

THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Portable Dance Flooring

by Lisa Gibbs, EdD

Many have heard the old saw: "always use the right tools for the job." Tools are anything that is utilized during a job to assist in completing a task; most tools are designed to increase efficiency, safety, and quality of the work being executed. Over time, some tools are adapted as new technologies emerge, research studies are released, construction standards change, and health and safety protocols are adjusted.



Private colleges and universities adapted quickly to the pandemic over the past sixteen months. As students were welcomed back to campus in 2020 and 2021, noticeable changes had been made in the tools used for classroom content, extra-curricular activities, study spaces and more. Even with these changes, many students, faculty and staff were eager to return to their work in person, whether in the laboratory, gymnasium, classroom, or theatre.

The proscenium stage most common in campus theatres is one tool that has changed little over time. The proscenium is the arch that separates the stage from the auditorium. The stage floor is usually large and flat so that orchestra concerts, solo musicians, musicals, plays, and dance can be performed on it. Musicians, actors, and dancers employ other tools of the theatre—sets, lighting, scenery, costumes, props, instruments—to enhance performances in their respective genres. On many campuses, only one space exists for such performances. This multi-use space can be less than optimal for the efficiency, safety, and quality of a musician—the acoustics in recital halls are more suitable. For dancers, while the space and equipment are useful, the floor of the stage is rarely best suited for their work.

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While taking class regularly does train the dancer's body to take off from the ground and land without becoming injured, proper flooring contributes greatly to the success and longevity of a dancer. The right floor increases the safety of the workspace, enhances the quality of the movement, and allows dancers to efficiently spin, jump, land, and change direction.

Dancers are very attuned to how their bodies react when performing on less than optimal floors. Since most campus performance spaces were built for theatre, these floors are described as "hard" by the dancers. Hard floors do not absorb the shock of landing from a large jump, which means the dancer's ankles, knees, hips, and spine must absorb the shock. Additionally, most dance forms are performed barefoot, or the dancers wear shoes designed for articulation of the feet. Unlike a basketball player whose shoes are optimally designed for shock absorption, a dancer does not typically have that tool available.

Consider this—the impact on one's body when landing from a jump can be three to seven times the body's weight. The surface upon which dancers land will have an effect on how their bodies distribute the shock of the landing. Numerous research articles by sports and dance medicine specialists detail the impact of gravity, flooring, and shoes on performance and injury prevention in nearly every type of sport and dance. For a dancer, a sprung floor with a vinyl covering is ideal for efficiency of movement, safety during movement, and quality of movement. A dance studio on campus can be fitted with proper permanent flooring. What

about performance spaces, or alternative spaces like libraries and lobbies? The first portable flooring tool designed for dancers was developed in the mid-20th century, and the name of the first producer has been adopted as a blanket name for the product: marley. More recently, portable sprung floors have been manufactured for events such as dance conventions and touring. Marley and portable sprung floors are becoming more and more widely used as dance becomes more popular and is performed outside of traditional proscenium theatres.

Marley was first developed by Marley Floors, Ltd in 1948. At that time, polyvinyl chloride (PVC) was an emerging technology. Marley Floors created portable "sheet vinyl" with PVC, black on one side and gray on the other, which professional dance companies used when they went on tour. Marley provides a large, smooth surface with just the right amount of traction for a dancer. Manufacturers have created numerous colors and thicknesses so performers of particular types of dance can choose the best option for their craft. Marley can be permanently installed or purchased in portable rolls.




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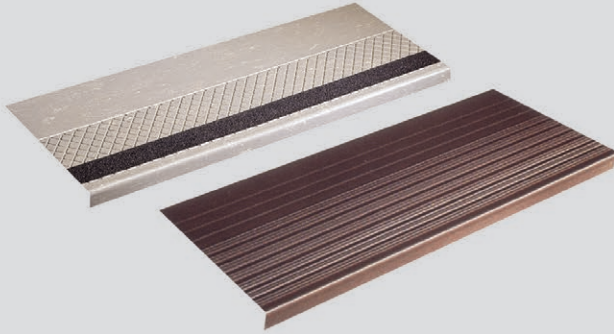
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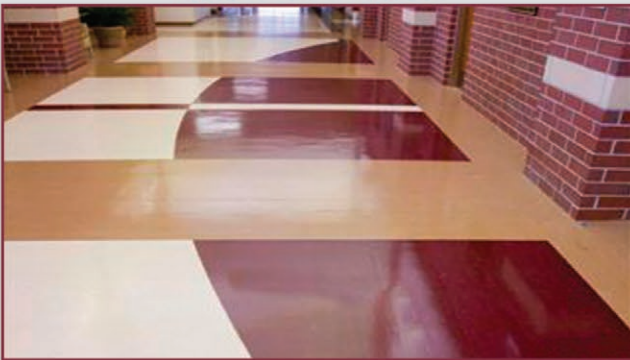
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Dancers are very attuned to how bodies react when performing on a less than optimal floor. Since most campus performance spaces were built for theatre, these floors are described as “hard” by the dancers. Hard floors do not absorb the shock of landing from a large jump, which means the dancer’s ankles, knees, hips, and spine must absorb the shock.

Width can vary from 5 ft to 6.5 ft and can be cut to length desired. The material is heavy when rolled up and needs at least two people to carry a roll.

Portable sprung floors are available in a variety of sizes, such as 12” x 12”, 36” x 36”, or 42” x 42”. The pieces interlock and can be customized for a particular space. The pieces are made from various materials, depending upon the producer and the reason for use. Wood sprung floors are made from hardwoods, such as maple, birch and oak, and have closed-cell foam blocks on the underside for cushion. Others are manufactured with medium density fiberboard and closed-cell

foam blocks. The weight of each section varies by size and material.

In 2015, the Alabama Dance Council (ADC), a service organization for all forms of dance in Alabama, purchased a portable sprung floor to support their “Dance in Public Places Project.” The pieces are 36” x 36”, and the full-sized floor measures 42’ x 30’. A 23-foot truck with a lift gate is required in order to move the flooring from storage to a performance venue. The floor is available for rental and has been used across the state by various schools and dance companies. Marley is also available for rent.

While taking class regularly does train the dancer’s body to take off from the ground and land without becoming injured, proper flooring contributes greatly to the success and longevity of a dancer. The right floor increases the safety of the workspace, enhances the quality of the movement, and allows dancers to efficiently spin, jump, land, and change direction.

Investing in marley and a portable sprung floor could be a solution to allow dancing on the hard floors of multi-purpose theatres. Portable flooring could also be rented to other institutions and organizations as a way to recoup some costs. Students could explore alternative spaces in which to perform across campus or within the community and feel confident they can perform at their highest level, knowing the floor, a most important tool, is the right one.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PUPN staff writer Lisa Gibbs earned her Ed.D. in Higher Education Administration in 2018. She is an advocate for arts, particularly dance, in education and for increasing the financial well-being of artists through financial education.



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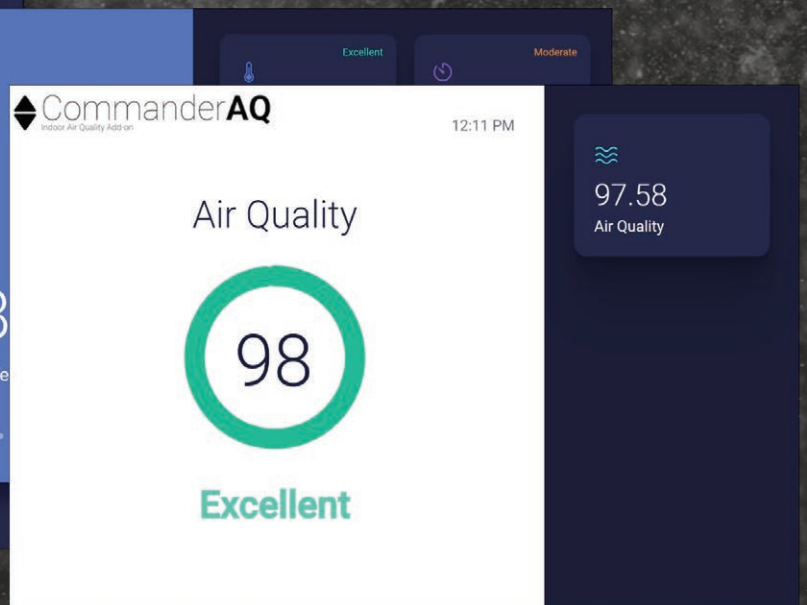
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