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Examination session (May or November)	May	Year	2013

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: Dance

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Title of the extended essay: Props and costumes are just not accessories in a dance performance

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had a hard time getting started
but was able to write once the ball
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Assessment form (for examiner use only)

Criteria	Achievement level				
	Examiner 1	maximum	Examiner 2	maximum	Examiner 3
A research question	<input type="text" value="2"/>	2	<input type="text"/>	2	<input type="text"/>
B introduction	<input type="text" value="1"/>	2	<input type="text"/>	2	<input type="text"/>
C investigation	<input type="text" value="3"/>	4	<input type="text"/>	4	<input type="text"/>
D knowledge and understanding	<input type="text" value="2"/>	4	<input type="text"/>	4	<input type="text"/>
E reasoned argument	<input type="text" value="1"/>	4	<input type="text"/>	4	<input type="text"/>
F analysis and evaluation	<input type="text" value="2"/>	4	<input type="text"/>	4	<input type="text"/>
G use of subject language	<input type="text" value="2"/>	4	<input type="text"/>	4	<input type="text"/>
H conclusion	<input type="text" value="1"/>	2	<input type="text"/>	2	<input type="text"/>
I formal presentation	<input type="text" value="3"/>	4	<input type="text"/>	4	<input type="text"/>
J abstract	<input type="text" value="1"/>	2	<input type="text"/>	2	<input type="text"/>
K holistic judgment	<input type="text" value="2"/>	4	<input type="text"/>	4	<input type="text"/>
Total out of 36	<input type="text" value="19"/>		<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>

Props and Costumes are just not accessories in a dance performance

Extended Essay

Dance

“When researching three different pieces choreographed by Alwin Nikolais, do the props and costumes he used on the dancers affect the interpretation of the performance?”

Candidate number:

3,993 Words

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Abstract:

In this investigation the question that will be under consideration is: When researching three different pieces choreographed by Alwin Nikolais, do the props and costumes he used on the dancers affect the interpretation of the performance? After researching such a great topic it wasn't easy to write this investigation because there was so much information that I couldn't understand where to start and where to end. This investigation was undertaken in the library of me writing down potential information for the essay, where did I have strong statement and what lead me to a dead- end. This investigation at first gave me a hard time to adjust my question and just for me to figure out how narrow my question needed to be for the essay. When I first sat down, ideas and questions ran through my mind about this investigation. I felt the main challenge in this essay is to have strong question. Another way the essay was undertaken was I had interviewed a dancer who is the company of Alwin Nikolais and he had gave me background information and gave me a great foundation in order for me to start my paper. Talking to his former student helped to realize how talented Alwin was and how he truly deserved to be in the dance hall of fame. Taking a step forward in my essay I read many online articles based on Alwin and the critics they had to offer, and just by what they said truly gave me another perspective and made me also think about how each critic interpreted the dance completely different. In conclusion I can defiantly say without a doubt that the props and costumes used by Alwin Nikolais in his pieces did affect the interpretation of the dance.

Abstract word count: 296 words

When researching three different pieces choreographed by Alwin Nikolais, do the props and costumes he used on the dancers affect the interpretation of the performance?

Introduction:

History can never be compared to Dance when thinking about it, but if we consider a little harder there is one thing that is in common between the two, both of them are telling story. History has a story written in words about what happened in the past and Dance has a story behind each step that is taken. When watching a dance performance almost every person believes there is a story behind the piece they're watching. After, watching a terrific two – hour long dance concert the audience always compliments on how wonderful the performers and how strong the story was being told. A saying that I really admire when thinking about dance is "Actions speak louder than words." The reason why I take this saying so seriously is because dancing out emotions makes this dance so much stronger and gives such a high impact on the dance. That is also the only differences there seems to be in History and Dance. The reason Alwin Nikolais is researched in this investigation is because of how talented and magnificent dancer he was. The footprints he left in the dance world couldn't be and shouldn't be forgotten. After having a talk with my dance instructor gave me ideas about Alwin Nikolais and that same night watching videos from his dance performance gave me so many thoughts and just lead me to think what was he thinking when choreographed the pieces, and what were the audience thinking after watching the pieces live. He was known for the outstanding performances of not having a story being told, and how strong of an emphasis he put on the costumes and props in his performance.

Alwin Nikolais was an American choreographer, born on November 25, 1910 in Southington, Connecticut and passed away on May 8, 1993 leaving footprints in the dance world, which can never be forgotten. He had received dance training from the great figures of

the modern dance world such as, Hanya Holm, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and many others.¹ His first piece that he obtained commission to create was *Eight Column Line*, his first ballet piece. After working as an assistant with Holm in the summer, in 1948 he was appointed director of the Henry Street Playhouse, which was later renamed and known as the Nikolais Dance Theatre.² At Henry Playhouse is where he began to develop his own world of abstract dance theatre.

I believe that was Nikolais philosophy and explanation on his way of what he thinks his dance style is, and gave an explanation to some extent why choreography the way he does. In the end he states he is moving to another direction of abstracts, and basically wants to move away from norms at that time period. He doesn't give the audience a clear explanation of why he choreographed the way he does. It just gives insight that he wanted to take a different path than all the other famous dancers like Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and more.

Costumes:

Mr. Nikolais was known for his strong costume aspect. Why did he choose such a strong interest on costumes, which tends to be a frequent questioned, asked? Costumes are everything that dancers wear during the performance. From the clothes to hair to accessories and ending with their makeup, that is all included in their costumes. The costumes that Alwin Nikolais used in his performances was something that left people speechless after the performances, more than speechless, they were confused. When looking at the costumes of any performances it goes with the piece and doesn't make a distraction to the piece being performed. Beginning with their clothes: leotards, points, gowns, tutus, jazz pants, and more.

¹ Reynolds, Nancy, and Malcolm McCormick. Schism and transition: reinterpreting Modern dance. *No fixed points: dance in the twentieth century*.

² Anderson, Jack. Phoenix of Modern Dance. *Ballet & modern dance: a concise history*.

Moving over with their hair styles: down, bun, braided, long ponytail, etc. Then coming over to the accessories area: earring, bracelets, necklaces, any type of hair piece, etc. Finally, ending with their makeup: dark, bright, natural, etc. When dressing the dancers, many of the costume artists have to think of the role that dancer is performing and dress them according to that role. For example, if the dancer is wearing an all white costume and her makeup is done in white and her tutu is white, the interpretation would be she is playing a good role. If the other dancer is wearing all black with black makeup then the audience can interpret she is playing an evil role. In Alwin pieces he focused mainly on the costumes which affected what the audience had interpreted the dance to be. He had confused the audience with the storyline. Every bit of the performance depends on the costume, which can affect the performance. When looking at Alwin work with the costumes, he made them differently and hard for the audience to understand convey the message, if any.

Props:

After watching a couple of more performances by Alwin another item that was noticed is he used props all the time. From small to the large props he covered, he seemed like he fell in love with exotic and outgoing props. Props are something that is used in the piece. Some directors start to use props and never stop adding them into the piece, and some directors don't use props, just use the dancers to tell the story. In a performance the stage maybe absolutely cleared and nothing on the stage and in some performance there may be a chair and table to used later in the dance or in the beginning. For example if there are four males on the stage and all of them are wearing a suit and carrying a brief case, that means all of the males are businessmen and the props would be the brief case. Many pieces might have more than one prop, which helps the audience to grasp a better understanding of the performances. When Alwin uses props, he goes on a whole another level which can't be topped. Props could only be used to

an extent and not more than that because the stage can get crowded and space isn't enough for the dancers to travel and wouldn't give the dynamic look because the dancers would be stuck in one location; more than making it a dance performance it would a still performance not able to do much because of all the props.

Interpretations:

What is interpretation? It means the action of explain the meaning of something. When looking at something we all tend to draw conclusions or take an inference at what we are looking and basically take a guess of what it is. Dance come under the umbrella of interpretations, not all dance piece give a description of what they are doing and leave to the audience to question what the dance is about. The interpretation of the dance falls on the audience but what the message that wants to convey is the choreographers' job. Just from a small experience having the message that wants to come out from the dance is the first step in choreographing in this piece. It gives the makers an idea of where to start from. After making a piece for so long and finally presenting it to full house, choreographers anticipate that the audience catches on to meaning behind the dance and to interpret the dance the way it is needed to be. Another string that lingers from interpretation of the dance is the dancers' emotions. How emotions are used in the piece makes the audience understand what is going on during the show. The more emotions shown by the dancers, the better the show is. Lastly another component of the interpretation is the audiences mind set, and how they think. A person can be closed minded or opened minded, that all depends on how the person wants to take it in. It seems all that there are three main components that make up the interpretation of a dance piece. Then there are some choreographers like Alwin Nickolais who decides to be different and take another path in the dance world and leave half of the audience confused on what just happened. To some extent it seems that he didn't want the audience to interpret anything that he was presenting.

He seemed to forget about the first and second component of interpretation, sometimes it looks like he just threw the dancers on stage and said do specific dance movement but they don't need to show any facial expressions or emotions while they are performing.

Tensile Involvement:

Now the first piece I saw was breath taking by Alwin Nikolais and how he worked with props and costumes left me confused but yet speechless because what the way he uses the costumes on his dancers and the way he attaches the props on the dancers. One of his famous pieces is called the Tensile Involvement. When first looking at the name just tensile itself, makes many people ponder what it can be because tensile has a definition of an element that doesn't bend or compress but can carry only with tension. What can Alwin do with his dancers carrying only with tension? This piece was choreographed by Alwin himself and the sound, light design; costume design was also by Nikolais himself. The dance consisted of many dancers going across the stage creating new shapes and geometric shape figures with colorful ribbons. There were colorful ribbons attached from the floor to the top of the ceiling and some were attached to the dancers itself, letting them create the shape that was needed to be created. The piece itself didn't have a story being told to the audience, and that wasn't Alwin concern either, his concern was to make exotic, something different and leaving the audience pondering what happened. The dance itself didn't have words, it was different beat also, and it was something that hadn't been heard before at that time. The lighting was once again unique something that only Alwin Nickolais would come up with. Now analyzing the props, this dance didn't have much props on the stage besides a good fifty ribbons hanging from the top of the ceiling to the floor, some dancers did have ribbons on the their wrist where there were no sleeves their entire hand open but some ribbons were attached at the palm of their hand. Whether the dancer leaps, turns, hops across the stage they would make a shape. The costume for dancer was full body yellow,

mustard colored leotard costume covering all of their legs, nothing was to be seen of the performers only their hands were to be shown and the face was able to be seen as clearly but because they were behind the ribbons or somewhere their face wasn't easy to be spotted by the audience. The *Tensile Involvement* didn't tell a story like any average dance piece, but he really did show how Alwin Nikolais thought. The props had filled the entire stage overwhelming the audience with so many ribbons from top to bottom.³ The costumes at this moment weren't too overwhelming but did leave me wondering on how this costume went with the dance. When reading different critics about the *Tensile Involvement* and seeing what others had to think about this dance performance, one critic says he offered many surprising themes and this dance piece didn't seem much different about the usage of abstract. Another critic says he creates dance that uses the human body movement has the same relevance as an optical effect. Overall, many critics and I have a different point of view about the dance and once again fall on the interpretation of the person. Nikolais may have a different thought than what we do, but at the end it's his piece and how he presents it to the audience. The concept of this investigation on this certain dance piece is because the way a person takes in the dance. It reminds and relates back to the Theory of Knowledge class, in there we had discussed so many issues and articles and I believe this brought out a very strong knowledge issue and that is to what extent a choreographer can use their imagination on a dance piece. That may seem like a small knowledge issue but in the dance world, it tends to be strong because using the choreographer's imagination isn't wrong, it makes the dance stronger I would say, but using it even more hurts the dance and the dance can lack more from it also. The class we also discussed the limitations that can draw and when can those limitations be crossed. Imagination is an example that can be applied the

³ Reynolds, Nancy, and Malcolm McCormick. *Schism and transition: reinterpreting Modern dance. No fixed points: dance in the twentieth century.*

statement above, imagination can only be used to an extent and there has to be a line marked, stopping point of the usage on imagination.

Prism:

Prism is another piece that was an interesting piece to look at because not only did use lighting as a strong factor but his abstract work on the costumes and props were shown in this piece also. This piece was presented in 1956 he used the light as a strong factor in the as well as the props and costumes. In this piece Alwin had created illusion that left the audience confused on who is an actual dancer. The costumes used were matched somewhat with the lights, and the props used weren't what an average dance piece would use. The props used in one of his previous works was shown in this piece also but the help with lights. In this piece mostly lights were used with the dancers costume leaving the audience confused on what is going in the performance. In the final moments of a battery of photo flashes aimed at the audience went off just as the dancers rushed forward, and in that blinding, disorienting flood of light, the curtain fell, leaving the audience gasping with surprise. Just the description of that ending must give at least eight people the chills of what just happened. The costumes must have matched or color contrast with the lights which made audience blind and not able to see the dancer coming at them. Prism's visually dazzling episodes, which had invented titles like Glymistra and Lythric to avoid anticipation in the minds of the audience, had no literal significance. After looking into what props and costumes were used during the performance the interpretation the Prism dance was completely different because a dance normally is a story but the Prism dance wasn't, it was something very unique piece put together by Nickolais. It seemed that from the Prism and forward Alwin used lights more on the costumes then needed, it looked to be that he was obsessed with lighting and how important it was for it to be in every piece. The affect of the costumes the matched to the lights made the crowd have many thoughts and try to understand

what all was going on. The affect of the props were the light was attached on to the costume leaving the crowd to contemplate what the lights meant or how significant it is to the dance. When looking at the aspects of interpretations it leaves the audience confused with how the performance and how the ending was. The props, which were the lights added an effect on the interpretation of the dance because if there weren't light people would think of the shapes he made differently, it would set a different tone of the dance and the lights give the impression of the dance. The interpretation without the lights can be looked at two ways; one way is the viewers wouldn't notice the difference with or without the lights but once again the interpretation is all left on the viewers. The second way to look at this is by the audience do notice that lights are all gone and the interpretation of the dance looks to be simple and easy to grasp the theme Alwin was trying to present. Once again the lights used in this dance make an enormous affect on the interpretation of the dance. When reading reviews over the Prism, one critic says without designed and conditional lighting, the dance couldn't be put together and wouldn't be able to be performed. Another critic says the makeup used in the performance seems to emphasis more and the lights and bring out the character at the moment of the dance. Just like the last piece talked, the tensile movement, the interpretation all depends on the audience and they felt when they saw the emotionless dancers, and usage of the lights. The dance piece just seemed to teach a lesson, more than relating this dance piece to school and it can be compared to an important lesson. The lights used in the dance performance made everything bright and just eye appealing and that is it, many people believe that it things shouldn't be eye appealing. Why shouldn't it be eye appealing? When a chief makes an entrée to served to the guest at the restaurant the chief makes sure to make it eye appealing to the eater and want that person to recommend it to someone else. First impressions are the strongest remarks needed in a job interview, if a person weren't to be eye appealing, dressed

nice, looked like they deserved the job then they wouldn't have get the job. Alwin may have not thought that deep or he may have, but one way I can surely relate this to is first impressions, and eye appealing. The dance had flashy light in order to grab the audience's attention and so does a writer, makes a bold statement for the reader to sit and read the novel. The academic part in this dance isn't clearly stated and not always does a dance piece relate to an academic part but can always help in the future. He did a great job on this piece, making it different and giving the audience something to ponder upon.

Kaleidoscope:

Finally another piece that Alwin Nickolais did that can never be forgotten by anyone is Kaleidoscope. The piece was presented in 1955 and this was his first full-evening work, which further his developing his mastery of multimedia effects as well as the use of the body extensions and props as the protagonist. Some of the props used in the piece were Discs, Poles, Paddles, Skirts, Bird, Hoops, Straps and Capes. In "Discs," the opening dance in *Kaleidoscope*, the dancers wear large colored aluminum discs on one foot, which serve in various aesthetic capacities. Originally intended simply to extend the dancer's range of balance by providing a larger than normal base, they also add a vertical extension as a great "toe shoe" might; they increase motional dynamics with their added weight in swinging. The shape, color, and material were aesthetic decisions, producing moving visual elements in themselves, and the heavy aluminum gives a satisfying, large, loud clang when the dancers stomp the floor.⁴By adding so many props in the dance it appeared to take the meaning away from the dance and the attention of the audience away from the dancer. By keeping so many props on the stage or adding them step by step makes the audience concentrates on the props more than how marvelous the dancers are dancing. The interpretation which was mentioned in the paragraph

⁴ Anderson, Jack. Phoenix of Modern Dance. *Ballet & modern dance: a concise history*.

above is all based on the audience and how they take in the piece of having all the props around them and bring in more and taking them out, just leaves the audience on its toes. The performances that Alwin put together became famous because the viewers had to interpret so much of the play because to an extent the play didn't make sense. Another way to look at it is the props have some benefits to the dance. After watching the performance presented by Nikolais, every single person in the audience interpreted the dance in such a different way because of he has used the props and to what extent can the audience really understand what Alwin was trying to come across. Alwin always had the abstract spin to his dance which made interpretation of the at least three times harder than a normal choreographer. The same critic from the above paragraph said that Alwin was having a difficulty with the music and he used such a different method in organizing the musicians. Another critic tends to say that the dance is really famous because of the music he produces in the dance and also that many wanted the music to be produced on the side in an album, in the 1960 the album was released with all the music. It appears to be that the dance, Kaleidoscope is much famous for the music and but the dance performance was wonderful and but mainly the music gave the attraction to the audience. In my eyes from watching the video I think that all the music gave it a touch but nothing that caught my attention, maybe due to the fact that the dancing was important to me. There seems to be a pattern in this paper, how unique Alwin Nikolais is, he uses abstract, he uses a different method than others when making his dance pieces. That is such a strong characteristic to have in any individual. Pattern is part of the Theory of Knowledge prescribed essay, which many of us classmates wrote about. I found that topic quite interesting to write about and not to mention it had put up a great discussion. Patterns used give us a general knowledge is the first part of the statement and I couldn't agree anymore. Alwin has this abstract pattern and uses some the props from other dance piece he made giving, which gives

the knowledge understanding of what he is doing. Alwin does a wonderful job in constructing all of his pieces, many would have to say he left a legacy that couldn't be and shouldn't be forgotten.

Conclusion:

I can truly say this investigation about the Alwin Nikolais not only gave me the knowledge and information about an outstanding choreographer but it gave me the ability to broaden my horizons. Alwin could compare too many things but who would have thought that Theory of Knowledge can be one them. Alwin Nickolais has made such a strong impact on Modern Dance today and influence so many others out there to think outside of the storyline and use exotic props and costumes in their performance. At some moments people wonder does he, have a purpose on why he makes performance the way he does. A question that arises is does he not have a meaning behind his chorography or does he have a true meaning behind the dance that was presented to the audience? Alwin took a strong spin on dance in at the time; it was different to the viewers' because they weren't use to what Alwin was presenting to them, because it had such a different outlook and mainly the dance was similar to an abstract painting piece. Nikolais had fantastic costumes but added props to the costume to make the appearance of the costume change the natural shape. Another thing about Alwin he floods his dancers with patterns of light in such a way that reality and illusion are confused so that audience may not be able to tell which figures before them are real dancers and which are merely shadows or projections. When analyzing Nikolais pieces, the costumes he used are different and leave at least eight people confused on what they're wearing and how does is correspond with the piece. Also looking at the props Nickolais uses in the performances, makes the audience wonder. After

studying many performances by Alwin Nikolais the props and costumes he uses in his pieces does effect the interpretation of the performance.

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