

# The More, The Merrier

How to market your dance department's performances to the university community and local residents

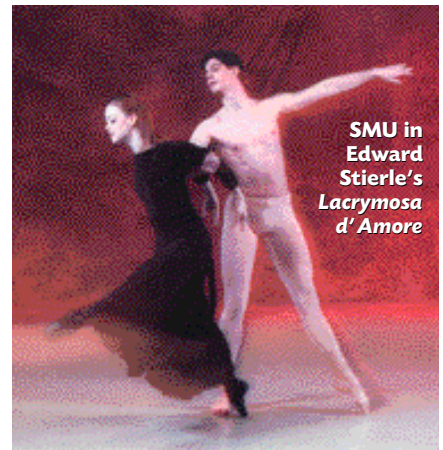
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Southern Methodist University performs Martha Graham's *Panorama*



SMU in Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco*



SMU in Edward Stierle's *Lacrymosa d'Amore*

**Y**ou probably spend several months preparing your students for a dance concert. Selecting music, choreographing and designing costumes and scenery are just a few of the tasks that go into producing a show, but all your efforts may be in vain, if you miss one crucial step: marketing. If you neglect to promote your concert to campus and area audiences, your dancers will

be performing for an empty theater. Read on for advice from veteran dance professors on how to fill seats at your next show.

Before you shrug off or delegate the job of marketing, consider the benefits of great turnout for your performance. Denise Carlson-Gardner, professor of dance at the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, says that a well-attended performance may be a deciding factor

next time the university considers funding for your program. For Greg Brown, managing director of the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University, a good audience is also vital for academic progress. "Performance is an extension of the educational process," Brown says. "Students take what they have learned in the classroom and studio and put it before an audience. That process of preparation, production and



University of Michigan students  
in *Point of No Return*  
by Ruth Leney-Midkiff

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“THE BEST BENEFIT OF HAVING A WELL-ATTENDED SHOW IS THAT THE AUDIENCE FURTHERS THE EDUCATION OF THE STUDENTS THROUGH FEEDBACK AND APPRECIATION.”  
—KERIANNE TUPAC

audience feedback is important in training them for professional dance careers. If we don't have the audience, the learning process is shortchanged.”

Kerianne Tupac, marketing and communications director at University of Michigan adds that “from a marketing standpoint, a well-attended show generates word-of-mouth advertising. Ultimately, however, the best benefit of having a well-attended show is that the audience furthers the education of the students through feedback and appreciation.”

### Use Your School's Resources

Before you start lamenting the high costs of a marketing campaign, consider all the tools that your school or university may provide you at no cost.

■ **The website:** “Every time someone logs onto our college website, there is a featured arts event on the homepage,” says Lynn Brooks, dance professor

at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. “You can click on that story to get more information about every arts event on campus. So, in a sense, we've made the front page.” To be listed, Brooks simply sends a description of the event, a photo and her contact info to public relations office, which forwards the materials to the calendar webmaster.

■ **Publications:** The college paper, alumni bulletin, department newsletter—these are all places where your dance performance should be promoted.

■ **Bulletin boards:** No college campus is without countless bulletin boards advertising myriad activities. Make sure that enticing, clear and informative flyers for your show are posted anywhere you can stick a thumbtack. Most schools remove all postings once a week, so enlist students' help to set up an effective posting schedule.

■ **Dining halls:** “At least a week before

each event, we place ‘table tents’—three-sided, eye-catching information pieces—on all the tables in the campus dining areas,” says Brooks. “These attract diners and coffee drinkers to learn about upcoming events.”

### Partner Up

As you promote your concert, consider how you can get other departments involved. If you're using Handel's music, for example, invite the German department or reach out to the studio art department by commissioning a faculty member to create a painted backdrop. When choreographer Deborah Slater was at F & M, Brooks recalls, she set *The Sleepwatchers*, which focused partially on sleep disorders, on a group of students. The piece attracted attendees from the psychology department.

Whatever the interdepartmental connection, be sure to extend a warm invitation. Brooks knew that her recent work, which was accompanied by recitation of Victorian and modern British poetry, would be interesting to the English department. She took the time to speak about it in a few classes and sent out special invitations to the department faculty and students.

### Make Music Work for You

At UM, Tupac says, shows with recognizable music attract the largest crowds. “Since modern dance is an unknown except to a select group of patrons, if the music is familiar there tends to be more inclination to give the unknown a try,” she explains. Familiar pieces such as *Carmina Burana*, George Gershwin works, jazz compositions and Big Band arrangements are big crowd pleasers.

Another possible partnership is with local musicians. “Not only do these collaborations bring in new audiences who might not have traditionally attended a dance concert, but the inclusion of live music versus recordings is a draw for most patrons,” continues Tupac.

### Be a Tease

No matter how detailed you may be in the description of your dance concert, some people may just not get it. Why not show them instead? During the week of your show, set up a few “teasers” in public areas of the school. Have a few dancers perform an excerpt from one of the pieces on the schedule in full

**TEACHING** Higher Ed



**Bella Italia  
at a "Brown  
Bag" event  
at SMU**

PAUL TALLEY/COURTESY OF SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

AT YOUR NEXT PERFORMANCE, ASK ATTENDEES TO FILL OUT FORMS AND FIND OUT WHERE THEY HEARD ABOUT THE SHOW.

costume. After the mini-performance, they can answer questions from the audience and hand out flyers promoting the event. Brown says that student-choreographed "Brown Bag" lunchtime performances given in a public lobby are "a huge draw to the university, as well as to community folks who bring their lunches."

**Reach out Past the University**

"There is a difference between marketing to the university community and the local community," says Ellen Rosewall, assistant professor of arts management at UWGB. You may not be aware that simple logistics may discourage local residents from attending. "Studies have shown that many locals are reluctant to enter college campuses if they don't know where to park or where to go once they get there," Rosewall notes. Especially since dance performances may take place in small halls within buildings, "the most important thing you can do is to encourage your school to improve signage

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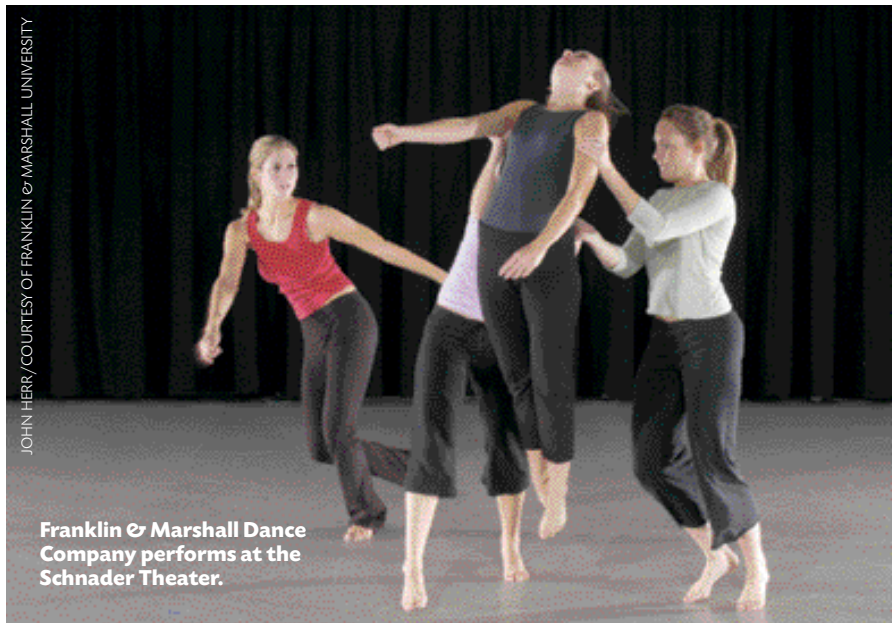
## TEACHING Higher Ed

# Not-So-Full House

5 ways to make the best of low turnout

From inclement weather to competing events, any number of things can leave your dancers performing for a small crowd. Here are five tricks to handle this disappointment:

1. Before the performance, ask the audience to move closer to the stage. This will help to keep your viewers engaged, whereas they might feel more isolated and distracted on their own in the back of an empty theater.
2. Hold a question-and-answer session after the show.
3. Distribute feedback forms (and writing implements) to get a response from the attendees.
4. After the show, invite viewers for a backstage tour.
5. Stress to students that as performers, it is especially important for them to make a connection with audience members when attendance is low. Before the curtain goes up, encourage dancers to reach out to the audience as they perform.



Franklin & Marshall Dance  
Company performs at the  
Schnader Theater.

or post your own signs on days of performances," Rosewall says.

The challenge in involving the local community is that your event is competing with other community activities: plays, concerts and sporting events. To win over this potential audience, Rosewall suggests "creating a brand image that gives townies a reason to attend." Another way is to link up with community organizations who may promote your show to their members. "Work with a community organization like a local YMCA that can be in touch with senior citizens to emphasize a specific theme," Rosewall proposes. (Coverage in local

newspapers can also help you boost attendance. For more on how to attract media attention, see "Making Headlines" in *DT* December 2004.)

Finally, before you run yourself ragged trying to get the word out to as many people as possible, consider aiming your advertising to those who may be interested. At your next performance, ask attendees to fill out forms and find out where they heard about the show. This will help you focus your future marketing efforts. Most likely, your dancers will be your most vocal promoters, so make sure that they are fired up about their dancing and they'll work hard to fill seats. **DT**