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Who Pays for Dance? — Choreographic Reflections on Audience Em

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Abstract

While contemporary dance creation continues to innovate in visual form and technical expression, the question of whether audiences are truly engaged—whether they "buy in"—has become increasingly prominent. This paper explores how dance works can establish meaningful connections with audiences through mechanisms of empathy and interactivity. Focusing on sensory stimulation, emotional projection, and the co-construction of meaning, the study examines how choreographic strategies such as spatial design, intentional ambiguity in movement, and immersive staging contribute to audience resonance and participation.

Drawing on case studies including *Encore Dunhuang*, *Henan Only*, and *Alpha*, the analysis reveals that the most impactful dance works are not necessarily the most technically complex, but those that are able to “see” the audience on an emotional level. These works transform dance from a choreographer’s monologue into a dialogic, affective exchange between artist and viewer.

Keywords: Dance Creation; Audience Empathy; Interactivity

1. Why Are Audiences “Not Buying It”?

With the evolution of society and the diversification of communication media, audiences’ aesthetic expectations and modes of engaging with dance have undergone significant transformation. In the past, people entered the theatre primarily to appreciate the technical precision and formal beauty of dance. Today, however, audiences are increasingly drawn to works that offer emotional resonance, intellectual provocation, and reflections of personal experience. Against this shifting backdrop, dance works that remain dominated by technical virtuosity are gradually losing the emotional recognition of their viewers.

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In recent years, a growing number of works—both in China and internationally—have emerged that pursue formal complexity and physical extremity. These pieces often impress with fast-paced, intricate movement sequences, yet many audience members report feeling dazzled but emotionally disengaged, remarking that "it was visually overwhelming, but I had no idea what it was trying to say." Similarly, certain experimental productions blending ballet and contemporary styles exhibit high degrees of structural rationality and stylistic eclecticism, yet appear distant and inaccessible to general audiences. Although such works may receive critical acclaim within professional circles, they frequently suffer from the "critical success but commercial failure" phenomenon in broader market contexts.

In contrast, works that prioritise emotional engagement and draw on contemporary social experience often achieve far greater success in terms of dissemination and reception. For example, the Chinese dance drama *The Eternal Wave* (*Yong bu xiaoshi de dianbo*) not only presents a revolutionary narrative but also constructs a strong empathetic trajectory through layered emotional development and expressive movement language. The production has enjoyed full houses and sustained positive word of mouth. Likewise, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's *Songs of the Wanderers*, with its minimalist stage design and subtle physical expression, explores themes of displacement and the search for belonging, sparking intense discussion among younger audiences. These contrasts suggest that today's viewers are no longer content with passive observation; rather, they seek to find fragments of their own emotional and spiritual reality within the work. Pieces that focus solely on the choreographer's personal expression—while neglecting the viewer's experience and emotional resonance—often fail to capture public interest.

This section adopts a research approach that combines **case analysis** with **phenomenological observation**. Case selection follows criteria such as "strong audience response," "clear emotional structure," and "reflection of contemporary shifts in choreographic thinking." The study draws upon widely recognised stage productions from recent years, including state-sponsored dance dramas, experimental contemporary dance works, and internationally renowned choreographers. Through detailed analysis of compositional structure, movement language, visual narrative, and audience feedback—supplemented by relevant literature and media commentary—the aim is to reconstruct the mechanisms by which audience empathy is generated, and to reveal how such responses feed back into choreographic approaches. This methodology provides a basis for identifying broader creative trends and offers both theoretical and practical insights into how contemporary dance can achieve more effective audience engagement.

Furthermore, in the era of social media, the mechanisms of content dissemination pose new

challenges for dance creators. Within the fast-moving information flow, audiences pause only for content that truly strikes a chord. Expectations surrounding live performances have also shifted: audiences no longer seek only to "watch dance" but to "feel understood." This places a new demand on choreographers and creators: dance is not merely an artist's statement, but also a form of **two-way communication** with the audience. Put differently, audiences do not come to the theatre to admire how difficult the dancing is; they come hoping to witness something genuine, tangible, and emotionally universal. If a piece is driven solely by technical display or self-indulgent expression—without building a meaningful emotional connection—then even the most virtuosic performance may leave no lasting impression on the viewer.

2. Audiences Seek *Empathy*, Not *Spectatorship*

What truly compels audiences to stay and engage with a performance is the moment they recognise themselves within it. Emotion—not technique—is what moves people. A slow, deliberate reach of the hand, a faltering step—these seemingly simple gestures can evoke deep memories of parting, loss, loneliness, or struggle.

The concept of *empathy* refers to a psychological process wherein viewers, through sensory stimulation and emotional triggers, project their own experiences onto the dancer's body and situational context, thus establishing emotional identification and psychological connection. *Interactivity*, meanwhile, implies that audiences are not passive recipients but active agents whose participation and perception play a role in shaping the meaning of a work, rendering the viewing experience a two-way, dynamic relationship.

This process is supported by empirical research. Studies on the **Mirror Neuron System** have shown that observing movement activates the same neural regions involved in performing the action, enabling visceral resonance with both movement and emotion. The theory of **kinesthetic empathy** suggests that viewers do not merely perceive dance visually, but experience a "bodily echo" at the affective level, enhancing their understanding and identification with the dancer's emotions. According to **emotional contagion** theory, emotions expressed on stage can rapidly spread within a group, creating shared emotional responses and communal affective bonds.

Drawing on these theories, this paper identifies **three layers of psychological pathways** through which audience empathy is formed—*sensory arousal*, *emotional projection*, and *meaning confirmation*—each illustrated with case studies.

Sensory Arousal: Emotion Begins with the Body

Dance first touches audiences not through narrative,

but through visceral physicality. Elements such as breath, muscular tension, and rhythmic shifts serve as physiological stimuli that trigger emotional responses. For example, the large-scale site-specific performance *Encore Pingyao* reconfigures the performer-audience relationship by breaking away from traditional proscenium staging and embedding the narrative within the streets and alleyways of the ancient city. One particularly moving scene depicts a female character washing a male warrior's body before his departure on a mission to Russia. With minimal dialogue and intimate proximity, the simple acts of washing, wrapping, and touching—performed in front of the audience rather than on a distant stage—evoke a profound emotional response rooted in memories of care and tenderness from everyday domestic life.

The performance also makes sophisticated use of lighting, sound, and spatial dynamics to intensify the affective potential of bodily language. Low-colour-temperature lighting, slow drum rhythms, and minimalist spatial transitions together create a "felt environment", in which the body becomes the primary medium of communication. When the audience sees themselves in a glance, a pause, or a touch, the first level of emotional connection is achieved—*not through explanation, but through embodied sensation*.

Emotional Projection: Recognising the Self in the Other

Choreographers increasingly structure works around specific *characters* rather than abstract forms, enabling viewers to project their own experiences more easily. A powerful example is the immersive theatrical production *Only Henan: Drama Fantasy City*, which comprises multiple chapters developed around representational characters and everyday situations. In the "Train Station" scene, performers portray 1942 famine refugees through weary gaits, hesitant pacing, and repeated backward glances—gestures that encapsulate the sorrow of displacement and evoke associations with personal experiences of parting and hardship.

In the "Li Family Village" sequence, dancers enact scenes of agricultural labour and hardship during times of war and famine. Simple, grounded movements—rubbing hands, bending to work, gazing skyward—carry deep cultural connotations. Audiences see more than just history; they sense echoes of family, rural life, and human resilience. These grounded, recognisable gestures serve as conduits for cultural identification and emotional stirring.

In contrast, had the production relied on fully abstract choreography, such empathetic projection might have been difficult. What enables this connection is the intentional use of character-based scenarios, concrete movement vocabularies, and immersive spatial environments. In *Only Henan*, audiences traverse spaces such as rice fields and granaries, effectively "walking the life path" of the characters. Empathy in this context extends beyond the dancer to encompass

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the entire sensory and narrative atmosphere. Emotional projection, therefore, is not a passive phenomenon but an *engineered pathway* constructed through character, space, and embodied storytelling.

Meaning Confirmation: Emotional Agreement with the Work's Values

Beyond resonance, audiences ultimately seek **affirmation**—a sense that the themes and values embodied in the work align with their own beliefs or life attitudes. This does not require literal comprehension, but rather an emotional sense of: *"I relate to this"*.

The contemporary dance piece *Alpha* (original title *Gongou*), performed by an all-male cast, explores diverse representations of masculinity and inner conflict. Rather than using linear narrative, the work conveys its themes through physical exertion, group collisions, and moments of isolation and collapse. Audiences witness the dancers sweating, falling, and repeating beast-like gestures—experiencing not just "a performance" but a question: *Is this also about me?*

Many audience members reported feeling reflected in the work: "I saw my fear of being moulded into the 'ideal man'," one viewer said. The performance evokes the tension between social conformity and personal freedom—not through didacticism but through embodied metaphor. As the dancers begin to break free, scream collectively, and collapse en masse, the audience is drawn into a shared emotional and existential inquiry. *Alpha* never declares what masculinity should or should not be. Instead, it opens a space for personal meaning-making. The openness of its structure becomes the very basis for meaning confirmation.

In such works, the audience does not "understand" the piece in a conventional sense; rather, they *feel recognised*. The ambiguity of meaning allows for specificity in emotional response. This is what makes empathy—and by extension, audience approval—possible. The challenge for creators is to construct emotionally accessible pathways without resorting to overt moralising. As *Alpha* demonstrates, clear emotional channels and open thematic boundaries are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are essential to audience engagement.

In conclusion, empathy is not an abstract aesthetic ideal, but a cognitive-affective process supported by the interplay of **mirror neuron activation**, **kinesthetic resonance**, and **emotional contagion**. Interaction is not limited to physical co-presence; it depends on whether a work leaves *space for response*. If creators focus solely on technique while neglecting emotional connection and interactive structures, even the most virtuosic performances may fail to gain deep audience acceptance.

3. Can the Work *Invite the Audience In*?

Contemporary audiences no longer wish to merely

watch a performance—they want to *enter* it. Even if this entry is purely emotional, it allows them to become more invested. This shift reflects not only a change in aesthetic preference, but also a deeper transformation in audience psychology: modern viewers increasingly seek a sense of *co-presence*, rather than passive spectatorship. In response, choreographers and directors must reimagine the spatial design of the stage, leave emotional space in movement arrangement, and introduce improvisational or interactive elements to achieve one goal—*to invite the audience into the work*.

Reimagining the Performance Space

The traditional proscenium stage is proving insufficient for many contemporary productions. Emerging forms such as immersive theatre, promenade performance, and audience-participatory scenography are gradually dissolving the boundaries between stage and viewer. For example, in *Only Henan: Drama Fantasy City*, audiences do not sit in fixed seats but instead wander through spaces like the "Train Station", "Li Family Village", and "Wheat Field", encountering performances as they move. This spatial arrangement integrates the audience physically into the environment of the performance, which in turn fosters deeper psychological engagement. Their perspective is no longer fixed, but multiple and dynamic—this spatial fluidity creates more entry points into the narrative.

A similar strategy is used in *Encore Pingyao*, where performers dance within the ancient alleys of the city. The physical distance between performers and audience is nearly eliminated; viewers do not observe from a designated seating area but exist alongside the performance itself. In such environments, the audience is never a bystander—they are immersed in the dramatic logic and emotional atmosphere from the very beginning.

Leaving Space Within the Movement

Emotional resonance does not come from filling every moment with expression, but from *allowing for silence and stillness*. In movement design, *emotional blank space*—moments of intentional incompleteness—invites the audience to enter emotionally on their own terms. In the contemporary dance piece *Farewell*, for instance, a sequence dealing with death and parting features a dancer standing silently at centre stage for nearly two minutes—eyes lowered, shoulders trembling subtly. Despite the absence of movement, many audience members wept. This "stillness" did not signify a lack of expression, but rather offered space for personal emotional projection. Audiences inserted their own memories of farewell into that silence, thereby becoming part of the emotional construction.

Such blank space can also be established through contrast. In some works, most dancers perform tightly synchronised movements while one remains off-rhythm or physically distinct. This lone figure inevitably draws audience attention, prompting the question: *If I were that person, what would I do?* This contrast,

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through difference and incompleteness, encourages spectators to become active participants in meaning-making.

Designing Improvisation and Interaction

Interaction should not be narrowly understood as requiring the audience to step onto the stage. It can be psychological, even invisible—created through energy flow, eye contact, or rhythmic breathing that aligns with the audience's own internal tempo. In one experimental dance piece, performers maintain direct eye contact with individual audience members during high-tension breathing sequences, generating moments of powerful emotional intersection.

In more overtly interactive settings, audience members may enter the rehearsal space before the performance, participate in spatial arrangements, or trigger sound effects. These tactile elements contribute to the cognitive realisation that *"I am part of this"*. In certain segments of *Alpha* (original title *Gongou*), dancers move between the stage and audience seating, making brief eye contact, pausing beside viewers, or even approaching physically. These moments of quiet proximity—without any spoken words—can carry immense psychological weight. One viewer later remarked: *"For a moment, I didn't feel like I was watching dance—I felt seen."* This subtle feeling of being *drawn in* is the strongest indicator of successful interaction.

This kind of design is not simply about attracting attention—it structurally positions the audience as co-authors of the experience. Dance ceases to be merely *display* and becomes *dialogue*. Works that truly allow audiences to "step inside" are those that leave emotional and interpretive space through their structure, movement, rhythm, and environment. Interaction, then, is not just an act but an attitude—one that reflects a choreographer's **respect and trust** in the audience: the belief that they can feel, understand, and participate. When a work opens an emotional doorway, and a viewer willingly steps through it—that is the moment when dance is truly *complete*.

Summary Table: Audience Empathy and Engagement Across Three Works

Dimension	*Only Henan: Drama Fantasy City*	*Encore Pingyao*	*Alpha (Gongou)*
Empathy Trigger	Character-driven scenes; life-based movement connects viewers to historical settings.	Domestic actions evoke sensory memory—e.g., hand washing, bandaging.	Reflections on gender roles and social conditioning through the male body.
Audience	Strong cultural identification;	Marked emotional	Predominantly self-projection;

Response	evokes rural memory and historical empathy.	fluctuation; immediate affective responses.	often prompts discussion and debate.
Movement Expression	Realistic actions (e.g., agricultural labour); emphasises everyday gestures.	Intimate, situational body language tied to personal relationships.	Repetitive, high-intensity movement and animalistic postures create psychological impact.
Spatial Interaction	Immersive theatre structure; audiences move through different scenes.	Performed in public alleys; collapses proscenium boundaries, heightens immediacy.	Conventional theatre, but open-ended structure invites meaning construction by the viewer.

In conclusion, works that successfully *invite* the audience in are those that provide **emotional entry points** through structure and performance. Interaction may occur at the level of movement, space, or emotional resonance—it need not be literal. The most effective forms of engagement are built on openness, ambiguity, and inclusion, enabling the audience to not only witness the work, but to *complete it* through their own emotional and psychological presence.

4. Conclusion

This study has centred on the core question: *Why do contemporary dance works often fail to resonate with audiences?* Drawing on audience reception psychology, it identifies three key pathways that significantly influence viewer engagement: the construction of **empathy mechanisms**, the **possibility of meaning confirmation**, and the **effectiveness of interactional design**. These pathways not only reflect the evolving modes of audience participation but also reveal the multidimensional strategies through which contemporary choreographers can forge emotional and cognitive connections with their audiences.

Firstly, the effective establishment of **empathy** is a fundamental precondition for emotionally engaging an audience. Through both *emotional arousal* and *emotional projection*, viewers are enabled to map their own experiences onto the work, activating latent affective responses. This deep resonance at the bodily-emotional level constitutes a primary psychological entry point for non-expert audiences.

Secondly, **meaning confirmation** underscores the audience's role in interpreting and identifying with the content of a performance. As a non-verbal art form, dance must communicate its emotional and social themes through clearly constructed situations, symbolic movements, and coherent visual vocabularies.

These elements collectively guide the viewer in generating personal meaning and forming inner connections during the act of watching.

Thirdly, **interactional design** serves as a vital mechanism for enhancing audience participation. By reconfiguring spatial arrangements, allowing openness in movement structures, and incorporating improvisational or responsive elements, dance works can construct new forms of performer-audience relationships. Through creative strategies of "invitation" and "intentional absence," audiences shift from passive observers to active co-constructors of aesthetic experience.

Taken together, whether or not a dance work can truly *resonate* with its audience does not depend on the complexity of its technique, but rather on its ability to trigger emotional empathy, enable meaningful participation, and provide structural access points for lived experience. The value of dance should not be measured solely by the completeness of its formal composition, but by its capacity to awaken perception, connect individuals, and inspire shared emotional response.

Looking forward, future dance creation must transition from one-directional expression to reciprocal generation, and from formal display to *experiential co-creation*. In a pluralistic cultural context, the logic of "what moves people" must be continuously explored. Only by doing so can dance truly achieve an effective transformation—from artistic language to social emotion—and thereby expand its vitality and communicative power in the contemporary cultural landscape.

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