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Dance Major Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1z78j1f9>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 9(1)

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/D59154700

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Who Do We Welcome in Dance?

Does the dance world look for dancers with a specific type of narrative? Is there room for people who did not start dancing when they were two years old?

by Lenard Glenn Malunes

Dance is a privilege, and I think many people forget about that.

I grew up in a low-income area of the Philippines for about seven years until my father and I permanently moved to California to reunite with my mother. Growing up, my perspective on “work” and “having a dream job” was static and practical -- rooted in what I saw and remembered in the Philippines. In other words, people wanted financial security and the only pipeline was through medicine. The majority of my family works in healthcare; they also marry other healthcare workers and eventually highly encourage their children to pursue healthcare and the cycle continues. For the longest time, I thought that is what I wanted too until I started high school.

I blame my father for showing and giving me the gift of dance. In my hometown, dancing was a way to celebrate traditional Pilipinx/o folk dances and/or socially to have a good time with one another. However, my dad and I would watch American pop music videos in our VCD -- and I thought dance was only that. At that time, our favorite artist to watch and appreciate was Michael Jackson; my dad even tried to encourage me to learn some of the choreography by watching his music videos repeatedly and I enjoyed every second of it. We shared this bond, and it was because of

dance that made it happen. I knew music videos and the commercial world existed when I was younger, but I never did think that was an opportunity for me or for someone like me. It was not my place, and it was not my space. In my family, if you enjoyed and practiced art, it was going to be strictly a hobby.

In high school, this extracurricular activity called color guard intrigued me. These students were not only movers, but they were learning how to dance with flags, rifles, and sabers; I thought it was the most mesmerizing thing. I expressed my interest in joining and when I started in the second semester of my freshman year, I had a challenging time getting to know my body. I never had to move this way and did not think I could ever surpass the fundamentals. Nonetheless, I fell in love with color guard and I stuck with it until I graduated. In my senior year, I auditioned to be in my high school's dance department when they hired a new teacher. I expressed to her how much I wanted to completely indulge in dance and how I want to pursue it in higher education. With her guidance, I was able to make the decision to apply, audition, and eventually attend UC Irvine as a dance major.

My first quarter was demanding. As a dancer

who had not trained in any concert styles, I felt like a toddler being thrown off at the deep end of the pool. Every class felt like something I just needed to get by without falling on my face, and if I did that, I called it a success. I always asked to be in-between my two friends so I could depend on someone knowing the combination. I felt like I did not belong. The classes (and sometimes the major) catered to people who were growing at a certain pace -- anyone who was not within that pace seemed like they were just off to the side. My perspective for each class had a mindset of being always behind, so I needed to do my best to catch up -- not knowing that there were a million other new things I have not learned yet. I did not know this art form and my body was unfamiliar with its mechanics and movement. It took a very long time and to this day I am still learning and my body is still adapting.

As an adult beginner in ballet, there were many things that I was grateful for. Dancers who have been training in ballet for a long time have expressed the harm that comes with the art form and from many times it has stemmed from the educators. Many have a way of teaching that perpetuates the appearance ideal of dancers; they should look a certain way and uphold that image for the rest of their careers. These unhealthy habits grow into a routine or a lifestyle and it is difficult to unlearn something that you have been taught was right since you were young. I was lucky to not be haunted by bad training early on as a young child and I am blessed to be in spaces that were changing and challenging traditional, harmful ways of pedagogy. I remember one of my first teachers emphasizing the importance of mindfulness and intention; they never mentioned anything

about looking a certain way. Their class was all about knowing what ballet feels like to you and to your body, constantly mentioning that everyone's bodily mechanics are unique and will present movement differently from one another.

As an adult learner, I wanted to hear other narratives like my own. I wanted to read dancers' stories and how they found their love for dance later on in life. However, I was happy to also encounter dance programs, training, and education that cater to adult beginners while mentioning how some educators enjoy teaching adults more than the youth.

Michael Cornell, Align Founder and CEO, founded the Align Ballet Method which provides quality ballet training to adults and has had student successes. Their veterans who have been studying with them for a couple years are now dancing in a semi-professional level and are training to perform classical repertoire. Melissa Weber, a faculty member at the CBT Dance Education Center and a dancer with the Charleston Ballet Theatre, states that she enjoys teaching adults than children because they are "easy-going and behave better." Weber also points out that it is easy to work with them and they retain more information since the brain matures as people get older. Kat Wildish also teaches a similar demographic at the Alvin Ailey Extension. Wildish encourages educators to "meet them where they are at" and to keep in mind they want to be treated with respect and to have fun also! She centers her class around the element of play, comfort, and artistry which then the space naturally grows to a

community where people can express themselves authentically. Some adults are limited by their body capabilities and age so Wildish is very mindful about what she wants her students to gain. The Ailey Citigroup Theater in NYC offers performance opportunities for adults and non-professionals to allow them to feel all the emotions as a professional dancer: “the grind, the excitement, the thrills, the rewards.” Wildish remembers the feeling of being moved by the dancers and always brings her tears of joy.

When people find something special they can feel like themselves in, it becomes a safe haven for that individual. Sometimes they do not want the full-on career of being in a professional company or a world-renowned choreographer, they just need to know that there is a place for them in the dance world.

It has been wonderful reading narratives about adults who discovered their passion for dance later in life as well as meeting some peers in my class who have gone through a similar journey. Although these opportunities and epiphanies are wonderful, I think one of the solutions for letting everyone get the chance to experience dance is by building bridges; accessibility to these resources allow dance and any other art to be more equitable. Many homes do not see the importance of what the arts can do for a person because they prioritize household basic needs. I hope to see dance become more available to low-income communities through student outreach, after-school programs, guest artists, and much more. Although I found dance later on, I appreciate my family for choosing the career paths they have and all the sacrifices they

made along the way to get us where we are today.

So again, is there a place for people like me?

The answer is yes and there is hope to see it transform to a place available for anyone. Things will unfold the way they should, no matter how old you are, where you are, what you look like, the list goes on. If you want to know what you can do in this art, go see for yourself. Every dancer’s journey is special and you get to decide what kind of role dance plays in your life.

Dance is a privilege as well as a gift and I believe everyone should have the opportunity to try if they are curious.

Resources:

Di Orio, Laura. "Teaching Dance to Adults." *Dance Informa Magazine*, 3 Oct. 2012, www.danceinforma.com/2012/10/02/teaching-dance-to-adults/.

"BALLET FOR ADULTS ARRIVES IN ORANGE COUNTY." *Align Ballet Method Official Site*, 12 Dec. 2018, alignballetmethod.com/ballet-for-adults-arrives-in-orange-county/.



Lenard Glenn Malunes expects to complete his BA in Dance and Social Ecology in 2022. Malunes keeps an open eye and heart to see where dance will take him in the future.