Technique Vs. Talent: Narration, Participation, and *So You Think You Can Dance*
Kirsten Pullen
Texas A&M University

I wish I could dance. Like many, I took dance lessons as a child, and like many, I quit as soon as my mother would let me. But now, when I watch those old Gap khakis ads, or see Chris Brown's videos, I get the urge to set up a ballet bar in the guest room and let my inner dancer twirl, leap, and glide.

I suspect I'm not alone, and the success of the 19E Entertainment-produced, FOX-broadcast *So You Think You Can Dance* (*SYTYCD*) seems to confirm my suspicions. There are several reasons behind *SYTYCD's* success: it features lithe and lovely boys and girls gyrating against each other; the host, Cat Deeley, is gorgeous and charming; the audience votes for the winner. One reason, however, must be its narrative of talented but less technically proficient dancers triumphing through expressiveness, audience connection, and determination to master unfamiliar idioms. Lythgoe and the other judges appeal to viewers by suggesting that anyone, regardless of training and technique, can dance.

In the words of producer and judge Nigel Lythgoe, *SYTYCD* is the search for America's favorite dancer. I didn't watch the first season, when Nick Lazzarini beat his friend Melody Lacayanga and the professionally experienced Blake McGrath for the title. Season 2 pit charismatic swing dancer Benji Schwimmer against twirling Travis Wall, a lyrical dancer who had trained for years; Benji won. Travis' brother Danny Tidwell, a professional dancer who had studied at the Kirov Academy of Ballet and danced with the American Ballet Theatre was vanquished by Sabra Johnson, a former gymnast with just four years of formal dance training, in Season 3. In August, Joshua Allen, a hip hop dancer with "no prior formal training" beat Katee Shean, who had been taking dance lessons since she was four. *SYTYCD* perpetuates a narrative that talent is greater than technique. Dancers win not because they've spent years in the studio perfecting their craft, molding their bodies to a aesthetic ideal, and developing a specific, universally recognized repertoire of virtuosic steps and moves – dancers win because they connect with the audience by dancing from the heart. This is a powerful narrative, and one that says as much about what audience members want to believe about skill, talent, and virtuosity as it does about dance.

This season, this narrative was especially visible but also particularly fraught. Video footage of Joshua Allen in dance class as a child, as well as interviews about his family's willingness to make financial sacrifices so he could take class, were prominently featured. At the same time, Lythgoe and the other judges insisted that Allen was completely untrained, had never had a "real" dance class, and was able to quickly master new dance styles because he was "a diamond in the rough." (And if you think this narrative is raced, classed, and gendered, of course it is. But that's a subject for another discussion.)

In addition to reassuring viewers with a dancer's version of the American dream, *STYCD's* narrative of technique vs. talent enables audience participation in fairly unique ways. By mobilizing these terms in opposition, *SYTYCD* invites fans to identify with particular aesthetic arguments, and the social positions those arguments imply. More than *Dancing with the Stars*, *SYTYCD* attempts to educate viewers about several dance genres: in addition to the usual ballroom, hip-hop, and lyrical routines, this season also included Bollywood, trepak, and ballet. Lythgoe, himself a choreographer and former tapper, is joined by Latin champion Mary Murphy and a roster of guest judges including Debbie Allen, Adam Shenkman, Wade Robson, and Mia Michaels. The panel of judges strategically uses technical terms to critique the dancers: Comfort had "sickle feet," Neil's planche was strong, Danny's extension was complete. Murphy in

particular talks about the upper body and the feet in ballroom and Latin numbers. Audience members are invited to learn about a variety of dances and assimilate the aesthetic assumptions of professional dance criticism. So, though the program's metanarrative privileges presence over precision, *SYTYCD* also employs a specialist dance vocabulary.

In many ways, then, I am the ideal viewer for *SYTYCD* (and you thought it was tween girls!): a person with a passing knowledge of dance technique and a past (if not a future) as a dancer. On the very active IdolForum, Television Without Pity, and DANCEforum discussion boards, arguments about what technique is, who has it, and whether it's worth having dominate. These discussions are often linked to photos and videos of the fans themselves dancing; either to demonstrate proper technique or to acknowledge how virtuosic certain performers really are. Further, fans recreate favorite dances, broadcasting them on YouTube and other video-sharing websites. Both the implicit narrative of *SYTYCD* and fan activity thus suggest that anyone can dance, allowing anyone to participate in an American dream of amateur talent trumping professional experience.