



# Discussing Performance in the Classroom

UMS believes that experiences with the performing arts can enrich and enliven academic inquiry across all disciplines. We are committed to creating uncommon learning opportunities for students and faculty, both in and outside the classroom. This includes helping faculty integrate UMS performances into their courses.

Discussing a performance, both before and after the event, is an important part of the arts-integrative classroom experience. While instructors may be familiar with the benefits of discussion as a mode of instruction, some may have less experience leading discussions about music, theatre, or dance. Conversations about live performance may touch on elements that lie outside your area of expertise, and they certainly involve a degree of the uncontrollable that is inherent in the live performance experience. This guide is designed to provide broad frameworks as well as specific prompts for talking about performance, with the purpose of making instructors

more comfortable in the role of facilitator. It addresses pragmatic aspects of discussing performance as well as the role of critical operations such as reflection, description, interpretation, contextualization, and evaluation.

As with any other discussion, learning goals act as guideposts. What is the purpose of including performance in the class? What do you want students to get out of the experience? Some instructors bring their students to the theater to enhance the content of their courses, or to provide the different perspective that the medium of live performance provides. Others have more open-ended goals in mind for their students such as developing attention to detail, gaining insight into creativity, or synthesizing an interpretation. The “take-away” you have in mind for your students will inform how you frame discussions.

## Before the Performance

Opportunities arise for fruitful in-class discussion both before and after the performance, each accomplishing distinct goals.

Discussion beforehand provides a space to articulate expectations of the performance, creating a reference point for comparison afterwards. It can be useful to explicitly gauge students' familiarity with performance—"Who's seen a play on stage?"—acknowledging the range of experiences in the room and perhaps talking about past experiences. Many instructors find transparency productive at this point, and share their learning goals with students. This can also be time for a "dry run" to practice talking about music, theatre, or dance, on their own terms or at their intersection with course material. To set up this discussion, you might provide background information on the genre, artist, or specific work you will be seeing, or note potential connections between the course and the performance. Watching or listening to a video or audio clip can ground the discussion in concrete details. Alternatively, one member of the UMS Faculty Insight Group recommends first getting students excited about the live performance experience rather than "front-loading" content. He offers his class a video or recording that is close to the performance he and his class will attend—the same work of art, the same composer or playwright or choreographer—but that, more importantly, is emotionally engaging or visually provocative. He has used Walt Disney's *Fantasia* toward this end. His goal is to get students invested in the performance itself; then he moves on to information relevant to the class.

Before the performance, consider assigning a required low-stakes written response to be handed in after the show. Such an assignment sets up the expectation that students will be alert to, and accountable for, details of the performance. Again, your learning goals will shape the assignment. Specific, content-based questions can help draw students' attention to how the performance provides a different perspective on or comparison with course material. More open-ended questions encourage general attentiveness, prompting students to "be present" and actively taking in the many details of the experience. Your questions might direct their attention to the venue, the audience, the sights and sounds—those physical details that will enable a rich description later—or to their own impressions and associations. The observation and reflection required to answer such questions prepare a student to participate in discussion after the performance.

One instructor asks her students to practice "passionate noticing," reminding them that even if the performance runs for many nights, it is never exactly the same. Because recording the performance is forbidden, encourage students to write down their observations and impressions. Many people like to take notes as soon as possible after the performance to ensure a record of their thoughts. Taking notes during the performance is fine, but make it clear that no lights of any kind—

including the light from a phone—are permitted during the performance.

## After the Performance

Discussion after the performance provides an opportunity for students to articulate their personal responses and to share them with the group. Here, many learning goals are realized; impressions are solidified or modified, multiple perspectives must be honored, and individual meaning-making informs the whole group's understanding. In addition, discussion mobilizes all the knowledge in the room rather than looking to the instructor as the lone authority. One instructor finds that debriefing and comparing notes with her students after a performance frees students from the notion that there is a right or best way to have seen the performance. She points out to her students that any performance involves a surfeit of stimuli, that partiality is not only fine but inevitable. Everyone makes choices about where to focus in the theater; sharing individual experiences not only reassures students that they can't notice it all but also builds a powerful collective account of the event.

<sup>1</sup>Instructors might also find the following resources helpful as they prepare to lead a discussion about performance: a) Elinor Fuchs's short article "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," published in the journal *Theater* (2004, vol. 34, no. 2, 5-9) and *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (2014), is widely used as a teaching tool for drama. It employs evocative language to encourage close attention to the world of the play. It is available in PDF form at [http://web.mit.edu/jscheib/Public/foundations\\_06/ef\\_smallplanet.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/jscheib/Public/foundations_06/ef_smallplanet.pdf)

b) The Kennedy Center's ArtsEdge program offers a variety of arts-integration resources to instructors. While some of these are designed for young children, many are appropriate for upper-level high school students and undergraduates. Of particular interest may be "Art Critiques Made Easy: Tips for leading classroom discussions about works of art" at <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/how-to/tipsheets/art-crit-made-easy>. While its topic is visual art, its principles can easily be applied to performance as well.

# ENTRY POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

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To open a discussion about performances, instructors might begin with open-ended questions that first allow students space to voice their impressions of the performance. The following ideas can serve as entry points:

- Revisit questions from low-stakes response papers: students have had a chance to reflect on these already. Build on individual students' answers by asking who can add dimension to that idea, or who has a different take on it?
- Ask students what was surprising, evocative, interesting, exciting, or striking in the performance. Again, encourage the group to agree with and add to initial responses, or offer new ones. Ask, "What made that moment so interesting?" to encourage an analysis of how the effect was accomplished. You might also ask at what points students were confused or lost. Allow time for other students to offer insight into those moments of opacity.
- Ask students to describe three Instagram images they would offer to other students as a way into this performance. Discuss what those images capture, and how they would be effective.

Instructors might then move to questions that relate directly to their learning goals, prompting, for example, student analysis of how the performance connects to course material. While the specifics of each course and each performance make it difficult to model those content-based questions, one instructor asks herself the following questions as a means to help formulate what she in turn will ask the students: "How did this performance 'help'? How did it elucidate the topic we're exploring? Was there a moment that changed my perspective?" (She also looks to the broader experience, inquiring, "Was there a connection between audience and performer? What did I as a human being take away from it?")

## SHAPING DISCUSSION

Instructors from across the campus who have taken their students to UMS performances contribute perspectives on the particularities of shaping a discussion about performance.

- Take a broad view of "discussion," allowing that it can happen in artist Q&A sessions after the performance, online, and in a variety of informal settings as well as in the classroom.
- Most classroom discussions will take place days after the performance. While this delay allows time for impressions to settle and marinate, you may prefer to engage students' immediate reactions. To that end, you might meet students in the lobby right after the performance, noting or documenting their responses in some way, or ask students to send you brief emails that night. These immediate reactions can then be conversation-starters in the more considered, intellectual setting of the classroom discussion.
- Let students know that specialized language of music, dance, or theater is not needed for participation. In fact, it is useful to devise a vocabulary together. Students from disciplines not obviously connected with the arts can contribute language that generates analogy, while other students may lend their performance- or discipline-specific expertise to the class's lexicon.
- In the classroom, consider asking students to first discuss their impressions of the performance in groups of two, three, or four; then bring the conversation to the whole group. Ideas with the most traction—and potential for engaging many students in discussion—tend to filter through the small groups to the larger one.
- Your learning goals will help you guide how the discussion unfolds. Is there a particular concept at which you want to make sure students arrive? Or is the discussion truly open-ended, exploring possible interpretations or outcomes?
- Normalize negative reactions as well as questions. For example, asking, "What questions do you have?" implies that some uncertainty is to be expected.
- Be prepared for the discomfort of an occasional long silence, as well as for some students who don't want to speak up.
- Allow space for intense reactions to politically or emotionally charged performance.

## Evaluation, contextualization, interpretation, description

Scholar Sally Banes identifies four critical operations—evaluation, contextualization, interpretation, and description—that arise in writing about dance, and they provide a useful framework for thinking and talking about performance in general. Extrapolating Banes’s definitions, evaluation assesses the relative quality of a work; contextualization connects the work to the world outside of itself, situating it historically and culturally; interpretation finds meaning in the work; and description identifies the physical facts or formal properties of the work. While all of these come up in discussion, and each one can lead productively to the others, description grounds the other three in concrete, specific observation. (Because description—a thoughtful account of the performance’s physical properties—is so important, the section “Inviting description,” below, provides prompts for description in discussion.)

Often students’ first reactions to a performance are evaluative, based on personal associations and emotional reactions. Because they are so meaningful to the speaker, evaluations can be great entry points into a conversation about performance. Then, your follow-up questions can impel students to think critically about their evaluations, moving the conversation from the highly personal to the common ground of contextualization and description. For example, finding out why a student thought the performance was “amazing” or “kind of blah” can reveal tacit cultural assumptions and rules about what constitutes “goodness.” Alternatively, asking students to construct detailed descriptions of what happened in the theater in those amazing moments can enrich the group’s understanding of the layers of their experience, and often leads to further insight.

Students are often eager to claim an interpretation of the performance, to know what it was about or what it meant. Ask students to ground their interpretations in description, in an account of the who, what, where, when, and how: “What elements of performance do you think contributed to that mysterious atmosphere?” Connecting an individual’s interpretive statement to the formal properties of the performance allows others to offer their interpretations of those same properties; together the class can reconcile these multiple meanings.

Note that words are the familiar entry point into meaning, which can sometimes render nonverbal forms—music and dance—less accessible. Experimental performances—ones that don’t work according to common cultural “codes” of story, emotional expression, and metaphor—can also prove difficult for students to interpret. When the meaning of a performance is opaque, cataloguing its physical facts often leads to insight. Working together, generate a descriptive list of things that happened, encouraging statements about elements or aspects that may seem obvious. Meaning

can emerge from simply articulating that in one moment, all the people on stage were standing together except for one who was apart, and that the sound was loud and jarring. Remind students that all of the physical facts are intentional, the result of artistic choices, and are therefore likely repositories of meaning.

Contextualization usually involves outside information about the cultural and historic background of an artist, a genre, or a specific work. Contextualization can lend itself to useful comparisons in discussion. One instructor asks his students what the performance reminds them of, and finds that those associations often help them grapple with the material. Note that contextual information can also inform interpretation. When students turn to program notes or Internet sources for statements from the artist, remind them that their interpretations will probably overlap with the artist’s intentions but need not be dictated by them.

<sup>2</sup>Sally Banes, “On Your Fingertips: Writing Dance Criticism” in *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 24–42

# ENTRY POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

Students' "passionate noticing" in the performance is rewarded with a rich discussion grounded in physical details. Because description is often the spine around which evaluation, contextualization, and interpretation cohere, a list of prompts that invite detailed description (and imply careful attention) is given here. You might introduce these prompts before the performance and refine or target them after the performance. They are organized by discipline, but many works are interdisciplinary; choose questions that are relevant to each performance.

## Theater

### PERFORMERS

- What did the performers look like? What did they wear? How did they move their bodies? How did they interact physically with each other and with the stage and the set?

### THE STAGE

- What did the stage look like—props, scenery, lights, costumes? How did it change over the course of the show? Did it look realistic? What colors stood out to you? Fantastic? Abstract?

### TEXT AND LANGUAGE

- What did the performers say? Was their use of language familiar? Colloquial? Formal? How did they use their voices? Any accents or distinctive ways of speaking?

### SOUND

- What role did sound play in the performance? How was music used? Could you hear sounds offstage? Were there recorded voices?

### TIME

- What was the order of events? Did they unfold chronologically, or according to some other logic? What timespan was covered in the course of the performance, and how was time treated? Does the play take place in a particular time period? How do you know when it takes place?

### ACTION AND PLOT

- How was the story constructed? Can you identify key scenes or turning points? What were the moments of surprise?

## Music

### WHAT DID YOU HEAR? CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE SOUND?

- loud/soft
- fast/slow
- high/treble or low/bass
- consider metaphorical language, as would describe wine or coffee: "full-bodied, rough"

### WHAT OR WHO IS MAKING THE SOUND? WERE THE INSTRUMENTS FAMILIAR OR UNFAMILIAR? WERE FAMILIAR INSTRUMENTS PLAYED IN UNFAMILIAR WAYS?

- human body—vocal, beatboxing, hamboning
- strings—pluck, strum, other
- blow into it—brass and wind instruments
- hit it—drums, piano

### DID ANY OF THESE MUSICAL ELEMENTS STAND OUT TO YOU?

- melody—what you would hum or sing. Could you identify melodies? Were they familiar ones?
- rhythm—the beat. Was it strong, noticeable? Was it predictable and even, something you could have clapped along with? Was it syncopated, going against the beat or emphasizing the off-beats? Could you discern a meter—the rhythm organized in, for example, twos or threes?
- timbre—What was the quality or nature of the sound? (A flute sounds different from a fire alarm.)
- pitch—high notes and low notes
- structure—how the music is organized. Did you notice any repeated material? Were the repetitions varied in some way?

### WHAT WAS THE FUNCTION OF THESE SOUNDS? HOW DID THEY CONTRIBUTE TO THE WHOLE?

### WHAT ASPECTS OF THE PERFORMANCE DID YOU NOTICE?

- number of performers
- interaction among performers—Were they facing each other? Facing the audience? Could you identify a leader or conductor? How did he/she interact with the group?
- context—How did the musicians interact with the performance space or theater? What was the ambience or vibe?
- audience—How did the performers interact with the audience? How did the audience behave?

### WAS DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATED INTO THE PERFORMANCE? HOW?

# Dance

## BODIES

- Were there solo or group dances? How many people in the group? How did they interact with each other?
- What body parts caught your attention? Why?

## **ACTION: USING EVERYDAY LANGUAGE, MAKE A CATALOGUE OF ACTIONS YOU SAW ONSTAGE.**

### EXAMPLES:

- run, fall, turn, kick, leap, hold hands
- skitter, amble, cavort, loll, tremble

## SPACE

- Were there formations of dancers such as lines and circles?
- What shapes did the dancers make with their bodies?
- How did they use levels in space: rolling or crawling low, moving at a medium/pedestrian level, leaping or dancing on their toes or being lifted high?
- Did the dancers extend their limbs fully, or keep them close to their own bodies?
- How did the dancers use focus? Did they address each other or the audience with their eyes? Did they have an internal, private focus?

## TIME

- Take into consideration duration—the length of the entire performance and of individual sections.
- Were movements fast or slow? How did speed contrast from dancer to dancer, or from section to section of the dance?
- What appeared to be the attitude of the performers toward time? Leisurely? Hurried?

## STRUCTURE

- Can you describe the trajectory of the dance from beginning to end?

Including description in your discussion not only encourages close observation; it also enables a more critical approach to interpretation, contextualization, and evaluation. These discussions about performance, both before and after the event, enrich the class's experience and shore up learning goals. One student in UMS's signature class, Engaging Performance, concluded, "I learned how much more interesting it is to see a performance and talk about it afterward."