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“That sounds like fun” and other insults to the Dance Major

What do you say when someone responds negatively to the thing you study with great passion in college? It pays to give it some thought.

by Breanna Rathbun

We've all had to deal with it at one point or another, when someone, maybe unintentionally, discredits what we as dance majors are studying. I've heard it all, from pressing questions such as, “So, do you just have fun since you're a dance major?” and “Is dance actually a major?” to “Is dance a sport?” and, of course, everybody's favorite, “So what are you going to do with that?”

I would guess that your initial reaction to pressing questions such as these would be to roll your eyes, get offended, and maybe feel the urge to say something sarcastic in response—or at least that's how I typically feel. I can never quite understand why I feel like I have to reduce my area of study to simple terms when I am faced with these sorts of conversations. Why is it so normal to have to defend ourselves as dance majors?

As I wonder about this further, I think one of the main sources of confusion stems from people generally not having any prior knowledge of the fine arts at a collegiate level, and not seeing why dance is so important. So why is it so important? Why does the world need it? Why do we as dancers need it? Why is it so crucial that it has been incorporated in almost every university and college in our nation? I think that we need to arm ourselves with reasons that our area of study holds just as much importance as any other field.

I spend my weekends working in a restaurant close to campus, so I get to meet all kinds of people from all different professions and walks of life. My co-workers and managers come from different backgrounds, so it was a chance for me to do some research. I spend all day and week at school with my dancing peers and then spend my weekends with people who are completely removed from dance. In short, I live in two very different worlds. Now and again, a customer will ask me about school, and when they ask me what I'm studying, I proudly reply “dance” and then brace myself to start explaining. It's typical for someone to say “Oh,” as they nod their head and then the conversation ends, which is fine. I'm sure I've done the same at one point to someone else.

But I always got this feeling that “dance” wasn't enough and to be honest, I wanted more of a reaction out of people. I started using more descriptive words in my responses by saying, “I'm getting my BFA in Dance Performance,” to add credibility and ignite some further interest. The reactions? One time a woman expressed her concern for my financial future by advising me to marry rich if I was going into the arts. On two separate occasions I have had a group of men, and an older woman stunned that UCI even had a dance major. They scoffed as they said they “didn't know you could major in that.” Well, gentlemen (and lady), you sure can.

My co-workers, on the other hand, have their ideas about what being a dance major actually entails. One asked, “So do you just have fun since you're just a dance major?” Pause. I thought to myself, “Yeah, I mean we usually have performances during finals week, and I haven't actually had a full day off since last June, and I danced for six hours before coming to work today so, yeah, it's just fun.” I ended up calmly explaining that it was actually a lot of hard work, but it's worth it because I love it.

Then there are the imitations of “ballet” that people like to do for me, which is always kind of comical. Flexibility seems to be the defining quality of a dancer and of the most interest. Some people think that dance is a sport, so they proudly brag to me that they once knew someone who got “Best Overall” or won a dance competition. I’ve also had someone ask me which “clubs” I dance at—you get the picture. Nobody actually knows what they’re talking about, but they will make comments about dance anyway.

I started wondering if I was the only one faced with these quick assumptions. So, I reached out to ten different dancers and asked them if they had any similar experiences. I asked men, women, undergraduate students, graduate students, and UCI alumni, all from different training backgrounds and geographical upbringings, to see if this trend had any underlying differences. I asked them if they could tell me about the most outrageous response that they have gotten. Although everyone was able to provide me with at least one example of a negative response, there was a difference in how frequent the negativity occurred. Generally, the negative responses had something to do with the most commonly known aspects of dance, i.e., mentioning flexibility, spinning and leaping, how fun it must be, and pole dancing. Yes, pole dancing.

One dancer noted that most of the time people are genuinely interested in what his major is. Sure, he’s heard the typical “how fun” comments, but he said that most of the time people’s faces “light up” when he mentions that he is a dancer. On the downside, he said that he felt pressure to highlight that he also does hip hop, a genre that is more widely known than ballet, jazz, and modern. I know that sometimes I use *So You Think You Can Dance* as a reference point, just because people know what that is. After hearing what other people have experienced, it is clear to me that we all feel pressures to conform and give examples that our “audience” can best understand.

As dancers, we all experience some sort of negative attitude toward what we do. I asked the dancers if anyone had ever responded positively, and if that was surprising to them. Everyone told me that they had experienced some sort of praise for what they are doing as a dancer. All of the dancers said that positive feedback usually comes from people who are well-versed in the field or had seen a dance performance before, which I guess makes sense. One dancer was touched when someone mentioned that ballet provides invaluable training and that she was very lucky to have that. Another dancer told me that although she has received an ample amount of support, she wished that someone would recognize that she is studying something that will enrich the culture in our community, and how neat that is. The replies to my questions led me to believe that as dancers, we crave to be recognized for our purpose and dedication to our art.

I pushed a little further in my interview questions, asking if these general remarks have ever caused my respondents to think what they are studying isn’t valuable. I was pleasantly surprised that every single dancer I interviewed replied with a solid “no.” They each explained that they have never been shaken by the arrogance of others. Just because someone thinks that being a dancer means that you twirl around on poles for fun all day doesn’t mean that that is our reality. Our study of dance is valuable, we chose to pursue it because we love it. We can’t expect others to hold dance as highly as we do because they personally don’t.

One dancer was very forgiving about the negative comments. She explained that the negative comments and annoying generalizations come from people who honestly don’t know anything about dance. That’s okay—unless they refuse to respect it. There are a lot of majors and industries that I know absolutely nothing about, so how can I assume that everyone that I interact with is going to know a thing or two about what I do? This dancer’s viewpoint on the situation

made me reflect on how I typically respond to others and made me think of ways I could better explain what I do. How can I let people in on my passion instead of sitting back and feeling offended?

So what do we do? How can we be proactive? It's obvious that there is a general lack of knowledge about dance, especially at a collegiate level. And it's clear that as dancers we possess a deep love for and confidence in what we do. So why don't we wear it proudly? We need to serve as educators for people who know nothing about our field. I asked one dancer what his response is when people have negative attitudes towards majoring in dance. He told me that sometimes he will redirect their judgements or questions back to their own areas of study as an attempt to show them that studying dance is not less than, nor different than studying any other subject.

I'm sure there are many different approaches to this, but I think the point is that we need to be confident and stand firm in our decision to pursue dance. Find your own meaning, your own style and approach, construct a sentence to use every time someone asks you about dance. We need to let go of the negative ideas about dance and take the opportunity to shine light on this wonderful art form that we have the privilege of participating in.

Resources

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