

CAPTURED

What makes a good dance photograph?
Carole Edrich talks to a number of experts to find out

Being a dance photographer is a difficult business: as one myself, I know. Timing is vital; in the briefest moments you must make decisions about how to set your camera, what makes a good shot, what kind of style you want and much, much more. Having established for myself that it's possible to do this, I decided to check my own findings against the advice of other people whose opinions I respect.

Wishing to question photographers with a variety of styles and disciplines, I selected a number of prominent photographers: Steve Bloom has a number of best-selling photography books to his name and is very much in demand for speaking engagements; Chris Coe runs the Photo Iconic Photography courses and founded the prestigious Travel Photographer of the Year (TPOTY) Awards; Jeremy Hoare specialises in cultural travel and has much experience in stage lighting; Max Milligan is a well-published fine art photographer of considerable repute whose new book on the Lebanon has just been released; and Johan Persson was a principal dancer with the National Ballet of Canada and the Royal Ballet before becoming a photographer and publishing a 161-image book entitled *The Royal Ballet*.

For balance I went to Biddy Hayward, owner-manager of ArenaPal (a photographic agency and library with a large dance section), and Leandro Palou who is both a wonderful tango dancer and the creative-director of a groundbreaking new tango spectacular.

Last but not least I included the opinions of Ron Self and Morrison Findlay, *Dance Today*'s photographers, whose experience of photographing ballroom and Latin is second to none, and Jonathan Gray who, as editor of *Dancing Times*, is responsible for selecting the images that go into the magazine.



Left, the Royal Ballet performs *Swan Lake* in 2004.
Photograph © Johan Persson
Below. John and Katherince Giannini.
Photograph © Morrison Findlay
Right, *Dance Today*'s July cover.
Photograph © Ron Self



WHAT ASPECTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY DO YOU CONSIDER MOST IMPORTANT?

MF: You can never control light at competitions, so look for a dark background and a place that will give a good balance of shadow and light on the face for atmosphere. Read dance plans in advance and use them to plan the best shots.

CC: Images should have a strong composition, use light well, be technically sound in terms of ➤



Main, Song of Spring, Ansar, Sanpei, China. Photograph © Pang Piow Kan , courtesy of www.tpoty.com
Right, a flamenco dancer at Santa Barbara's "Old Spanish Days" celebration.
Photograph ©Lalove Benedict, courtesy of www.tpoty.com
Right below, Leandrou Palou and Romina Godoy. Photograph © ???

focus point, ISO [sensitivity to light] and digital noise, and use the appropriate aperture to create the depth that's right for that shot; either losing background details or bringing things in.

SB: Taking shots of dancers outdoors, such as in Africa, is about more than movement and action. Try to capture the dust and context and think of capturing the spirit of the dance and the feeling of the moment.

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES HAVING A DANCE BACKGROUND HELP?

MF: If you understand what they're doing, it definitely helps you line the shots up.

JP: I've had ballet training and can't help but [feel] that my dance background affects my aesthetic. I think it makes a difference to those in the dance world, but not to others. This isn't necessarily a good or bad thing, it just is.

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HOW DO YOU MAKE PHOTOS ORIGINAL, ATTRACTIVE AND SALEABLE?

CC: Look for your own viewpoint and style. To be saleable it must be eye-catching or of a style that illustrates a point.

WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR?

LP: From a dancer's perspective, I look for an image that clearly captures the dance's essence while giving it a different twist.

CC: It should be more than just a documentary, have a sense of atmosphere and give the feelings that the dance is supposed to convey. I look for something that conveys the culture from which it originates and a sense of movement, either frozen in time or blurred, to convey the speed of the dance.

BH: Dance shots are particularly sensitive in that the picture may visually show great qualities, but if it's not accurate, it has no value. The professionalism and skill of the dancers must be part of the picture and a good grasp of the fundamental principles of dance remain core.

JG: In ballet, the best photographs are when the positions are perfect, feet pointed, arms properly extended and the eyes focused. Striking dance images need a sense of movement.

JP: Each picture tells its story in a different way, above all, capturing a sense of performance – beautiful colours, composition, raw emotion, expressions – there are a million ways to express dance and a million ways to interpret it in images. That's what makes it exciting and fun.

IS THERE A CONFLICT BETWEEN THE NEEDS OF THE PERFORMERS, THE CLIENT AND YOUR OWN VIEW OF THE PHOTOGRAPH AS ART?

MF: Sometimes you take a shot where part of the body is out of place; many like to see these as it helps them correct the mistake.

JP: There is definitely a pressure but, to be honest, in any shoot there is now so much choice you can find something that ticks all the boxes: those of the highly critical dancers; [those that work as] nice press shots, full stage and production story shots, telling moments and exciting interpretations. It helps to have a long relationship with clients. As their confidence in you grows, they become prepared to consider different ideas. Everyone is happy with a good shoot.

IS THERE ANY SPECIAL ADVICE YOU'D GIVE TO THOSE SHOOTING BALLROOM AND TANGO?

RS: Ballroom dance photography is not just taking a still; it's about the action. If your dancers are running on a quickstep, you need split-second timing. If they're waltzing, you can catch them on a still moment. On the rise is great because good dancers will then be on the balls of their feet. Knowing the moves is vital for the ability to anticipate changes in timing, staccato music and open and closed positions. The best pictures catch the dancers on the point of no return, just as their move is finished.

DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER WORDS OF ADVICE?

RS: In ballroom, depending on the camera and what you want to do, unless you're in the front row you won't get a good shot. Stand up, because then you're roughly the same height as the dancers, so hand- and head-lines look good and the face isn't hidden. This is especially true for moves like the promenade or whisk.

JH: Finding a way to convey movement, passion, intensity and character are important. It doesn't matter how the photographer does it, although framing, composition, lighting are all key. Good dance photography is about how you represent what you find.

MM: It should always depend on the dance. Native dancers in Peru might need a low shutter speed to emphasise the colour, while tango or ballet might best be frozen to make the image as sculptural as possible. Walk around, find your favourite view and take shots from different angles to capture the rhythm, movement and shape of the dance.

JP: After fulfilling the brief, if there's time and opportunity, I try to do my own thing – that's when I take what excites me. I think that the combination of strong physicality and emotion makes for a good picture.

CC: Get a basic understanding of photography in terms of technical aspects and use of light and then practise, practise, practise!

SB: A good photograph articulates something that's really deep and emotional. Putting that into words isn't easy. Trying to encapsulate a moment of deep expression on the flat surface of a photo is a great and wonderful challenge.

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