for male dancers in EFX. About two a year leave and return to New York, or go back out on the road to tour internationally with Equity shows. The rest have permanently relocated to Las Vegas, bought houses, and teach, choreograph, and perform with the city’s burgeoning modern dance companies.

### Lifestyle

The sun shines an average of 320 days a year in Las Vegas with the mean temperature exceeding 90 degreesF during the summer months (Newby, 1994). Many of the dancers I spoke with are active outdoors and their bodies attest to this, looking

outwardly healthy and vibrant. They bike, swim, play softball and tennis, train horses, and rollerblade. Their musculature is a result of dance training and cross training regimes. It is also a result of a culture where a hot climate dictates lifestyle: 'fashion' leaves the skin bare, swimming pools are not only the accoutrements of the rich but are necessities for the middle class and even for some less privileged. Heavy liquid intake is essential to prevent dehydration for all Nevada residents who venture outdoors frequently. Subsistence comes in the form of protein drinks and designer or bottled water. Inexpensive fresh California produce is abundant in Nevada, so it is not difficult for a dancer to remain lean in Las Vegas. Working at night means the largest meal of the day is usually ingested around noon.

The exposure of the body takes many forms in Las Vegas. There is a very large fitness subculture in the city. Many dancers subsidize their incomes as aerobic teachers and personal trainers. Most gyms are open twenty-four hours a day due to the city's heavy reliance on shift work. There are two certified Pilates studios, and the Las Vegas Institute of Physical Therapy and Sports Medicine has very active directors who are bringing stabilization methods for dancers, stretching and relaxation techniques mainstream, offering group classes. Most of the dancers I spoke to at EFX see their profession as a lifestyle, not solely as a source for gaining income. Their lifestyle emphasizes health, for in their eyes health promotes longevity in both life and career. Nevertheless, one in four dancers in the current cast smokes cigarettes.

MGM administers drug tests to its employees upon hiring. If the employee tests positive, immediate dismissal ensues. Other casinos are following suit. Given the generous remuneration and health and dental insurance benefits the casinos offer, there is very little substance abuse among employees.

Currently, thirty-five percent of the cast members are married. Six cast members have children. MGM has structured its health benefits so that the only cost a woman incurs during her pregnancy—all visits, medication, and delivery—is five dollars per visit. Cast members joked that after the six-month probation period one would never see married female cast members again except in the nursery (Quaglia, 1999a). Job security is no longer a concern for female dancers who are in good standing with the company when they want to become pregnant. MGM compensates the dancer by paying 66% of her full salary for six months after giving birth. Couple this with a secure 401K retirement plan and a dancer who desires a family has struck gold landing EFX. Company Manager Liz Lieberman believes this compensation is not enough: she would like to see her dancers paid more—a sentiment echoed by most company managers in Las Vegas. She sees quality as the weapon of choice for survival in the current business climate: “They have benefits but if you pay them well as well, then you can really choose the best, the cream of the crop,” she asserts (Quaglia, 1999d).

The original cast had many dancers who were married to dancers who worked in other shows in Las Vegas. One couple from the Eugene Ballet left toe shoes and

partnering to land roles as original cast members in EFX. Many female dancers were involved with entertainers or casino staff they had met while working world wide on various cruise ships. Many relationships also formed during the rehearsal process between dancers and others connected with the show (production staff and crew). Many suggest this quasi-incestuous situation is due to the long hours spent in the theater, and having contact with few people outside the isolated entertainment environment.

‘Scandals’ were rare, for possible expulsion ensured good behavior, at least outwardly. For the most part, cast members did not discuss religion as openly as they discussed politics and issues pertaining to race, sexuality, their family, or love. Books by Deepak Chopra, and Redfields’s The Celestine Prophecy were the most popular titles circulating around the seven months of rehearsal space in 1994, as self help and self-improvement were the trendy topics du jour (Quaglia, 1999a). Many dancers had their own personal trainers, and many sold vitamins and dietary supplements on the side, not so much for extra income as to spread the health gospel.

In all the casts since 1994, there has been quite a range in age between the oldest and the youngest dancer. Currently, the oldest is forty and the youngest is eighteen. Liz Lieberman believes this makes for an educated cast, one that begets order, and she states: “We have a mixture of ages here, which is good. The younger ones need to learn from the older ones—the passing of knowledge. The young ones learn proper theater etiquette, and just how things work” (Quaglia, 1999d).

### Education and Experience

Many of the dancers in EFX have a university education. Of the twenty-three dancers on whom I have data concerning educational level, twelve hold Bachelor's degrees: three Bachelor of Fine Arts, seven Bachelor of Arts in Dance, Dance Arts, Theater, Psychology, Business Management or Performing Arts, two Bachelor of Science degrees, and one current candidate in Kinesiology. Seven do not specify if they have any post-secondary education and five record secondary school as being their highest educational attainment. The universities mentioned are: University of Nevada, Las Vegas; University of Arizona; Oklahoma City University; Arizona State University; University of Michigan; University of Maryland; University of Oklahoma; North Carolina School of the Arts; and the University of Florida. Four current cast members hold real estate licenses; there is a certified Pilates Instructor as well as a licensed massage therapist among this group. This relatively high educational level constitutes part of the evidence that shows in the new Las Vegas are changing, especially because the higher educational achievements of the dancers go along with higher technical standards. When I asked Lieberman what she looked for in an audition, she responded without hesitation, "solid technique." EFX is not like A Chorus Line where all the dancers have to be approximately the same height: at EFX the dancer is an individual whose individual shape, ethnicity, and bone structure are celebrated (Quaglia, 1999d). However, ultimately the dancer who gets hired is one who can cross over between styles (ballet, jazz, modern, funk, and tap) with a high level of proficiency. At an

audition, the Company Manager, Choreographer, Dance Captains, and Director look for two things right away: pure alignment and pirouettes. Lieberman states her priorities clearly (Quaglia, 1999d): “I start them off doing a simple grand battement exercise. Does their back break in the extension? They need to be able to do pirouettes in proper retiré. There are lots of pirouettes in this show.”

The questionnaire responses support the viewpoint that the dancers have had years of training before their recruitment. The following is a list of percentages and/or the number of dancers in EFX who specified the length of their training in specific dance forms (ballet, jazz, tap, gymnastics, modern, cheerleading, choreography, improvisation and drill, respectively): 95% have studied ballet for more than 10 years; 1 dancer has studied jazz for 23 years; 81% have studied jazz for more than 10 years; 47% have studied tap for more than five years; 45% have studied gymnastics for more than five years; 46% have studied modern dance for less than five years; 40% have studied cheerleading for less than five years; 25% have been choreographing for more than five years; 65% have never studied improvisation; 86% have never taken drill. The ‘other’ category revealed two dancers having taken adage, one taking baton and whips, and another taking Greek national dancing for ten years.

### **Technology**

The integration of state-of-the-art technology in an entertainment-driven application is one of EFX’s defining features. The impact of technology on dance in particular, and



the performance arts in general, indicates a growing trend of technological innovation. The implications for musical theater and what the future might bring are fairly obvious. Dance theater now entails a multi-disciplinary approach, and future dance training will undoubtedly make use of computer based technologies integrating sound, movement, and visual arts.

### Technological Parameters

EFX may be one of the first indications that Las Vegas shows are retreating from topless reviews and seedy reputation. EFX is a show where production wizardry, song, and dance form a huge aggrandizement of visual and audio stimulation. Tony Award winner David Mitchell (Barnum, Annie) designed sets whose colors are so vibrant, they make a box of Crayola crayons seem monochromatic. He had many obstacles to overcome mixing the production elements together:

That was the biggest challenge: making everything work smoothly and cinematically. It was mixing all these big elements together of spaceships landing, dragons appearing, landscapes disappearing in the mist, and of a time machine that would segue into a 3-D movie. (as cited in Production Arts web site, 1998)

EFX is a show where Broadway and Hollywood coalesce; where song, magic, circus, Nijinsky, and Riverdance are encapsulated in a 90-minute package, performed twice a night. EFX is like Broadway in its staging and script, and it is like Hollywood as it

masterfully manipulates symbols of capitalism. As Zukin (1991, p. 232), puts it, Vegas represents art by big money. For example, a typical Broadway production uses around 400 conventional lighting fixtures whereas EFX uses 2,500. In the Broadway show Beauty and the Beast there are 60 moving lights while in EFX there are 250. The 90,000-watt, 90-speaker sound system—designed exclusively for EFX by Jonathan Deans, President of Level Control Systems—is similar to studio equipment in that it is very precise, intricate, and timed to the exact milli-second. There is enough wattage in the sound system to play a 20,000-seat arena comfortably. There is also enough electricity in EFX to provide power for 1,440 homes.

The main stage hydraulic lifts, stored under the stage floor, raise and lower sets weighing in excess of 60 tons (125,000 lbs) when static and 10 tons (20,000 lbs) when in motion. Sets have been brought into the computer age: they move on a computer-controlled track accurate to within 1/8". To perform set movements and changes without automation would require three times the backstage staffing and would therefore be unaffordable (Weatherford, 1995).

The perspective backstage is very different from what audiences experience. Backstage there are cranes, vertical and horizontal garage doors, and the sounds of motors driving and fly rails moving. The technology operates in a syncopated symphony to ensure a precisely smooth and on-time show. All of the set changes are programmed and activated by computers. The computer terminal that ECTS Scenic Technology designed and built is very big (it takes 20 gigabytes of computer drive to

control it all) and is dubbed the subterranean 'Show Control' computer room, because it is located in the basement, three floors underneath the stage. Similar types of hardware configurations are used by NASA. The computers coordinate all technical elements with the help of 11 surveillance cameras. "They're all talking back and forth to Show Control. It's a watchdog," says Associate Producer James Trudeau (Weatherford, 1995, p. 12c).

Aside from complex computers, there were complex creatures. Act Four used two 50-foot robotic dragons for a dramatic fight scene between Merlin and Morgana. Hydraulics operate the dragon's appendages and pyrotechnics operate the flamethrowers. These animatronic creatures were created specially for EFX and they implemented a new technology called forced compliance which was distinguished from conventional hydraulics. Production Art's Web Site (1998) cites MGM VP James Trudeau: "This gives it [a] fluidity you don't have with stiff hydraulics that don't yield. The dragon wavers and bounces more like a living creature than a robot." These dragons were constructed by the same animatronic designers who built the dinosaurs for the movie Jurassic Park.

Predictably, the complex production environment was the source of many problems when the show first opened. In early 1995, some shows extended well beyond two hours because of all the technical mishaps. I recall, after the dancers went home, the technical crew would have to stay all night to repair the glitches. They were making so much overtime pay that many of them went on to purchase very big houses

(Quaglia, 1999b). As one dancer recalled—a sentiment felt by most of the original cast members—“It didn’t seem like the show would ever get down to one and a half hours!” When asked about her most vivid memory of the first six months of EFX, another dancer replied, “Dragon doesn’t work-GO HOME!” (Quaglia, 1999a).

At the height of the battle, flames shot halfway across the stage. Compressed natural gas was used for this effect. Conceptually, it sounds impressive, but practically, it took a long time to get the animatronic dragons to operate precisely. Often, one of the dragon heads would get stuck in the garage door, or the wings would not retract.

The main challenge for the dancers was the water on the floor, residue from the fog wall. The fog wall was designed to eliminate the traditional curtain. Created by conflating a 300 degrees steam stream with one composed of nitrogen gas sprayed from the opposite direction, the fog curtailed visibility every bit as effectively as if a traditional curtain was used. However, fog wall technology was nowhere near as proven as pulley technology, given that the former is a couple of years old while the latter is over 6,000. Just as with a curtain, the fog wall opened the show and concealed the stage during key transitions. But one thing the fog wall did which was not foreseen was that, on occasion, it created its own micro-climate. Sometimes, a slight adjustment in water resulted in too misty a rain or too much nitrogen made for ice crystals which when settled played havoc with footwear and dancer balance. The air currents determined exactly how it worked each night rendering predictability difficult. “We’ve made it snow onstage,” James Trudeau said (Paskevich, 1995). The fog also did not

dissipate on cue and rolled out into the theater, making for an uncomfortably numbing temperature in the first few rows. Large suction fans installed under the stage which pump the fog downwards have since alleviated this problem. Many dancer mishaps were occasioned by stage puddles, and from time to time, this problem of stage water recurs. In the spring of 1995, stagehands would run onstage during blackouts and mop the floor as fast as they could. Security guards were inundated too, but for them the “inkfall” (Kaufman, 1999) involved writing accident reports. To this day, stage water is still the most common dancer complaint. A bad situation was made good, though, in that MGM was the first hotel/casino to have a registered physiotherapist on staff to treat injured dancers (Quaglia, 1999d). In March 1995, a room was set aside to house an ultra-sound unit and to administer physiotherapy. The cast now has access to a resident Sports Medicine Doctor who is assigned backstage for each and every performance. The injury rate has dropped 75% due to the regime of preventative care which has since been implemented. Lieberman (Quaglia, 1999d) commented on the significance of this new regime thusly: “The equipment is here, the trainers are here, and psychologically the dancers feel reassured. It’s not just: you’re replaceable if you’re injured. Bring in the next one!”

But if the dancers were priority items, the production’s commitment to technology did not mean that their priority was number one. The following represents an instance of performance being subordinated to technology. It also illustrates some of the planning challenges with which management could not cope. The circus scene

in which I was performing required that I learn to do a juggling act while rolling around the floor on top of a huge ball. I had to learn to move the ball with my feet while juggling rings to the beat of the song, Intergalactic Circus of Wonders. Learning to juggle, to balance on top of and propel a giant ball, and to do all three to the beat of musical accompaniment was difficult and challenging. I found it, nevertheless, comprehensible and therefore manageable. I finally mastered the task, but soon found out that mastering the task in the rehearsal space was not the same as mastering it for the performance. For when the production was polished enough and we began to rehearse at MGM's performing stage, a problem developed. There the stage was crisscrossed with metal tracks used for conveying scene changes. I could not roll the ball over these tracks so I had to move in lines delineated by the tracks or rock back and forth while remaining stationary. Needless to say, the challenge was difficult, therefore frustrating, and a solution was not forthcoming. I found it incomprehensible that the technology dictated my performance rather than vice-versa. Clearly a lack of communication between the artists and the producers resulted in much wasted effort. The producers were forced to live with the fact that on occasion I would have to dismount the ball to nudge it over a track. I was directed to perform this movement gracefully, of course.

Many other dancers experienced problems with props also. The rocks carved in foam and covered with urethane and the paint on the trees in the Merlin Act gave those who came in physical contact with them rashes, and the liquid-nitrogen from the

fog wall gave many cast members bronchitis. Dancers suffered bruises from their contact with harnesses and circus apparatus and from accidental mishaps during the stick section, as when inadvertently beating a neighbor's hands with a mallet while beating out the rhythms on the floor. People fell off unicycles or trampolines, missed the mats during dismounts, and fell from sets high in the air. The skills of the physiotherapist and sports doctor were thus not luxuries but necessities.

Getting used to performing the show wearing costumes was another source of humor and terror in curious combinations. This, of course, was a function of individual mindset at the time. Dancers either dealt with the problems at hand or complained loudly to management and anybody else who would listen to them. Wigs and hats (some exceeding 6 lbs) fell off or got caught on scenery, props, or other dancers. Choreography had to be eliminated or changed to compensate for costumes which inhibited coordination with the star or principals. Dancers running down eight flights of stairs to make scene changes, dancer traffic jams, dragons getting stuck, juggling pins crashing to the floor, slippery stage surfaces, masks cutting off circulation, moving marks, frequent electrical stoppages—the nature of a high-tech show was not without its problems.

The show relies on precision, and every last detail has now been integrated. Once the show is programmed, it has to repeat itself with the same precision twice each night (Weatherford, 1995). Getting it there required hours of code-crunching to make all the lights, sound, lasers, and film projection interact. “Everything impacts

everything else. Everything is related,” director Scott Faris said in an interview to the Las Vegas Review-Journal, March 1995 (as cited by Paskevich). On the non-technical side it is the same. Stagehands and dressing assistants stand in the same places night after night; wigs, costumes and shoes are arranged in neat lines and formations without fail. No shuffling (line congestion) or queue changes ever takes place onstage except when specifically scripted. All re-blocking (re-spacing to compensate for an absent cast member or dancer) is rehearsed before the commencement of the show. The ethic of leaving nothing to chance or serendipitous intervention is pronounced. The show’s reliance on precise timing necessitates these compensations. Any tinkering with the timing could result in an accident.

Safety is paramount. Therefore, talking is not allowed onstage or in the wings while waiting to go onstage. These rules are strictly enforced with a verbal warning and a tongue lashing if one disobeys. Michael Crawford was adamant about the need for silence onstage and would not tolerate the slightest distraction. The performance manager used to stand in the wings—hidden behind ‘shinbuster’ lights—and write down names of the guilty ‘chatty’ parties. Line captains abide by the no talking rule religiously, as order is considered essential to the success of the show. The odd cast member is agitated when reported, especially when the agent of her discipline is a fellow dancer. Again, all cast members feel the influence of upper management and all have come to understand the rationale for the rules. Any emotional outbursts—laughing fits or temper tantrums—have to be contained until entering the lit hallways



that are safely fifty feet or more away from the wings. How was this operationalized? For instance, in the case of a painful, short-term injury, the refrain I most recall was: “Shut-up! If it hurts and you must scream, take it out into the hallway.”

### Synthesizing Technology with Show Business

Audiences have evolved—or not—depending on whom you talk to. The old distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow, high art and pop culture, have largely dissolved. Ballet, opera, and Broadway no longer cater solely to their own distinct audiences and cross-over is the norm. Today, the ordinary theater-goer supports a multiplicity of media. Nevertheless, the ante has been raised and many theater-goers today expect visual and emotional rewards, even in ballet. Harris (1994) describes the importance of staging:

About halfway through the first act of the Paris Opera Ballet’s Cinderella at New York City’s Metropolitan Opera House last June, it suddenly became clear that the show was going to be a hit. At first the evening had hung fire. Faced with a dim kitchen interior, a handful of drably costumed dancers, and stuttering choreography by Nureyev, the audience sank into apathy. Then the scenery started to move, and everybody sat up.

As soon as the lights went up on the scene, dominated by a beetling Hollywood studio and framed by three gigantic statues of Betty

Grable outlined in flashing lights, the audience made appreciative noises.

Harris' comments are consistent with those of Drucker (1994) who appreciated that the look of glitz is now a prerequisite as audiences, perhaps jaded or overstimulated, crave more and more. Las Vegas and EFX are thus answering the call for the hunger for substance trimmed with style. The producers have created a show in the spirit of Zeffirelli, Lloyd Webber, and Robbins; in other words big sets, formulaic music, and innovative choreography, respectively. Thus the combination of expensive hydraulic systems and NASA computer technology may not be as far-fetched as one might suppose.

EFX is billed as 'the best production show in Las Vegas.' The production tag implies that technical elements are the show's biggest virtue. Historically, reviews of the show have stressed this sentiment. Weatherford (1995) opens his review by omitting all references to the performers:

It has a spaceship, a time machine, a 3-D movie, a giant Oz face, magic tricks, a circus and not just one fire-breathing dragon, but two. "EFX" an abbreviation for "special effects" pushes the limits of possibility for a live stage production.

Corliss (1995) is also complicit in de-emphasizing the performers: "there's sorcery everywhere on the vast stage of EFX. Merlin does battle with Morgana—she with her 5.4 ton mechanical dragon, he with an even more gigantic fire breather." Paskevich

(1997) adds the following perspective, but in more lamentable terms: “the show simply stumbled about between eye-catching segments and worthy tunes, seeking some kind of hook that could bring it all together.” However, there are dissenting voices. The Las Vegas Sun notes fewer production elements and more marquee draw. They credit the star power of Michael Crawford more than anything else. Shemelgian (1995) writes, “By all accounts, “EFX” and its star, Michael Crawford, are enjoying a very grand opening in Las Vegas.” He didn’t seem to notice the technical difficulties, adding: “Each production number segued so quickly and smoothly, that when the show finally ended, many in the audience stayed in their seats, almost as if they couldn’t believe the show was over.”

It did take longer than expected to have a production-related, kink-free show—almost six months longer. As much as 200,000 lbs of scenery moves at the push of a button in the circus scene. One bridge used in that section weighs more than the entire set for Sunset Boulevard. The show uses 60,000 gallons of liquid nitrogen per week. It may or may not be the greatest show on earth, but EFX packs an amazing amount of scenery and special effects into a 90-minute extravaganza.

The years between early 1996 and the present have benefitted from the technical kinks having been smoothed out, and the show as a seamless whole is currently “blurbed” as follows: “This \$45-million production show features a cast of 70. EFX is a surrealistic, high-tech journey, highlighted by music, a dance spectacular, visual effects and pyrotechnics (calendar of concerts and shows in Las Vegas

Magazine (1999) distributed in the city's hotel rooms). This review, both briefest and most impartial, does not mention its star. It addresses both the technological and the human performances present in EFX.

The cost of EFX (different depending on who you talk to but ranging anywhere from \$45–70 million) is no longer a cause of shock in production circles. Q at the Bellagio has surpassed the cost of EFX, with a budget in the vicinity of \$70-90 million. Other lavish expenditures in the pop culture realm have also supplanted the awe of Kerkorian's generous 1994 spending—James Cameron's Titanic and the salaries commanded by some professional boxers and baseball players illustrate a few.

EFX has an indefinite run. In January 1999, it replaced its previous star, David Cassidy, with Tommy Tune. Tune, a veteran of Broadway, is morphing the existing show to showcase his preferences, style and strengths, just as Cassidy did when he took over from Crawford. Many current cast members find Tune a peculiar choice for the lead role. Can he lead EFX successfully into the new millennium? Perhaps he is the best offense the MGM executives and their demographic experts see as the way to keep atop of the new Broadway in Las Vegas. One crewmember (Quaglia, 1999b) had this to say: "Will Joe Shmoe from Kansas know who Tommy Tune is?" So far, the star's popularity has been irrelevant and the house has consistently been sold out.

### **Conclusion**

While writing this monograph, I often felt myself on the defensive, as if I had to defend the existence of the pop musical instead of simply analyzing the new style Broadway musical transposed to Las Vegas. This reaction was odd, because surely it's the essence of pop culture to provide an alternative to cultural authoritarianism, and if so, why should I feel so defensive? Certainly many young people, in particular, feel a closeness to Broadway-style dancing and many fine choreographers, including Robbins, have worked in that style.

I also knew I wasn't alone in my discomfort: I've noted earlier that other dancers in EFX felt embarrassed by the popular stereotype of the Vegas dancer, and thought that what we did as professional dancers had little if anything to do with that stereotype. I noticed that dancers like me, with university education, tended to be defensive about working in a popular show. This was so even though our working conditions, benefits, and pay were as good or better than they would have been in a ballet or modern dance company. I also believe that EFX show dancers are as equivalently extended by their choreographic challenges as are those in "legitimate" dance.

I started to realize that my discomfort was less a result of the work I was doing than it was of the attitudes of university departments (and faculty and students) to popular theater and popular culture. How do professionally-oriented university dance departments see show dancing (consciously or unconsciously)? We study the classics

(and contemporary classics), many of them embracing certain aspects of what might be called popular culture—but we study them in relation to noted choreographers of ballet or modern dance, and as performed by ongoing formal dance companies and not by pick-up groups of “gypsies.”

Yet, for many graduates, there may be numerous attractive and satisfying career opportunities in musicals and other dance forms related to popular rather than “high” culture. Why are we not preparing students for the full panoply of dance-related careers, including musicals? What is lacking in academic based dance curricula is thorough discussion concerning the style of the Broadway musical, the nature of the choreography, dances, and dancers; the effectiveness of the integration of the music, words, movements, and the impact of the visual components. Still more has to be done to cover the new Broadway standard evident in productions inaugurated by EFX. Even the Canadian Opera Company’s recent high-dance-content production of The Golden Ass proves the argument that multimedia is the future, particularly when one considers that its choreographer is closely associated with Cirque du Soleil. An ideal discipline of dance appreciation would embrace not only the choreography of the Broadway musical but also a study of contemporary innovation. Such a course would be marked by respect and appreciation for a wide variety of creative dance forms, and would validate good examples of Broadway dance just as courses now validate modern dance and (often to a lesser extent in universities) ballet.

All serious and talented dancers, in whatever field of dance they work, deserve some sense of positive self-esteem as a reward for their discipline and perfectionism. Yet the hardworking and talented performers in productions like EFX, who often have exactly the same training and experience as dancers in major companies, seem to have less self-respect. Working in notoriously crass Las Vegas perhaps makes self-esteem harder to come by for dancers than would be the case on Broadway, but as a rule neither kind of performer receives the same respect—and manages the same self-respect—as dancers in established high culture companies.

It is of prime importance to the dance community that graduates of dance studies recognize that the nuances and protocols of the musical (“traditional” and “contemporary”) are as professionally important as those of classical ballet and modern dance. This paper proposes that a study of EFX constitutes a legitimate endeavor because it familiarizes readers with the nature of a contemporary show, its technology, choreography, facilities, backstage activities, and dance performance; subjects thought worthy of academic and aesthetic documentation only in the context of “high” dance art.

The point of EFX was not and is not to enlighten. It was and is to entertain. Would the patrons and critics call it a masterpiece? Probably not, but that was not its producer’s intentions. Nachbar and Lause (1992) make a moot point when stating, “popular culture does seek a place in the ‘canon’ but beside it” (p. 34). Ouzounian (1998) makes a stronger point in his review of Enchanted Evenings, written by music

professor Geoffrey Block. Block analyses 14 American musicals in historical, critical, and musicological terms. Ouzounian addresses the point that some composers—Irving Berlin, for example—never intended to produce anything more than a pleasing collection of songs. He adds,

The simple fact is that most modern musical comedy is mercifully uncomplicated. (Okay, okay, I didn't mean Sondheim.) That's part of its charm. To try to imbue it with supposed depth by reading above, below and between the lines of its 32-bar compositions is to do it a grave injustice.

Musicals can be over-read and over-interpreted, no doubt (and over-interpretation is perhaps endemic to current academic culture). Terms like “masterpiece” and “perfection” are, perhaps rightly, seldom applied to them, for Broadway shows and EFX are admittedly transitory, re-inventing themselves to reflect the climate of the moment, and in any case have not, for the most part, stood the test of time. Yet the music of an Irving Berlin, “popular” in intention, has over time risen to iconic status. For many dance writers, DeMille's work too now has the hallmark of genius. Agnes DeMille's choreography of Oklahoma! in 1943 is particularly important, for while there were musical comedies with dancing on Broadway long before Oklahoma!, DeMille's choreography marked the beginning of the era in which music, words, and movement were fully integrated. Oklahoma! became the progenitor of the Broadway musical, leading other fine choreographers to follow: Helen Tamaris (Annie, Get Your Gun), Hanya Holm (Kiss Me Kate and My Fair Lady), and Jerome Robbins (On the



Town, The King and I, and Fiddler on the Roof), who is particularly remembered as the creator of West Side Story, which skilfully used dance to further the drama.

Moreover, as Salutin argues (1999), declaring a work a masterpiece tells an audience how to react instead of just letting them react, and focuses external authority onto the democracy of popular culture. If EFX were trying to be a masterpiece in the traditional sense, it wouldn't be EFX, and it probably wouldn't be running.

Mutual respect and a clear understanding of various missions and pathways in dance—for dancers, choreographers, audiences of all stripes—must underlie a new approach to dance education and appreciation. Wherever a serious and talented dancer finds herself performing (modern, ballet, jazz, tap, or musical theater), the genre should be viewed as a legitimate one. All the genres of dance celebrate great human achievement, in one way or another, and all the genres are cast with dancers who are fulfilling their calling in life. This sense of mission can be felt and expressed as earnestly, joyfully, honestly, and with as much artistic satisfaction by a cast member of EFX as it was by Martha Graham (as cited by Carter, 1998, p. 67): “People have asked me why I chose to be a dancer. I did not choose. I was chosen to be a dancer, and with that, you live all your life.” Frankly, all the show dancers in EFX feel the same way. We too are the legitimate children of Martha and Isadora.

The purpose of this thesis was to demonstrate that show dancing, contrary to popular prejudice, requires a significant investment in training and commitment on the part of a dancer. As documented in this research, the discipline of show dancing requires multidisciplinary dancing skills, an artistic appreciation of the various major genres, and multimedia synchronization skills. Show dancing is also significant because it provides a window on popular culture. One view from this window reveals that show dancing has become an integral part of extravaganza-type entertainments, and there is every reason to believe that the many styles of show dancing, from Stomp to Riverdance, will become even more popular and accessible with time. Show dancing is thus worthy of academic consideration quite apart from its aesthetics. Show dancing delivers a wide variety of expressive styles to the public and is contributing to the development of more sophisticated audiences for dance in general. Finally, as this ethnography reveals, show dancers have typically developed their craft with as much commitment as dancers in traditional ballet or avant-garde New York companies—and in fact, many of us move from one kind of dancing to another precisely because of our technical skills, versatility, and love of challenge. A respectable pay check doesn't hurt, either.

Though some academics and performers may not want to believe it, show dancing is now a long way removed from being a transparent excuse for marketing sexual attributes. This shift reflects both cultural and socio-economic realities as Las Vegas becomes more family oriented and sheds its former image as Sin City. Las

Vegas has become an international travel destination on the basis of its wide ranging amalgamation of the best of what the entertainment world offers. That show dancing is a vital part of this transformation is a testament to the power of dance—as art, as entertainment, and, for a change, as money-maker.

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## Glossary

**Animatronic:** The name of the technology reserved for the mechanical dragons commissioned for EFX.

**Canon:** An authoritative standard or accepted criterion.

**Culture:** This essay adopts the definition of “culture” expressed in recent times by E.D. Hirsch and augmented by Robert Ray. Hirsch argues that Americans share a vast range of cultural references which they use to communicate their shared beliefs and values. He produced a dictionary that included terms from both the canon and the streets and that reflect the range of beliefs and values (Nachbar & Lause, 1992).

Robert Ray develops Hirsch’s definition of culture further (as cited by Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p. 14): Ray describes the battle of definitions between those who would argue that culture is only that which is “great” work and “good” for us; and

...those who...believe that worthy, enduring culture is not the possession of any single group or genre or period, who conceive of culture as neither finite nor fixed but dynamic and expansive and who [do not] believe that the moment an expressive form becomes accessible to large numbers of people it loses the criteria necessary to classify it as culture.

I find myself in the latter camp.

**Ectomorph:** A category of body type based on the predominant type of body tissue. The ectomorph has a long, narrow, lean, lithe body and a fragile bone structure.

The bone tissue is actually less dense and the long bones of the body are longer than other body types. This body type has the greatest flexibility and mobility.

**Global Circuit:** The organizations and their contacts responsible for the distribution of entertainment products from their centers of production, usually either in Los Angeles, New York, Toronto, or London. Las Vegas may now be added to this list, and with the debilitation of Livent, Inc., Toronto removed. This illustrates the volatility of this sector.

**Gypsy:** A nickname given to a dancer who frequently changes geographical location to ensure work, because many contracts do not exceed one year.

**High Art:** A term parallel to “elite culture” (as cited by Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p. 15). This refers to the products of human work and thought produced by and for a limited number of people who have specialized interests, training or knowledge. “Elite” or “high” art is produced for the ages, not for a tiny folk community or for the entertainment and diversion of the masses.

**Megamusical:** A collaborative large scale production show employing cutting edge production elements—technology, sound & light design, and computerization—alongside the performing arts.

**Mesomorph:** Another category of body type. The mesomorph has a solid, square, muscled, athletic appearance. The mesomorph excels at strength and endurance activities due to efficient cardiovascular and muscular systems.

**Pilates:** The Pilates method of body conditioning is an exercise system focused on developing flexibility and strength for the total body. It is a series of more than 500 specifically designed, controlled movements engaging the body and mind, performed on five major pieces of exercise apparatus, developed in the 1920s by Joseph H. Pilates.

**Popular:** Refers to that which is (or has been) accepted or approved of by large numbers of people.

**Popular culture:** Refers to the products of human work and thought which are (or have been) accepted and approved of by a large community or population. This definition ignores notions of “quality;” that is culture as being something which is taught rather than experienced, is mostly past and barely present, and contains only a tiny number of works which have been judged to be worthy of being “canonized” as “the best” (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p. 13).

**Secret Santa:** A Christmas tradition whereby each cast member draws a name out of a hat that determines for whom that cast member will purchase a gift. There is a fixed spending limit and each “Santa” remains completely anonymous until all the gifts by everyone have been opened.

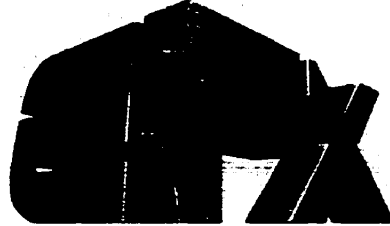
**The Strip:** The nickname given to Las Vegas Boulevard. It is home to many large, upscale resorts and casinos.

**Wooden sprung floor:** A type of expensive flooring often found in upscale dance and aerobic studios. There is resiliency in the wood, making it safer for the

dancer when landing from jumps. The occurrence of injury (shin splints and bruised sesamoid bones) decreases.

Appendix I (Program)

**MGM GRAND  
PRESENTS**



Starring

**DAVID CASSIDY**

Executive Producer  
**Richard Sturm**

Associate Producer  
**James Trudeau**

Produced in Association with  
**Jeremiah J. Harris**  
Harris Production Services

Production Design by  
**David Mitchell**

Costumes Designed by  
**Theoni V. Aldredge**

Lighting Design & Special Lighting Effects by  
**Natasha Katz**

Music Composed, Produced and Directed by  
**Don Grady**

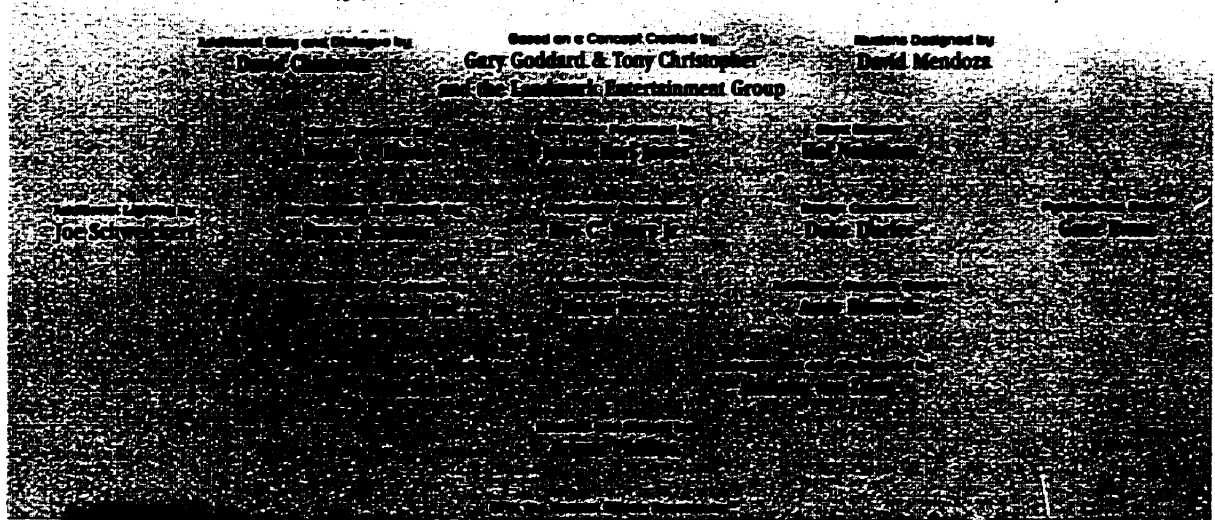
Sound Design by  
**Jonathan Deans**

Additional Music Composed, Produced and Directed by  
**Bill Wray**

Additional Story and Dialogue by  
**David Christopher**

Based on a Concept Created by  
**Gary Goddard & Tony Christopher**  
and the Landmark Entertainment Group

Rehearsal Designed by  
**David Mendoza**



## NEXUS

### Act One — PROLOGUE

NEXUS  
 Music by Don Grady; Lyrics by Marty Panzer

### Act Two — EFX

EFX  
 Music and Lyrics by Gary Goddard and Ted King  
 Additional Lyrics by Doug Drayfield

David Cassidy

EFX Master James Earl Jones  
 Master of Magic Michael Frontek  
 Master of Spirits Lawson Shala  
 Master of Time Paul May  
 Master of Laughter Stewart Daylida

### Act Three — THE LINE DRAWING

David Cassidy and the Masters

## MERLIN

### Act Four — MERLIN

The Magic That Surrounds You  
 The Sprite Dance  
 The Wizard's Duel

Arthur David Cassidy  
 Merlin Stewart Daylida  
 Morgana Amelia Prentice-Keene

The Magic That Surrounds You  
 Music and Lyrics by Gary Goddard and Ted King  
 Additional Music and Lyrics by Andy Balling and Don Grady

The Merlin Ballet

Music by Don Grady

The Sprite Dance

Choreographed by Ralph Parkins

## PT. BARNUM

### Act Five — INTO THE FUTURE

Master of Laughter Stewart Daylida

### Act Six — THE GREAT ESCAPE

Master of Laughter Stewart Daylida

Master of Laughter Stewart Daylida

Master of Laughter Stewart Daylida

Master of Laughter Stewart Daylida

Master of Laughter Stewart Daylida

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## HOUDINI

### Act Seven — THE SPIRIT WORLD

Master of Spirits Lawson Shala

### Act Eight — HOUDINI

The Seance

The Escapes

Houdini David Cassidy

Bess Houdini Amelia Prentice-Keene

## H.G. WELLS

### Act Nine — TIME

Master of Time Paul May

### Act Ten — H.G. WELLS

H.G. Wells' Laboratory

3-D Adventure

Morlock Exterior

Morlock Interior/Stick Dance

Battle with the Morlocks

Return

H.G. Wells David Cassidy

Captive Girl Tanya Morgan

Captive Boy Ontario Gesmusendo

River In Time

Music and Lyrics by Andrew Gold and Sue Shifrin

Stick Dance

Written and Arranged by Jeff Krashinsky

## FINALE

David Cassidy and Entire Company

Music Director

Music Director

Music Director

Music Director

Music Director

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Appendix II (Original Cast Questionnaire)

**“EFX” QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ORIGINAL CAST MEMBERS**

Answers can be in paragraph or point form. There are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. If provided space is not enough, please use the space on the back of each page.

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Sex: M F

Prior to “EFX” were you: EQUITY ACTRA SAG

Please indicate all types of diplomas you held prior to landing “EFX:”  
(Include college and university degrees, Real Estate licenses, Aerobic/ Personal Trainer’s Certification, First Aid etc.)

Please circle ~~ALL~~ of the following you studied prior to landing “EFX:”  
Please state the number of years where applicable:

Ballet _____	Cecchetti _____	Jazz _____	Tap _____	Gymnastics _____
	Vagonava _____	Modern _____	Improv _____	Choreography _____
	R.A.D. _____	Theater _____	Drill _____	Cheerleading _____
		Singing _____	Other _____	

1) Please state your most vivid memories of:

a) The “EFX” audition

b) The rehearsal process at the ‘warehouse’ on Wynn Road



c) The rehearsal process at the MGM Grand

d) The first six months after "EFX" opened March 1995

2) How many years prior to "EFX" had you been performing professionally?  
less than one year      1-5 years      5-10 years      more than 10 years

3) How did "EFX" compare to other shows with which you were affiliated?

4) How long were you with "EFX?"

5) Why did you leave?

6) What is your perception of a dancer in Las Vegas?

9) Other additional comments:

## Appendix III (Current Cast Questionnaire)

**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CURRENT CAST MEMBERS OF  
"EFX"**

- 1) Please circle all of the following that you studied prior to landing "EFX" and in the space provided state the number of years.

Ballet ___	Cecchetti ___	Jazz ___	Tap ___	Gymnastics ___
	Vaganova ___	Modern ___	Improv ___	Choreography ___
	RAD ___	Theater ___	Drill ___	Cheerleading ___
		Singing ___	Other _____	

- 2) How long have you been dancing in Las Vegas?

less than one year      1-5 years      5-10 years      over 10 years

- 3) Please indicate all diplomas you hold ( Include college/university degrees, real estate licenses, aerobic/ personal training certification etc)

- 4) How many hours a day is taken up by dance and dance related activities? (This includes class, pilates, physical therapy, teaching class etc.)

less than two hours      2-4 hours      4-8 hours      over 8 hours

- 5) Do you crosstrain? Please circle all that apply:

aerobics    swimming    running    cycling    walking    yoga

spinning    weight training    tai chi    kick boxing    other \_\_\_\_\_

- 6) What languages do you speak? Read?

French    Spanish    Italian    Japanese    Chinese    Other \_\_\_\_\_

