

FROM THE DANCE HERITAGE COALITION ...

AN IMPORTANT ALERT ABOUT DVDS AND PRESERVING YOUR DANCE LEGACY!!

Many in the dance community have been turning to DVDs to re-master their treasured videotapes ... but beware! While it is true that DVDs have virtually supplanted VHS tapes at local video stores throughout the country and are even quickly becoming the format of choice for moving image materials housed in public libraries, the professional archival community, including members of the Dance Heritage Coalition, *does not endorse the DVD format for archival purposes*. DVDs provide a convenient way to easily access moving images, but they have numerous inherent problems. Until an archival-quality digital format becomes universally available, it is critical that you SAVE YOUR ORIGINAL TAPES if you are transferring materials to DVD.

So why are people using DVDs?

The upside: DVDs offer a low-cost, portable, readily available, and (somewhat) resilient medium to get your work out there for all to see; they also offer editing and programming options unavailable in the analog world.

Then why *shouldn't* you use DVDs?

The downside: For archivists, two key factors must always be considered when selecting a videotape preservation format: 1) the long-term survival of the medium or format and 2) the authenticity of the recording—i.e., when looking to re-master, how well the chosen format duplicates the original material. Disappointingly, DVDs fall short in both areas.

One of the biggest concerns is that the process involved in making DVDs compresses the video signal, resulting in an inferior quality recording. This process, known as “lossy compression,” results in the loss of a significant amount of original information. This permanent alteration is unacceptable in the archival community. In addition, this new, compressed recording is not suitable for certain applications, such as HDTV.

The DVD medium itself is problematic. The lifespan of a DVD remains unknown—to date, no independent source has done systematic longevity testing. Furthermore, since a DVD is a laminated medium composed of different elements that are bound together, if one of the layers or the binding that holds the layers together fails, it could easily lead to the catastrophic loss of the content on an entire disc. This is unlike analog videotape, where damage to a portion of the tape does not lead to complete loss of the recording.

Where do we go from here?

Through a generous grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Dance Heritage Coalition sponsored research into the most appropriate digital format for preservation of moving

images in dance. Laboratory testing led to MJPEG2000 as the format of choice: MJPEG2000 is a digital format that creates a wholly authentic copy of the original recording and provides a high-quality visual image. Unfortunately, transfer costs to MJPEG2000 remain prohibitively expensive for the average consumer, dance company archive, and even most public libraries.

The Dance Heritage Coalition has recently completed a pilot project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts to create a digitization center or “hub,” where dance materials have been converted to MJPEG2000 data files. As additional funding is secured and permanent hubs are established, this resource will be made available to members of the dance community.

Recommendations for safe preservation

In the meantime, while awaiting lower costs associated with MJPEG2000 transfer, it is essential that you hold onto your original tapes if you are transferring images to DVD, regardless of the original format (VHS, U-Matic, Betamax or Betacam-SP, Digi-Beta, Mini-DV, etc.). Keep your originals in a protected environment, preferably separated from your newly created DVDs. (When selecting blank DVDs for your access copies, purchase the highest quality you can find—“gold” is preferable.) Having multiple copies—even if one is not archival quality—offers additional protection should a tape or disk become unreadable due to damage or format obsolescence. Keep an entire set of copies offsite in case of catastrophic loss to your storage facility. A non-archival copy is better than no copy!

For more information on videotape care or the DHC’s Mellon-funded research on MJPEG2000, consult the Dance Heritage Coalition website: www.danceheritage.org. Click on “Publications” and then *Dance Video Preservation Reformatting Project: A Report* and *Dance Videotapes At Risk*.

Don’t risk losing your precious legacy! Hold onto and safeguard your originals!

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Founded in 1992, the Dance Heritage Coalition is a national non-profit alliance of institutions holding significant collections of materials documenting the history of dance. The DHC’s mission is to make accessible, enhance, augment, and preserve the materials that document the artistic accomplishments in dance of the past, present, and future. The DHC also serves as a think tank and a convener for the dance heritage field.

Member organizations of the Dance Heritage Coalition are: American Dance Festival, Dance Notation Bureau, Harvard Theatre Collection of Houghton Library at Harvard University, Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, Library of Congress, the Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute at Ohio State University, and San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum

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