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A new kind of success

It's not only an "ideal" body, or your original dream job, that can spell happiness in a dance career. Sometimes, you have to be open to change

by Claire Upton

As dancers, our bodies are our instruments, so it's understandable when our bodies become vulnerable to other's judgements. If a professional dancer does not meet the standard of perfect physicality, then they can expect to hear something about it.

The sculpting of the "perfect" body in the dance world has been desirable since the 19th century, yet some dancers have become famous without it. In Jennifer Homans' *Apollo's Angels*, she states that Marie Taglioni was known for being "poorly proportioned, with a bent posture" and being "famously ugly" in the ballet world. Still, Marie Taglioni is considered one of history's most famous ballerinas, proving that societal perceptions can be sometimes overlooked.

I believe that the younger generation of dancers has been taught that if they are not skinny, they should not expect a future in dance. But being a dancer is more than just being skinny; dancers are artists who have the ability to share and affect others. Even having been given this power and skill, we still need to make an effort to achieve our goals, but it does not mean dancers should give up if they do not possess the ideal body. Current professional dancers are proving that success can be reached without the perfect dancer body.

To make my argument clear, I first need to clarify the meaning of "success" and what is and isn't considered an ideal dancer body. The definition of success is different to everyone. Dancers are naturally ambitious and tenacious, so when we hear the word "success" we automatically envision the highest position a dancer could attain. For some that could be performing with the American Ballet Theater or Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. But I am looking at "success" as making a living in the dance world. It's not about lowering your standards of your ideal success to make a living, but there is a way to see a new career choice within the dance world as a success.

In the 2012 *Dance Major Journal* article "Plan B—Surprisingly Better than Plan A!", Heather Castillo explained her decision to earn a dance and choreography degree at the University of California, Irvine after working professionally. She wanted to be qualified to teach at the university level. After a subsequent MFA, her career options broadened, and she ended up choreographing for musicals, and earning tenure as the head of the dance department at California State University, Channel Islands. Castillo is an example of finding success despite thinking she only wanted to end up onstage in a major production.

Just as there are many versions of success, the "perfect dancer body" is different to every individual and dance company. As a pre-professional dancer, I was aware that companies looked for thin, athletic dancers who had superb technique, individualistic artistry and an easygoing personality, with certain body characteristics they deemed essential. I thought that acceptance into a company depended on a standard idea about weight, height, proportions, bone and muscular structure, and many other factors. But it turns out each company has specific requirements. The reality is that the mold of the "perfect dancer body" is slowly transforming, so that more dancers with unconventional body types are now found in professional companies.

In Jill Green's *Dance Research Journal* essay, "Somatic Authority and the Myth of the Ideal Body in Dance Education," she asked six dancers at the university level to describe their

bodies in journals. Only one of the participants strayed away from negative thoughts on her body. The student describes her body as “long, lean, stiff, strong” and also says that her “growing strength and power coincides with a grounded-ness and a better sense of balance.” Green explains that the particular dancer “appeared to be resisting ideal imposed definitions of body and locating inner feelings of strength,” unlike the other participants. The journal was written in 1999, so today we can optimistically hope and most-likely succeed in seeing more women loving and accepting their bodies.

In a 2012 *Dance Spirit* magazine article “Breaking the Mold,” professional dancers without the ideal dancer body were interviewed about their experiences before landing a position in a company. At five feet and four inches, Sarah Hay, who is said to be “curvy,” is dancing with the Semperoper Ballet in Germany. To lessen the size of her D-cup breasts, Hay almost underwent a breast reduction surgery, but decided against it after learning to appreciate “appearing feminine and sensual onstage.” Dealing with a different body characteristic, Aileen Roehl danced with the Paul Taylor Dance Company while measuring only five-foot, two inches. These are only a few dancers who have found success in dance performance, despite their unconventional dancer bodies.

I truly hope that every dancer can fulfill their dream to perform with a professional company, but if it does not happen that does not mean giving up is your only option. Knowing your capabilities and being realistic sometimes mean a new career choice is imperative. It’s crucial to remember that there are many different career paths you can choose in the dance field. Some options include: teacher, choreographer, Broadway, fitness instructor, arts management, dance medicine, staging, directing, or returning to school. To make a career transition easier, it helps to realize that dance is ultimately about sharing, which is something you do in many careers, related to dance or outside of the field. In performing, the dancer shares with an audience the same way a teacher shares with students or people behind the scenes share with a community.

In a 2012 *Huffington Post* article, Lori Weiss wrote about Kerry Ann King, a woman who began her training at the Joffrey Ballet in New York City to achieve her childhood dream of becoming a ballerina. After years of judgements about her figure, it only took one injury at the age of 14 to make Kerry Ann quit dance. Although it took 30 years, Kerry Ann revisited dance and started pursuing her passion through teaching it and becoming a fitness instructor. Kerry Ann found a new joy in teaching and sharing her love for dance. Another dancer who was able to find success in the dance world is Frostine Shake, a plus-sized burlesque dancer who left the ballet scene at the age of 16. At 30, Shake was a professional burlesque dancer who incorporated pointe technique into her routines. In a 2016 *Independent UK* article, it was said that Shake gave women “hope to do anything [they] want to do, at any age, any size, or any time in [their] life.” Along with making a living by performing, Shake found success in being able to share the idea of self-love and positive body image.

When seriously pursuing a career in dance, expect the journey to be tough, painful, and discouraging, but always remember that you are beautiful, and every physical aspect of you makes you the unique dancer that you are. If it is indispensable to make a new career choice, focus on a career that will bring you the joy that dancing has brought to your life. And remember, you can have a positive effect on the dance community in whichever career you choose. A “perfect dancer body” is not a requirement to make a living in the dance field. The only requirement is passion and the drive to find contentment in whichever career you choose—and that is success.

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