

Dance Challenge:
A study of individual college educated dancers and the challenges
they face in the dance industry.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The objective of this study is to understand some of the environmental, artistic and educational factors that cause dancers who have earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance to pursue careers outside of the dance industry. The study seeks to explore the experiences of individual dancers who do not utilize their college education in their current career. Exploring the experiences of these individuals is important to the field of arts administration because it may reveal necessary adjustments that could be made to strengthen the curriculum and teaching styles of dance training institutions. Additionally, it is important for arts administrators to receive general information on the challenges of pursuing a career in dance as they consider working in administrative roles for dance related organizations.

INTRODUCTION

The world of a dancer can be full of thrills from magical stage lights and applause. What can be more fulfilling to a dancer than feeling the excitement flowing from the audience, or catching sight of a child's face light up with the hope: "I'll be on that stage some day". Still, any dancer knows that beyond the glitter and glamour of the stage dwells the underlying reality that the dance world is filled with uncertainties, insecurities and often the tragedy of short-lived careers.

The transition that dancers make from their active performing career into their non performing career often comes with questions of what to do next, feelings of loss and grief after many years of honing dance technique and confusion about what skills from

the dance world can be transferred into a new non-dance career. Often dancers feel the need to be supported with counseling as they move into this new challenging phase and reach out to transition support groups for dancers to help clarify their path through the transition.

There is an additional segment of the dance community that also requires immediate attention, study and support. This group consists of college educated dancers in the early stages of their careers that have left the field of dance or choose not to pursue dance as their full time occupation. What lures some of the most technically advanced and graceful dancers away from the stage? It is not because they are not talented, not because they have no passion for dance – instead they have often left to find the financial security and stability that is commonly unavailable with employment as a dancer.

This research paper will review published literature on retiring dancers as they make the natural transition into the non-performance stage of their lives. Further, the paper will review literature and statistics on the challenges that current dancers face. Finally, there is an in-depth analysis of the personal experiences that led dancers, in the early stages of their careers, away from the dance industry. The study seeks to give a voice to this unheard and underserved segment of the dance world and offer their stories as insight into the challenges that dancers face beyond the stage.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF CHALLENGES OF RETIRING AND MIDDLE CAREER DANCERS

The review of literature that follows outlines the concerns that retiring dancers have addressed as well as the stress early and middle career dancers endure. These issues have been voiced during interviews, published in magazine and newspaper articles and

several major studies of dancers. Most of the articles were published in magazines that are dedicated to dance. Some of the areas of concern to be discussed are compensation, emotional distress during and after transition, need for counseling services, preparation for retirement and preparation for “real world” dance challenges after graduating from college for the younger dancers.

STUDY OF CHALLENGES OF RETIRING DANCERS

There has been some major study of the transition period experienced by dancers as they move into a post-performance career. The aDvANCE Project, which is a collection of a number of notable dance professionals, did a three year study to review the circumstances and issues that challenge professional dancers as they transition out of their active performing career. Leading the research is William J. Baumol of New York University and Princeton University, Joan Jeffri of Columbia University Teachers College, and David Throsby of Macquarie University in Australia. The findings of The aDvANCE Project are reported in a book entitled, *Making Changes: Facilitating the Transition of Dancers to Post-Performance Careers* (Baumol, Jeffri, Throsby, 2004).

The issues addressed in *Making Changes* (2004) include dancer’s compensation and income, lack of transition programs for dancers and the emotional distress associated with this transition period. Other authors have reviewed the concerns of transitioning dancers and produced articles that outline their individual experiences by conducting interviews and writing on the major topics addressed by the dancers. These issues include the decision to pursue higher education, learning to recognize other interests and skills as well as managing their grief.

Career Transitions for Dancers

A belief shared by all of the authors included in this review is the creditability and necessity of the organization Career Transitions for Dancers (CTFD). The mission of this non profit organization is “to empower current and former professional dancers, as well as their younger counterparts, with the knowledge and skills necessary to clearly define their career possibilities after dance, and to provide the resources to help make these possibilities a reality” (Leda, 2007). CTFD was founded in 1985 by former chorus dancer Edward Weston. Weston was inspired to organize CTFD while traveling in London in 1980. There he learned of the Dancers Resettlement Trust, a government program that gave money to retired ballet dancers (Aguirre, 2007). He wanted to create a place of resources and support in New York City for dancers who are moving in to another field.

The authors highly recommend the use of transition organizations like CTFD for transitioning dancers. The free services that they provide such as a reference library to find information on employment and education opportunities, career planning workshops as well as counseling services are all valuable offerings of support (Baumol, Jeffri, Throsby, 2004, Livine, 2004). Taking advantage of the resources that are available through CTFD allows dancers to create a successful life once their career as a performer has come to an end. The organization has launched offices in New York City and Los Angeles as well as a website and an 800 hotline number for transitioning dancers in other parts of the country (Leda, 2001). Additionally, there are programs and workshops that are designed to help dancers who are still performing to develop a plan for their next career (Wozny, 2006).

Career Transitions for Dancers uses individual and group counseling sessions to encourage self assurance within the dancers as they move into a new career. Most of the dancers have little to no education beyond high school and no professional work experience other than dancing. Counseling sessions at CTFD offer a safe environment “where dancers can go through a period of mourning” after their performance careers have ended (Abby, 2007).

Definition of Transition and Professional Dancer:

The only authors to define transition, professional dancer, or address compensation are Baumol, Jeffri, Throsby and Levine (2004). Transition is defined as the career stage during which a dancer stops actively performing. They all use the same definition for professional dancer and agree that it is vague. Professional dancer is individually determined by the dancer's training, career commitment, standard of work, and the amount of time dedicated to dance (2004). In other professions, the amount of income is often used to distinguish professionals from amateur or entry level associates. However, for dance, the amount of compensation for highly skilled dancers is often low. Therefore, income level is not a factor to be considered in defining “professional dancer” (2004).

Grieving for the loss of Dance

Both the research of Baumol, Jeffri and Throsby (2004) as well as the interviews conducted by other authors have exposed the extreme feelings of loss that are shared by many dancers as they transition into their post-performance career. Most of the authors reviewed agree that counseling is a healthy way of addressing the feelings of grief.

During one of CTFD's group counseling sessions entitled "Managing Change", dancers were asked to describe the feelings they associate with the end of their career as a performer. Some of the responses to this question include "loosing your first love", "it's like death", "emptiness", "loss of a dream" and "pretty devastating". During the session former dancer Daryl Fowkes, who has been retired for four years, discusses the frustration he has experienced during his transition. "I feel disoriented about how to pursue my artistic aspirations. "Do I want to teach, do I want to choreograph or finish my degree? The thing is, after four years my brain is still that of a working dancer. I still eat and sleep like a dancer. Still, after four years, in my head I'm a dancer."(Aguirre, 2007).

A writer from the magazine Dance Teacher warns that the transition out of a performance career may bring up feelings of loss and grief and agrees that it may help to speak with a professional counselor to deal with those feelings (Dance Teacher, 2007). Through counseling, there is a hope that, although the dancers mourn the loss of performing, they will begin to establish themselves and gain other achievements for which they can be proud (Leda, 2001).

Preparation for the Transition

Some authors recommend that dancers who are still performing should begin exploring other areas of interest that they may have outside of dance and that they make early contact with Career Transitions to take advantage of their career planning workshops (Leda, 2001). If possible the dancers should even begin pursuing higher education before they stop performing (Leda, 2001).

The lifestyle of a dancer often includes performing for others at all times and in most cases it's necessary to make adjustments to the performance to fit the needs of others. Having a career as a dancer could be considered a service oriented profession. Among other things, working to satisfy the audience and learning the movement of the choreographer are examples of how dancers must be selfless and focused away from themselves. Therefore, it is suggested that dancers learn to develop a sense of self while they are still performing and "get a civilian life before you need one" (Wozny, 2006). The end result of developing a life outside of dance and nurturing their personal health may positively impact their artistry. Having non-dance influences to impact performance may give the dancers artistic aspirations greater depth and reflect positively on stage (2006).

The authors suggest that ideally dancers should begin preparing for their transition before it is necessary. Planning for the future is important because few dancers will have dance as their only career throughout their lifetime. There is a disconnect in how long dancers perceive their performance career to last and the realistic retirement age of dancers. According to a 2004 study from Columbia University's Research Center for Arts and Culture, the average age of retirement from dance is 34 years old (Wozny, 2006). However, when asked the expected age at which their performing career will end, many dancers respond with the thought that they will perform until their mid forties (Baumol, Jeffri, Throsby, 2004, Levin, 2004).

Identifying, Transferring and Developing new skills and interests

Once the dancers realize that the transition is coming or has happened, many of them question their professional skills and ponder returning to school to pursue a degree of

some kind. As related to returning to school, the writer for Dance Teacher magazine states that it may or may not be necessary, depending on the field of study. The writer reminds dancers that potential employers may even offer on the job training. Still, they should proactively seek out computer classes or online classes during their off peak season in an attempt to begin preparing for their transition (Dance Teacher, 2007).

Wozny (2006) suggests that going to school may be a way of developing non-dance interest. She says that enrolling in courses and reading books will help the dancer to find out what subjects they are interested in (2006).

Dancers often focus only on dance, performing and sharpening their technique and leave little time for many other activities or interest (Wozny, 2006). This can be detrimental to a dancer as he or she begins to transition out of performing. Instead, dancers should be exploring the other things that they are interested in and discovering new strengths (Leda, 2001).

As mentioned above many dancers reach the end of their performing career with no professional skills other than dance. This fact often becomes frightening to them as they transition into the non dance world. Eighty three percent of American respondents in The aDvANCE Project were unable to identify the skills that can be transferred into a new career. However, Levine was able to list communication skills, competitiveness, cooperation, leadership, personal presentation, physical self-confidence, mental and physical dexterity, self discipline, stamina/persistence, creative problem-solving and time management as just a few (Levine, 2004). This disconnect is an example of why the programs at CTFD are needed. Many dancers need assistance learning to identify with the general work environment and are unaware that they have the skills to fit in.

It's important for dancers to take the first step and write a draft of a resume that doesn't include dance. Even if they have not worked outside of a dance environment, writing the draft may reveal universal skills that dancers learn such as discipline and independence. Certainly these skills are useful no matter what new career they are going into. Additionally, it is suggested to use goal setting, both long and short, as a form of career planning. After writing the draft the dancer can take inventory of what skills they have, both their dance and general work skills. They can then realistically research new career options and look for the ones that fit their skill level and interest (Dance Teacher, 2007).

Some of the authors suggest that trying new hobbies and exploring new interests will help dancers prepare for or move through their transition into their post-performance careers. It is recommended that dancers learn to become curious about the new world around them and communicate with people who work in their field of interest. They should also consider volunteering their time to intern with organizations that catch their interest (Dance Teacher Magazine, 2007). Leda (2001) suggests that dancers make a conscious effort to actually think about what they want to do and in what field they want to work. If they aren't sure, then start by slowly getting involved in anything that catches their attention (Leda, 2001).

Expanding social circles to include more than just dancers is another way of preparing for the transition into a post-performance career. Wozny (2006) observes that the dance industry can be a self-absorbed business and it requires effort to break that cycle and begin spending time with all kinds of people with different professions. Dancers can try finding a non dance hobby such as tennis, skating or jogging. They

could spend more time around friends who are not dancers doing non-dance activities (Wozny, 2006). Associating within a circle of non dancers begins to open the transitioning dancer's mind to new possibilities and options for influence. This expands the choices and references that they have when it becomes necessary to choose a new career.

Dance Related Employment and Mature Performers

Of course not all dancers will completely transition out of the dance world. There are other options, other than performing, for dancers who still want to continue to work in a dance environment. As mentioned above by the retired dancer Daryl Fowkes, a career as a dance teacher or a choreographer is often one of the first considerations for a new career after the performing has ended. However, the roles of teacher and choreographer should not be entered into lightly. Leda (2001) warns: "The skill and disposition for teaching is different than for performing. It may not be the natural fit or transition that is expected".

There are, however, a number of other professions within the field of dance that can also be considered. Former dancers could work in dance in the field of dance critique and write reviews for performances. Costume, lighting and set design are other options that would allow the dancer to continue to literally work in the theater. Physical therapy, massage therapy as well as dance photography are all potential careers within the dance field (Leda, 2001).

As there are new career options for dancers who want to continue to work in the dance field, it should be noted that there are dancers who have not made the transition out of performing and continue to dance well into their forties and fifties. For example,

Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project has a cast with multiple dancers over the age of 40, Twyla Tharp celebrated her 50th birthday by launching a national dance tour. Martha Graham danced as the principal dancer in her company until she was 74 years old (Jowitt, 1994).

Jowitt's (1994) article from *The Village Voice* discusses dancers who have continued to dance and some of the emotional benefits of being a matured dancer. "Young dancers concentrate on physical matters" while older dancers are more aware of all the possible achievement that can be made on stage beyond the physical. They reach out for a more emotional connection with the audience and the choreography by including more theatrics, including the use of breath as a part of the choreography, singing and sensitivity to the art (1994). No other authors in this review address the dancers who have not transitioned out of performing.

Dancer Identity after Retirement

A few authors uncovered a concern that some transitioning dancers have about still being able to identify themselves as dancers after they have left the stage. The question is "Am I still a dancer if I'm not performing"? The authors agree that the answer to this question is yes. "We have our own fingerprint on the way we move through the world. It doesn't go away when we stop dancing" (Wonzy, 2006). Being a dancer is more than just being on stage, it is built deep into who we are as individuals and cannot be undone (2006). While going through the process of entering a non-dance career, dancers should consider accepting that the new profession may not provide the deep sense of fulfillment and satisfaction that was experienced while performing. Instead

the dancers should keep in mind that the spirit of dance will continue to reside within and it is that spirit that can bring fulfillment to the next career.

The literature that has been reviewed exposes the need to establish a system that enables dancers to make a smooth transition into their post-performance careers. Recommendations for establishing such a system include involving dance training institutions and performing arts organizations in the preparation of dancers for this reality. Baumol, Jeffri and Throsby (2004) suggest that performing arts organizations do more to promote awareness of the challenges of transitioning by offering workshops and information sessions. They also suggest that the transition is promoted as a natural part of a dancer's career rather than encouraging the misconception that dancers will dance forever. Additionally, training institutions for dance should integrate education on transitioning into post-performance life as a mandatory portion of the curriculum (2004).

STUDY OF CHALLENGES OF EARLY AND MIDDLE CAREER DANCERS

Some research has been done to monitor the challenges that dancers face as they move through the early and middle stages of their careers. However, little research has been done to track the careers of dancers who have received their training at a college or university with a major in Dance. The review of literature to follow exposes the issues related to income, work place stability and the dancers' likelihood of leaving the dance world to find work in other fields.

Pursuit of Formal Education, Wages and Employment

In June of 2008 Dance USA, a non-profit service organization for dancers based in Washington, DC., presented statistics on dancer training, income, employment and the general financial state of dance companies throughout the last decade. The findings

reported several alarming issues such as the slow growth rate of dance employment, low hourly pay rates and the number of dance companies that have folded entirely.

On training, the Dance USA report (2008) acknowledged that some dancers choose to pursue a bachelor's degree in dance. However, in many cases the degree is not necessary because "most dancers need long-term on the job training to be successful" (U.S Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2009). The report also noted that the median hourly pay rate for dancers in 2006 was \$9.55 with the lowest 10 percent earning \$6.62 for their talent.

There is no direct relationship between having a degree in dance and an increase in income. Paul E. Harrington, Neeta P. Fogg and Thomas F. Harrington (1999) published a book entitled "The College Majors Handbook: The Actual Jobs, Earnings, and Trends for Graduates of 60 College Majors". The information in the book is based on data collected by the Census Bureau on more than 250,000 college graduates. Dance, along with music, drama and visual arts was among the majors with the lowest earning potential.

The National Association of Schools of Dance accredits 71 dance programs and there are nearly 300 colleges or universities in The United States that offer a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance. Each year thousands of new dancers graduate from these programs and enter into an industry notorious for extreme competition, low pay and unstable companies. Although there is a high number of dance graduates moving into the dance work force each year, employment for dancers is expected to grow no more than 6% during the 10-year span between 2006 and 2016 (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2008).

The low rate of employment growth may be due to the growing financial challenges of many dance companies throughout the country.

To put this in perspective, consider the number of dance companies that have permanently closed their doors. Between 2000 and 2007, 5 major dance companies folded entirely¹. When compared to the 10-year span of the 1990's, when only 1 major dance company folded, losing 5 companies within 7 years suggest extreme financial stress on these organizations (Dance USA, 2008). Dance USA reports that many dance companies have begun to take action in order to reduce the cost of operations and expenses. Over 50% of the companies they have traced have reported efforts to downsize.

Supplemental income for dancers

Considering the low wages, unlikely employment opportunities and the financial instability of many dance companies, it is often necessary for dancers, even those with a college education, to supplement their income with several other jobs in order to make ends meet.

There are several ways that dancers supplement their income from dance. Among many other things, some juggle multiple dance related jobs while others may teach. Still, there are many dancers who take jobs unrelated to dance. The report by Dance USA listed the 5 top industries that employ the largest number of dancers and the average hourly pay rate for each industry (U.S Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2009):

Theater companies and dinner theaters	\$15.28
Schools and instruction	11.71

¹ In this case, major dance company is defined as having an operating expense budget of \$1 million or more. The five dance companies are: Ballet Internationale, Oakland Ballet, Ohio Ballet, Ballet Pacifica and Ballet Cleveland (Dance USA, 2008).

Amusement and recreation industries	8.58
Drinking places (alcoholic beverages)	7.76
Full-service restaurants	7.13

Leaving the Arts

In 1999 Sarah Montgomery and Michael Robinson studied the graduates of the Five College Dance Department (FCDD). The FCDD is a group of Dance Departments at five schools in Massachusetts. The schools include, Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. With the use of a survey, graduates were granted the opportunity to review the paths their careers have taken after graduating from the FCDD. The results of their research were reported in a publication titled *What Becomes of Undergraduate Dance Majors? A Study of the Five College Dance Department Graduates* (Montgomery, Robinson, 1999).

The participants in the survey graduated between the years of 1970 and 1998. Although 84% of respondents found work in the dance field at some time in the years after graduating from college, over time the number of respondents working in dance decreases dramatically. Of those who graduated after 1990, 41% were still dancing. Of those who graduated before 1990, less than 20% were dancing. On average respondents in their study spent 3-6 years working in a dance related job. The study reveals many of the dancers pursue and gain dance related jobs within the first several years of graduating from college. However, as time passes less and less graduates work in their chosen field of dance and move on to other occupations.

These issues of retention are not unique to dancers. In 2006, a study by Neil Alper and Gregory Wassall entitled *Artists' Careers and Their Labor Markets* reported that

within a 10 year time frame, “fewer than forty percent of those in the performing arts occupations (actor, dancer, musician, composer and announcer) were still artists”. (Alper, Wassall, 2006).

One could consider lack of talent or insufficient training as contributing factors causing an artist to leave their chosen discipline. While this may be true for some, it is not the case for most. In 2004, Daniel Wakin (2004) of *The New York Times Art and Leisure* studied the Class of 1994 from The Juilliard School of Music. He found that even the prestige of The Juilliard School, which carries the reputation of the premiere performing arts school in the United States, was no match for the economic challenges that artists face after they’ve graduated.

Ten years after leaving school The New York Times (Wakin, 2004) traced 36 former students from the class of 1994. Only 11 individuals (of the 36) worked as full time musicians, 9 worked as freelance musicians who taught or worked non music related jobs to supplement their income, 3 considered themselves soloists and work as individual musicians outside of an orchestra. Twelve from the class have left the field of professional music performance all together and 1 was unemployed looking for work with an orchestra.

"It got to the point where you're just tired of being poor." (Wakin, 2004). These are the words of Chad Alexander, one the graduates from Juilliard’s Class of 1994 as he describes the circumstances that lead him to take a job as an assistant underwriter with and insurance company, determining the amount of money to be distributed for insurance claims. After accumulating student loan and credit card debt Alexander was in need of a job, however, “a Juilliard degree had not prepared him for much besides playing” (2004).

So in a sad moment of facing reality, he decided to sell his Bassoon for \$5,300 to alleviate his financial issues.

Conclusion of Literature Review

As the review of literature reveals, there are a number of factors to consider and that require preparation when a dancer moves into a new non-performance career.

However, the literature reviewed for this paper does not provide insight into the personal experiences and reasons why a dancer may decide to change careers. How do individual dancers describe their decision to make the transition into their post-performance career? What are the factors that lead to this decision?

Based on the data that was presented, conclusions can be drawn that low income, lack of preparation from the training institution and financially unstable work environments may play a large part in a dancer's decision to leave the field. However, data doesn't give a voice to the individuals who have lived the experience.

The full text that Baumol, Jeffri and Throsby (2004) used to describe the word "transition" reads: "the career stage during which a dancer stops actively performing (often gradually) for reasons of age, health, injury, or some other cause, and moves to a new activity, whatever that may be". Even for a 3 year international study, the reasons for the transitions are categorized all together and there is no emphasis placed on discovering the individual circumstances that prompted these dancers to discontinue their career. The researchers acknowledge that a dancer has a "professional life that is relatively brief, since many dancers have to retire in their early thirties, and some even earlier" (2004).

Additionally, there is evidence that some dancers are able to maintain a performance career beyond the average retirement age of 34. Take for example, the dancers mentioned above in Jowitt's (1994) article from *The Village Voice*, many of them continued to dance well beyond 50 years old. Doing further research of this additional issue and collecting solid information about why many dancers leave the field so early in their careers as compared to the handful of dancers who continue to perform may offer solutions that could be used to prolong careers.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Information for this qualitative study was gathered by interviewing eight individuals who have received their Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance. Some of the interviews were conducted in person, and others were conducted by phone, depending on the location of the interviewee. All of the interviews focused on the following themes.

1. Detailed description of college experience.
2. Detailed description of experience after graduating from college.
3. Dance employment after graduating from college.
4. Non – dance employment after graduating from college.
5. Feelings of grief.
6. Exploring new skills and hobbies.
7. Current employment and dance opportunities
8. Recommendations for BFA dance programs.

Because this study is centered on collecting information about the experiences of individuals, the qualitative approach to research is used (Creswell, 2003). The particular strategy is narrative research. The benefit of using qualitative research and narrative strategy is that it allows each of the participants to tell personal stories related to each theme above. After all of the interviews are completed, an analysis of the similarities and differences found in each theme is summarized by the researcher and presented in the

research findings (2003). This is the most suitable method for this study because it is dedicated specifically to allowing participants to openly express personal experiences.

Because of the sensitive nature of the interviews and to accommodate the request for privacy from several of the participants, the individual names of participants and their schools have been withheld.

There are limitations of this study that must be acknowledged. The first limitation is the relatively small sample size of eight participants. Also, the study is confined to only interviewing dancers who earned a Bachelor of Fine Art in Dance and was graduated from college for at least five years, but no more than nine years, at the time of the interview. For these reasons, the findings of this research cannot be used to draw definite conclusions about the work experiences of all college educated dancers, nor can it be used to draw definite conclusions about the dance community as a whole. However, it can be used to provide general insight on about the personal challenges of the dancers and their community.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

There are dancers who could be in the prime of their dance careers who find themselves with little connection to the dance world. They've spent thousands of dollars on higher education, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance to learn the technical intricacies of dance technique. Yet they spend their days working in office cubicles, day care centers, retail stores etc. They are far from the theater stage and the ballet barre. Who are these dancers and why don't they work in the industry for which they have been prepared?

To answer these questions, eight dancers were interviewed. Each of them has earned their Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance and neither of them work full time in the dance industry. They all have unique stories describing the path that led them away from dance. There are several similarities and common themes that emerged from the interviews as well as distinct differences that set one dancer's story apart from another's. The research that follows will give a review of the common themes found in the eight interviews.

College Experience

“You’re never going to be the best dancer, it’s about competing with yourself. There’s always going to be someone somewhere who’s a better dancer.”

When choosing to go to college to study dance many of the interview participants chose a school that would give them a well-rounded education. Having diversity in the types of dance techniques that they would learn was very important to many. One participant noted that having the opportunity to study ballet, jazz and modern dance was particularly important because, in her college search she found many schools that didn't offer modern dance at all. On the other hand, another chose to transfer from a school that focused primarily on modern dance in order to learn other dance types.

There was quite a bit of variety in the ways the participants interacted with their faculty. Most of the interview participants witnessed extreme favoritism in their faculty and saw them focus their energy on a hand full of students in their classes. All of those who witnessed this favoritism agreed that the students receiving the attention were students who could be perceived as having the most potential for success. These were students who, among other things, often had years of training before coming to college or already had advanced dance technique skills.

Some of the participants shared that they made personal connections with one or two members of the faculty, received corrections in class and some personalized attention. However, most of the participants felt that they received little to no personal attention from their teachers. Many used phrases such as “felt invisible”, “had no voice” and “would be surprised if they even knew my name” to describe their relationship with the teachers. However, one participant said that while it was clear that she was being over looked, she chose to stay in the back of the class where she wouldn’t be a focal point. The lack of attention didn’t bother her because she was “there to learn, not to be friends with the teachers”.

Another participant stated that being overlooked in technique classes challenged her to mentally compete with the “teacher’s pet type students”. She explained that she recognized them as her completion and believed that they had an advantage by being personally connected to the teachers. So, she was forced to keep her eyes and ears open and make the best of the situation by listening to the corrections that were not directed towards her but could be used to make her a stronger dancer.

In contrast, one participant said that in hindsight she realized that “you get what you put in”. Today she feels that she should have made a personal point to make improvements rather than waiting for encouragement from her teachers. This participant, along with several others, admitted to feeling intimidated by many of the teachers as well as classmates. This intimidation caused them to keep questions and concerns to themselves resulting in not getting the most out of their college experience.

Having access and insight into the experiences of professionals in the dance industry was important to all of the interview participants while they were students in

college. However, there are significant differences in the amount of exposure their colleges provided to the dance industry as a whole. The differences range from no exposure at all, some exposure and having required residences and workshops built into the curriculum.

Some of the interview participants said that during their entire time in college, they never had the opportunity to work with any choreographers or dance artists other than their teachers or classmates. Several of them stated that their school is located in cities that are home to many small and large dance companies however, no opportunities to collaborate with these companies were facilitated by their schools. One participant said that there is an award-winning dancer with a dance company based in the city where she went to school and unfortunately, she never heard of this artist until after she graduated from college.

Other interviewees said that they had several opportunities to work with local artists who were based in the city where their school was located. Many local artists held single day workshops and lecture demonstrations that gave the students the needed insight into the dance industry. One participant attended a school that required her to actively seek opportunities within the local dance community. She was required to research local dance companies and get involved in workshops they may offer.

Overall, everyone agreed that the technical training they received while in college was outstanding. Still, having a successful dance career requires more than excellent technique. Each of them were faced with challenges that were not related to technique while in college. While it is not the case for all, the most common challenge shared between the participants was learning to create their own identity or voice as a dancer.

One participant described her school as producing “cookie cutter” dancers who look the same, dance the same and value the same types of dance aesthetics. She didn’t fit the cookie cutter mold and had few opportunities to explore the dance world outside of what her school offered. Sadly, she reported that after four years of college she graduated believing that there was no place in the dance world for her. Another says that by the time she graduated she was so “burnt out” from school politics, favoritism and feeling ignored that she just wanted to get away from everything related to dance.

In contrast, there were some who ended their time in college with a positive outlook for their future. For example, the mental competition that one interviewee conducted led her to develop a unique style of choreography. As she prepared to graduate from college she envisioned herself having her own dance company and performing her own style of dance.

Life after graduating from college

“That’s what I enjoyed most about leaving college - feeling that I was an awesome dancer and choreographer and that my world would be full of opportunities”

Many of the paths that these dancers took, after they received their Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance degree, are like long winding roads with lots of twists, turns and emotional highs and lows. The final outcome for all of them is the same; it ends with dance taking the back seat as they pursue some other interest.

A few of the dancers graduated from college and immediately decided that they needed to get away from the dance world. Some had injuries that caused them severe pain, while others had such negative experiences in college that they wanted to experience something new and different. One interviewee says that after graduating from college she realized that she’d spent her whole life in dance and just now realized that

there is “a whole other world out there” and decided to spend time traveling and gathering new experiences for her life.

The majority of the dancers interviewed wanted to have long-term dance careers but were blindsided by the realities of what it takes to be successful in the dance industry. Many were encouraged to move to or stay in New York City to start their dance career and most followed that advice. Several of them shared the ultimate goal of finding full time dance employment with a dance company and the general plan was to spend time auditioning for dance companies until they found a job.

When asked to describe the “real world of dance” and what it takes to be successful, they described a cutthroat environment with aggressive people where only the strong survive. They described an unstable world with low wages and dance opportunities that often expire after 6 months. After graduating from college, the dancers found themselves in a world where hundreds of people compete for one job. Some found it’s necessary to sacrifice luxuries like having a bed, settling for living out of a suitcase and sleeping on the floors and couches of friends.

Then there was the shock of how difficult it was to simultaneously maintain the basic necessities of life, such as paying rent and utilities, while trying to support a dance career that often requires dancers to spend money. Many found that they could not afford the cost of taking daily dance classes, which often range from \$10-\$15 per class, in order to stay in shape and maintain the level of technique they attained while in college. However, some found work exchange programs at dance studios that offer free classes in exchange for cleaning the studios or working in the office and front desk. It was

immediately clear that the plan to simply attend auditions until a dance job was found would not suffice, so many began to incorporate a day job.

The most common job of the interviewees while trying to pursue a dance career was working as a waitress. The impact that being a waitress had on their ability to pursue dance was described as “awful, just awful”. The issue was that waitressing provided “good money”. However, it also required late night hours and some participants admit that they were “up working until 4 o’clock in the morning and getting up at noon so it’s like your whole clock changes. And you’re exhausted”. Additionally, after landing a secure job many were reluctant to request off from work to attend an audition or a rehearsal.

Those who found jobs performing were often paid a small amount “out of pocket” by the choreographer or not at all. Others found opportunities to dance paying as much as \$500 per performance, however, these were often short-term performance opportunities that required the dancer to be looking for work again after 6 months. One interview participant tells the story of having the opportunity to work with a hip-hop dance choreographer and have access to free dance classes. However, because the choreographer was unable to provide any income for the dancer she had to take a job in retail to pay her household bills. Her work schedule had several conflicts with the rehearsal and class schedules so she was forced to withdraw from the dance project.

The question that filled the heads of several of these dancers was “why didn’t I know that being successful in this industry would be so complicated”? As mentioned above, these dancers all felt blindsided by the realities of this juggling act. Those who chose to go in search of dance employment set out armed with their talent, their dance

technique and their degree. However, that wasn't enough. They began to question the roll their college could have played in preparing them. The quote below sums it up best:

“ I am 30 yrs old now and in hindsight it seems like it should have been common sense to be ready for all of that. But, the reality is that I walked into the school at 18 yrs old. I was a blank slate and all that I was going to learn about the dance industry I would learn from them. I learned technique and that's it. My dance technique was impeccable but what I needed was survival skills. Or at least a warning that I should be prepared to juggle side jobs with auditions. Instead they gave me pointed feet and showed me the door”.

Exploration of Self

“It's hard to keep telling yourself “I'm good” even though there's nothing to show for it”

Deciding to become a dancer is not only physical, it's also an emotional commitment to continue to train and work through pain, hurt feelings and tears as well as joy, excitement and happiness. For many of the interview participants, accepting that they had not been successful in securing a job as a full time dancer was a devastating blow to their self-esteem. They all spent years perfecting their craft and dedicating their bodies and souls to dance. During the interviews they expressed feelings of grief, embarrassment, shame and even feeling stupidity for not learning how to be successful in the dance world. One interviewee shared the following: “I felt sad, embarrassed, lonely, like I wasn't good enough or strong enough to make it. Deep down I knew that I was smart and talented enough to be a dancer but it just wasn't working out”.

More than a few went out of their way to avoid seeing other dancers in social settings. They felt that they'd have to explain why they were “working at CVS and not on stage”. Some expressed complications in explaining to family members why they didn't have a job in dance right away. Additionally, many of them stopped going to dance concerts or other types of dance performances due to overwhelming feelings of

sadness and longing to be a part of the show. A few even sought professional counseling to help ease their sadness.

Overtime, they each began to find a way to fill the void and explored new hobbies and interests – especially those hobbies and interests that could become their new careers. Two of the participants pursued additional education and training. One focused on becoming a certified yoga instructor, while the other tapped into her interest in arts and education administration and moved to London where she received her Master of Arts degree in Arts Management at City University.

Identifying new skills and developing new interests is imperative to the dancers well being, or as one said, “it’s essential for my sanity”. Many described a personal need to feel that they have accomplished something in life rather than just living as a failed dancer. Although the other six interviewees have not pursued higher education, many of them have identified areas of interest such as photography, fashion marketing and theater production and are currently considering returning to school to learn a new trade.

Current Employment and Current Dance Opportunities

“Many people don’t have to a clear-cut path to success”

Most of the interview participants found day jobs that would cause them to focus their energy away from dance within three years of graduating from college. At the time that the interviews were conducted for this research, three of the eight dancers work in retail sales, one is the program manager of an after school program and day care center, another is a full time yoga instructor, another is an administrator at Julliard in the Arts Education program, one is a full time mother and wife and another works as a model and does production work on movie sets.

Although only three of the participants are currently involved in any dance related projects, seven of the eight still consider themselves to be dancers. The ones who are currently involved in dance each choose to keep dance in their lives for different reasons.

As stated earlier, one participant left college believing that there was no place in the dance world for her and spent several years away from the dance stage. However, as she worked to earn her Master's degree, she began to discover a pull toward learning more about her heritage and the dance forms associated with it. Slowly, the dancer began to realize that Afro-Haitian and Afro-Caribbean dance not only reconnected her with family history, it also became the open arms that would welcome her back into the world of dance. Today she's back in the dance studio working with a dance company that fuses Afro-Caribbean dance with modern dance. She works a full time job and dances part-time with the company.

Similarly, another dancer also works full time and works with a modern dance company on the weekends. However, she doesn't feel satisfied with this dance opportunity and admits to staying involved simply because she likes "to be able to say that I'm in a dance company or I'm working towards a performance and my next show is in September". Additionally, she admits that she's committed to leaving the company to find small choreographic opportunities. She still has the drive to create and experiment with dance that she had when she graduated from college and would like to take the time to explore her creative energy again.

The third interviewee who is still involved in dance has made a conscious effort to have fun with dance and use it, along with music, as a creative outlet for her most private issues and concerns. Like all of the other interviewees, she studied classical ballet,

modern and jazz dance while in college. Today she turns her focus away from the classics and enjoys hip-hop dance and creative movement. Rather than being stressed about her hips being turned out and the height of her leg extension, she values the natural movement that's created through creative expression. Although she's not currently working towards presenting her creative ideas on stage, her ultimate goal is to combine her love for dance with a newfound talent, writing music. For her, it's no longer important to be a dance super star, instead she'd rather use her talent to help and inspire the people in her community.

Recommendations from Interview Participants

"It's important to have technique but that's not enough to be successful"

Many of the interview participants currently feel that they live successful lives. As mentioned above, they have moved beyond the initial grief they felt about not becoming full time dancers and many have identified new skills that they can use on a new career path. Still, they all love and appreciate dance and hold onto the passion they had when they first began their dance training in college. The memories of their college experience are vivid and when asked "what could have been included in your college experience to better prepare you for life after college", they all offered a number of similar recommendations for their schools without hesitation.

The top recommendation from the interviewees is for schools to offer their students more individual attention and teaching. One interviewee even suggested that the dance departments should be smaller with fewer students so that throughout the four years, teachers can spend time getting to know their students. They also recommend that

teachers pay attention to the student's individual talent and dance style rather than force them into the same mold that other students may fit.

General guidance about where individual students should look for dance employment and what types of dance companies would be a good fit for the student were also popular recommendations from the interviewees. One participant tells the story of seeing her former college dance teacher on the street, several years after she graduated from college. They had a brief discussion about her talent and he casually mentioned the name of a nationally known choreographer and suggested that he believes she would have been a great fit for this choreographer's dance style.

While she was flattered, she was also frustrated and disappointed that the teacher never shared this idea with her while she was his student. Knowing what kind of choreographers and dance companies to reach out to would have made the first few years after her college graduation less difficult. She admits that even if it turned out that the teacher was wrong and she wasn't a good fit for the choreographer, it still would have been helpful to have a sense of where she would fit in.

Additionally, interviewees suggest that colleges should incorporate more interaction with local choreographers, dance companies and alumni into the curriculum. This would not only expose current students to information about local dance opportunities but it would also allow them to hear the stories of challenges and accomplishments of former students. Another suggestion is that faculty should encourage their students to become certified in yoga, Pilates or anything else that would serve as additional sources of income while helping them maintain their physical form.

Overall, the interview participants believe that realistic information about the environment they were moving into was not given to them from their schools. Although all of them agree that they were taught to be the best dancers they could be and received a great education about dance, they also believe that there was a lack of information given about the industry as a whole.

CONCLUSION

From the research that has been presented it is fair to conclude that those who choose to pursue dance as an occupation are likely to face challenges at any stage in their career. Additionally, the literature shows that some difficulties are shared between mature dancers and those who left the field of dance before their career even began. Among other things, feelings of grief and loss as well as being challenged to find new skills and areas of interest are all shared between the two groups. Nonetheless, the first group has often been supported by research and general understanding of their natural transition into a non-performance lifestyle.

On the other hand, in the past, little has been done to research and understand the final segment of dancers. Often, they have been forgotten and presumed to be the ones with little talent who just weren't good enough to be successful. The purpose of this research study was to give those dancers a voice and an outlet to tell the story of the path that led them away from the dance stage. Also, it is important to note that no one who was interviewed presented the idea of lack of talent or lack of passion for dance as a reason for not working in the dance industry today. Instead, it was issues of circumstance and lack of preparation.

Additionally, consider the economic conditions noted earlier. Along with other art related fields, dance was found to be among the college majors with the lowest earning potential for its graduates (Harrington, Fogg, Harrington, 1999). While there are a few hundred dance programs in this country the potential for employment growth in the dance industry is not likely to increase beyond 6% (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2008). Therefore, the dance community has more dancers looking for work than there are jobs available. Thus, this is creating the competitive work environment described by the interview participants.

These facts, along with the absence of communication about what to expect of the dance industry, assisted in leading the participants in this research study away from a dance career. It is reasonable to conclude that making the choice to seek dance employment as a career should not be made without proper information about the state of the dance industry today.

Also, it is imperative for the colleges and universities that offer Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance degrees to provide their students with appropriate coursework and realistic expectations of what will be required to be successful. The interview participants have stated that their colleges did little to prepare or even educate them about the common challenges that they would face after graduating from college. This lack of information should be considered unacceptable. The next actions should be taken by the schools to accept the responsibility of offering their students a thorough education that includes preparation for the challenges of the dance industry.

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