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A New Perspective on Competition Dance

A dance contest in war-torn Uganda can remind us all of the joy and empowering aspects of dance

by McClaine Timmerman

In 2015, I attended yet another American dance competition as a choreographer and teacher. As I witnessed the event from both the audience and backstage, I began questioning whether this experience was more positive than negative for these dancers. What was it teaching them? I remember hearing a teacher prep her young soloist before her turn to impress the judges. She got uncomfortably close to the barely dressed dancer and said, as if it were a life or death situation, “*This is it. I want to see you kill it. Walk out there and show them who is the best. Make me proud.*” After hearing that, and then watching the attitude of that young dancer as she performed her turns, leaps, splits, and seductive hip movements, I thought, “What did this 13-year-old girl learn from this?”

Having taught at multiple dance competition studios, I find I’m not a supporter of the atmosphere, attitudes, and drama the American “culture” of competition dance provides. I am in search of a new way to approach teaching students from this background. On YouTube, I recently watched a very different kind of dance competition in *War Dance*, a 2007 American documentary film directed by Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine. It captures the role that dance and competition play in the lives of thousands of refugee children of Uganda who have fled their homes to live in villages where the government protects them from rebels. Three children reveal their stories of horror, and then how their community and traditions through dance and music provide them with a sense of empowerment. In exposing the darkness surrounding so many lives of those in Uganda, the directors were able to show the empowerment and sense of community that competition-driven dance and music can provide.

As a graduate student and teacher of dance, I am beginning to ask myself how I can integrate both history and current events into my classes. How can I incorporate particular subjects into class and make them relatable? Is a film like *War Dance* important and relevant to these students? With such a high percentage of college students in the U.S. coming from a competition dance background, the topic seems to me highly relatable and relevant. American competition dance seems to be mostly technique driven, providing a platform for feeling superior and pursuing fame. The possible benefits that underlie dance contests may not be that apparent to dancers in the U.S., so seeing what competition dance means to Ugandan children can bring some perspective about what’s important and what is not.

The perspective on competition dance offered in the film could be translated into many aspects of the dance world. It can teach students about accountability and the roles of leadership within their community as a dance student and performer. Or it could help dancers find something else other than just the technique to drive their movement in both class and performance. Beginning at a young age, competition dancers in America develop a strong drive

to be the best, to be winners, and to be perfect. These concepts, although natural in a competitive atmosphere, can overshadow the positive effects and experiences that competing can offer. In *War Dance*, the effect competition dance has on the children is of pure light and love. It shows the pride dance brings to the children and their village, the accountability and responsibility it teaches, the reason and tradition behind representing their village and country, and the empowerment they feel, having worked for something meaningful, accomplishing that task, and being a part of something so liberating.

If there was a documentary portraying competition dance and its effects on children in America, I do not believe the same concepts would be highlighted necessarily. It isn't about culture, or tradition for American competitive dancers. It's more about winning, trophies, and sex. I am using the word sex in the broadest sense when American competition dancers focus on the projection of what is "sexy," regardless of age. Having middle school children in tiny booty shorts bend over facing away from the audience, sliding their hand on their butt as they body roll up, and snap their head to the audience for a wink, doesn't seem like the best message to be sending either the children or viewers. Nevertheless, this is what is being taught and what is winning attention.

It's important as a teacher to remind dancers why they have chosen to spend so much time devoted to this art form. Asking them that question might help them remember why they love dancing so much, as opposed to just being in a routine of doing and perfecting it every day. Gaining perspective in our lives as individuals and dancers can provide such humbling awareness, and I believe it can be taught at any age. Dance didn't come from a machine that never makes mistakes. It came from tradition and expression. *War Dance* is an important film that can guide competitive dancers to have a more humble and meaningful learning experience.

I gained perspective both as a person and as a dance artist watching this film. I believe anything that I find valuable in my practice can be valuable to my students. The children shown in the film were given a beautiful outlet and opportunity to find peace and empowerment in their lives through dance and music. This is a universal form of expression that can offer its freedom to any and everyone, from a child with no training to a professional dancer. Competition dance offers a lot of great lessons for young dancers. I think the valuable lessons and joy can be lost in translation in American competitions. A little more perspective never hurt anyone.

McClaine Timmerman is scheduled to receive her MFA at the University of California, Irvine, in June 2017. Post-graduation, she plans to continue pursuing both her choreography and teaching career. It is her goal to start a dance theater performance company and travel with her work.
