

November: Dancer Guide to Catalog Costumes

Dancer

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IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE
How fast is too fast when it comes to growing up?

For Dance Teachers and their Students • dance.com

PHOTOS

That Make the Grade

By Terri Diffenderfer

As Fred R. Barnard said in the advertising trade journal "Printers' Ink" on Dec. 8, 1921, "One look is worth a thousand words." Some adages still ring true over time, and this is one of them. You can't market without photos or find any substitute for the lack of quality in your photos—because you build your plan around them. Photos do create a perception, says dance photographer Richard Calmes, and furthermore, perception is reality. "When a person looks at a website they see the pictures first, then the bold type, and they only read further detail if they are interested or caught up visually."

This is where good photography comes into the marketing plan. "Pictures—good pictures—are what most companies and studios do not have," he says. Yet, to market effectively, those quality photos/video are what studio publications need. Calmes' photos sell dance in a way that takes your breath away. If you



"This shot of Whitney Sue Jones, Gwinnett Ballet Theatre, is one of my favorite shots. It took over 25 tries to get the fabric to fly like this. A single studio shot takes patience and experimentation and is unrepeatable... There is no such thing as multi-shot studio work. For that reason, I shoot everything one shot at a time so that I keep my timing skills sharp."

are seeking inspiration, check out Calmes' website and his photo gallery: www.richardcalmes.com and www.pbase.com/rcalmes/ballet.

Like many of you may have, Calmes began shooting dance images of his own dancing daughter. Based near Atlanta, the former architect and marketing executive eventually decided upon another career: dance photographer. He says his mission is to capture "bursts of beauty," which happen so quickly that the observer's eye cannot absorb the image. "There can be so many moments of excellence during performance, class or rehearsal: the apex of a jump, the perfection of line, an expression, a gesture. But the continuous flow of dance means that these beautiful moments are fleeting. By capturing these 'bursts of beauty' in a photograph, I can preserve perfection forever."

He bought his first camera in 1968 as an architect on a military base where he eventually took combat photos for the military. But it was another challenge that eventually drew him to dance photography. He says, "There are many reasons why I photograph dancers. At the root is the challenge—the challenge to me and the challenge to the dancer."

If you don't want a challenge, you might want to pass this task off to a professional. But, if you're determined to get a product to sell your studio, you might start with staged photos to avoid some of the most common problems: low light, movement blur, and stage lighting. Through staging or "stopping" action you can get a photo that seems "live" but lacks movement blur. Most photographers will need to take a large number of performance photos to get great shots. Just start and keep trying. Calmes says he is self-taught by trial and error, mostly error. So go out and shoot photos, some carefully planned, and some

that just happen. For those planned photos, consider some of these tips.

It's unlikely that you will get sharply focused, high-resolution photos without a good telephoto lens. Camera movement from inexperienced photographers causes as many problems as subject movement. Blur from camera movement can come from slight movement as you catch a breath or when you push to release the shutter. A new image stabilization lens can cost as much as \$2,000 to \$3,000 or more, but the resulting product for action photography could be considered "priceless." You can sometimes rent these lenses if you only need them a few times a year. This is a practical option as each year telephotos are bigger, better, and usually less expensive. Another and cheaper alternative, use a tripod to "image stabilize" any shot.

You also need to learn about manual aperture and ISO options on your own camera equipment. For stop-action shots, you want to choose the highest ISO option your camera allows. (Measured in numbers: 100, 200, 400, 800, 1600, 3200.) The lower the number, the lower the sensitivity of the film, and the finer the grain in the shots you're taking. For high quality, low grain resolution, sharply focused shots (such as for portraits), you want the lower number. For stop action, go as high as your camera allows. Then, learn to use your manual settings and choose lowest aperture or f-stop your camera to freeze the action. Familiarize yourself with manual focus and manual settings as you progress.

Just like the dancers you photograph, the photographer needs a dress rehearsal to practice "pre" focusing to avoid shutter lag. "After so many years," Calmes says, "I can see the preparation for certain moves coming. I can usually shoot a performance cold and catch a few good moments. If I see a rehearsal, I will catch a lot more." To focus, push that button half way down to set your focal plane before you are ready to take the shot. Don't be afraid to waste a few. That's the beauty of digital. Go ahead and start shooting before the action. Calmes says to try to think ahead of your shots. "There is the human delay between brain and finger and the delay of the electronics in the camera. This means I have to shoot early—how early is the art and the challenge. When I miss a shot, it is almost always late."

You should also turn-off the red eye delay on your camera. You can fix red eye afterward, certainly more easily than you can anticipate the camera delay the red



"The way I work with dancers: I encourage them to come up with ideas, whether it is in the studio or out there. This day on the streets of Atlanta, I looked at the dancers and said, 'Alright somebody come up with something.' Ezra Ezard hopped up on the front bumper, and I got out in front to shoot. I had no clue what he was going to do. He did a nice split, but not this one. I asked him if he would do it again and give me a better split and 'a face.' This is what I got. The whole thing took two minutes from beginning to end, and we kept on walking hoping that the owner of the car would not see us. There was no flash no equipment, just the dancer, me, and the camera. And again—one snap. I particularly like the 'Pedestrian Safety' on the right fender—makes me smile."



"I asked Aisha Mitchell and Corey Baker to improvise a dance. I set up one overhead light, a strobe with eggcrate diffuser, which creates a spot of light. There was music, and they danced. I shot about 20 shots as they just made up this dance. They had never danced together, but I think they had immediate chemistry."



"This was shot during a performance. I did shoot this during a dress rehearsal of Gwinnett Ballet Theatre but was not happy with what I had. So I crept into an empty seat on the front row and shot this one during performance Rebecca Crawford (Kirov trained) calls this her flying squirrel. David Blumenfeld actually has her in this position, and he rotates on the floor on his back 180 degrees pressing her up like this. So I shot this 8 or 10 times as he rotated and this was the best one. No special equipment—I shot it at ISO 1600 as I do all performance work."

eye function causes. If your camera has a high-speed continuous shooting mode, this is the time to use it to capture several shots in rapid succession. Just hold the shutter down for continuous images. Practice outside before the big day for both timing and continuous shooting experience. It's really fun to see the difference a snippet of time can make.

Some of these tips can't help unless you understand the options on your own camera. There is always the camera manual, but if you need some help, ask. It's kind of like asking for directions when you are lost. Get over it, and go to your local camera store, at a time when they are not really busy, with your cameras in hand.

For the big event, be prepared. Plan ahead to buy, borrow or rent equipment for the occasion. Make sure you have extra batteries, a large memory disk, and a backup. Set your camera on large format to get the best resolution and largest image possible. Plan ahead to place yourself at the angle and location where the action will take place.

Kodak Gallery online (www.kodakgallery.com/PhotoTips.jsp?d_45000=4500013) offers other tips that may help you get the action shot you need. Don't be afraid to try different options. Even if your subject is too far away to benefit from the flash, the flash may help freeze the action. It is important to set up shots to minimize the impact of subject motion. If you can set up the shot so the subject is coming at you straight

Tip: For performance shots Calmes uses a Canon 1Ds Mark III with a Canon 70-200 f2.8L IS lens. That is a \$10,000 combination, and most photographers cannot afford that. He stresses: "The key is low noise in low light. The latest mid-level SLRs from Canon and Nikon have pretty low noise, so for about \$1500 you can get a camera that will work in low light. The camera and lens are the first part, and post processing is the second. I use noise reduction and motion blur plugins for Photoshop along with other time consuming techniques to fix and improve images taken under low light—a labor of love I am afraid."

on, the relative motion across the picture area will be less, allowing you to shoot at slower shutter speeds.

A different artistic approach is to let the subject blur, thus emphasizing the fluidity of movement. This is appropriate when you're more interested in capturing the feel of the moment, rather than a sharp focus and facial expressions. The technique is simple: do the opposite of the previous tip. Use slower shutter speeds to let the subject blur naturally, and shoot the action at right angles to your camera to capture apparent motion. Again, practice at a rehearsal. Think out of the box. Changing angles can totally change composition. Try to edit your background and obstructions through the viewfinder. Manual focus can give you the desired focal plane. Simplicity is usually best.

Get more tips on action photography at www.kodak.com/eknec/PageQuerier.jhtml?pq-path=38/14993/15606&pq-locale=en_US

Once you have shot your photos and loaded them onto a computer, photo enhancements can help you make the most of what you have. You can pay someone to do this, or you can do it yourself in programs such as Photoshop. Calmes uses Photoshop CS4 and plugins for image enhancement and manipulation. "I am not a photo purist. I believe that the image starts in the camera and it is just the beginning," he says.

You don't have to be a pro to use Photoshop. You can buy Photoshop Elements for about \$60, sometimes less with an educator discount, and this program is more than sufficient for a beginner. You can eliminate red eye, level and adjust color, burn in or filter light, and sharpen your images quickly. Instruction manuals with disks to practice cost less than \$40 and give you step-by-step sample projects. You can buy a manual, go online for tutorials, or hire a tutor and save yourself time and a few headaches.

Plan your enhancements for the Web and for print—as they require different modes, sizes and resolutions. Check with your printer or web designer so that you may enhance photos and video properly for the use you have planned. You maintain more quality control when you understand the procedures and plan for the outcome you need.

The prize photo is payoff for the challenge, Calmes says. "In today's world of YouTube, it is still the photograph that puts 'butts on seats' at a performance. Whether it is a print ad in a magazine, or newspaper, or on a computer screen, it is the dramatic image that draws the eye and captures the imagination and cre-



Headshot of Richard Calmes. He took it himself in his garage.

ates the desire to see more."

So, get inspired. Look at the photos of others and keep taking your own. If you keep your eyes open for ideas and keep shooting for the prize photos, they will come.

LINKS:

Check out Calmes' website and his photo gallery: www.richard-calmes.com/ and www.pbase.com/rcalmes/ballet

More Calmes' tips outlined: jrphoto.wordpress.com/spotlight-interview-dance-photographer-richard-calmes/

www.photochimps.com/chaud/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/richard-calmes-interview.pdf

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