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The Merits of Competition Dance

Despite potential downsides, dancers can find opportunities and meaningful experiences that help them in the dance world and beyond.

by mia simonović

There are many criticisms of competition dance, especially from academia. In my experience, it is common to hear university educators dismiss competitive dance as something vapid and exploitative. This can create an apologist attitude from dancers who predominantly received their training from a competition studio. Should they have to feel shame about their dance background?

I have plenty of my own criticisms of the competition dance world, but here, I would like to hone in on how its dancers exemplify positive traits from their involvement in competitions and conventions. For example, in my 15 years of teaching, I've observed that dancers from competition studios are more well-rounded, courageous, athletic, and skillful than other dancers. Because they face so much criticism in academia, I want to honor and validate their training and life experience. What can we learn from this type of dance education and its dancers?

I have spent most of my dance career making work in experimental, improvisational capacities, which isn't a sphere associated with commercial competition dance. I am a freelancer who has presented not only on traditional stages but also galleries, museums, warehouses, and festivals. I am a gender-non-conforming person, interested in meditation and social justice. I advocate for all-bodies-welcome dance classes and sliding-scale options when I teach. I have also been a member of dance companies in San Francisco and Los Angeles. But my origin story is the common suburban cliché: taking ballet and tap at a local dance studio that emphasized success at competitions? In Southern California, more likely than not, private studios are portals into competition dance.

The cringe-worthy side of competitive, the one emphasized by television, unfortunately highlights some ugly truths: tacky sequined costumes, overly animated facial expressions on stage, hypersexualization of young dancers, white supremacy, forced gendering, fatphobia, racism, ableism, and many other forms of abuse and dysfunction present in our Western, colonial, capitalist society. Travis Wall (*So You Think You Can Dance* star and *Break the Floor* faculty) was investigated in 2021 after "allegations of widespread sexual harassment and predatory behavior" in his interaction with students. Abby Lee Miller (*Dance Moms*) was sued by one of her former students for physical and psychological abuse. My own ballet teacher, Quincy Jacinto, was arrested in 2022 for sexual abuse of a student.

The risks often found in the competition world are real, but they have not gone unnoticed by the dance community, which is now advocating for reform. These risky environments may be on their way toward change, especially given the presence of organizations like DanceSafe (<https://www.instagram.com/thedancesafe/>); and Embody, a nonprofit that seeks to make their convention and competition events safer and more inclusive than the commercial models.

OK, so if competition dance can be so awful and unsafe, why do so many people do it? What do they gain? Joe Lanteri, founder of New York City Dance Alliance, estimates that around 20,000 dancers attend his events a year. “A report by the research firm IBISWorld found that in 2012, dance competitions alone generated nearly \$500 million in revenue” states the *New York Times*. In the United States, going to a dance competition is like going to a sporting event, beauty pageant, and pop festival all in one. These competitions last a weekend and are frequently coupled with a convention. A convention is made up of several classes a day from the morning to mid-afternoon where all the participants are expected to train and socialize before they spend the remaining daylight hours into the night competing on stage. These events are focused on dance education and community networking.

Yes, there is a fee, it is commercial, but it is also an investment in a platform to train, get noticed, and network. These conventions and competitions also offer full and partial scholarships for their events. In fact, I danced on scholarship at my home studios and received sponsorships to participate in competitions/conventions. Most of these events have a scholarship audition that typically covers the next year’s costs, but some have grown and partnered with prestigious higher education institutions. New York City Dance Alliance is known for their generous funding, with their website stating that “scholarships usually range from \$10,000-\$150,000 each” for dance students to pursue college. According to their own figures, their former students are represented in over 40 dance programs, such as Julliard, USC, CalArts, Pace, and Marymount Manhattan.

Dance competitions put young dancers in touch with representatives from colleges, entertainment agents, and professional choreographers. Who is teaching at these things? The best in the business. Dancers train with highly regarded and seasoned industry professionals, many of whom work in highly visible venues, like Brian Freedman (Britney Spears), Tony Testa (Janet Jackson), Wade Robson (Justin Timberlake), Mia Michaels (SYTYCD), Parris Goebel (Rihanna), LaurieAnn Gibson (Lady Gaga), you get the idea. Many competition circuits also give teaching opportunities to younger artists who are dancing for performers like Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, Justin Timberlake, etc. For young dancers, this is a rare opportunity to train and be seen if you do not have access to Los Angeles dance classes and events.

I will never forget my first dance convention and competition, LA Dance Magic, in 2002. It was held at a Marriott or Hyatt or something by LAX. My mom dropped me off. and I was left to navigate the event on my own. That’s right, not all of us have “dance moms.” The sheer number of dancers in the space was overwhelming. I took classes in the Teen Room with around 300 other students. The exposure to dance teachers and styles outside of the ones at my home studio,

the exposure to hundreds of young dancers with their own personal style and energy, and the importance placed on performance quality was seminal in my pre-professional training. The interactions with other dancers were an opportunity to build camaraderie, diplomacy, and even lifelong friendships. There, we were not just competitors, we were peers, classmates striving for a common goal to improve our movement practice.

Competition dance teaches participants to be humble winners and also graceful losers, because there is an expectation to celebrate and congratulate your peers' achievements and for them to return the favor. Dancers congratulate each other, practicing social skills of affirmation and praise. They watch and learn from each other and are a part of one another's evolution. Inspiration, admiration, and motivation circulate, continuing to deepen their practice. It is intoxicating.

When a dancer competes, the faculty and industry moguls are the judges. They have their eyes on each dancer, with a microphone recording an audio file of uninterrupted feedback that gets taken back to the studio to be applied to training. These used to be sent to the studio on cassettes in plastic bags, later turning into CDs, then DVDs, and now I'm sure it's available instantly on some app or something. This is tremendously valuable information for a growing dancer, even if they don't pursue a career in the industry. These faculty members watch each dancer grow and offer advice to help their technique and performance quality. Judges remember dancers from the year before, maybe not by name, but by movement, and they notice change. To compare it to athletic training, it would be like having several of the best coaches in the sport giving individualized feedback to each athlete. Instead of having one coach, dancers are given temporary access to many. Having successful professional commercial dancers provide wisdom and knowledge to young aspiring dancers is invaluable.

In the messiness of consumerist exploitation, dancers at competitions find camaraderie, inspiration, diplomacy, specialized feedback, access to important people, networking opportunities, friendship, development of self, socialization, creativity, and experimentation with new movement.

In my 15 years of teaching, I have trained competition dancers, pre-professional ballet dancers, aerial artists/circus performers, and recreational practitioners young and old. A major attribute competition dancers possess that sets them apart is that they are open to learning any style or genre. They are brave. They understand the value in different ways of moving, even if it doesn't come easily. They might be best in hip hop, but they know how important taking ballet is. There are contemporary dancers who have never taken tap, now putting on someone's tap shoes to try to figure it out. The reserved, introverted student is trying to come out of their shell in a high energy jazz or musical theater class. The moody, bitchy teenager can find tenderness within a lyrical sequence. It is sink or swim, but there is an understanding that all movement practices are significant and welcoming to try.

The more diverse a dancer can be these days, the better dancer they are. This reverence for diversity in movement, being a jack-of-all-trades, is highly coveted not only in competition dance, but in the dance world as a whole. Susan L. Foster suggests that dancers have had to increasingly train in different techniques because the professional dance field was becoming more “mobile.” Her description of this “hired body” is due to dancers no longer traditionally sticking to one company, but frequently changing companies and doing freelance work, gigs. Dancers are expected to accommodate various demands by various choreographers in various projects. Knowing more dance genres equals the potential to get more jobs. But, outside of marketing the body, the learning of new skills along with the interest of unfamiliar experiences, teaches dancers about life. What does this belief and practice do for those who do not pursue commercial dance, or even dance at all?

Those who start branching out from the competition dance world, those who go to dance in college, even those who do not pursue dancing at all, are better prepared to take on whatever comes their way in their lives. They adapt. This can trickle out into different movement practices like sports, gym exercises, or yoga, but also into their states of being. When things change, these dancers have the tools they need. Quickly, efficiently, with camaraderie, diplomacy, and grace, they are more equipped for the ups and downs in adulthood and are proactive, disciplined, and confident. They can accept discomfort, consistently practice bravery; they remain curious. In fact, these are qualities all dancers need, but I am arguing that it is more embraced, practiced, and understood by the competition dancer. These dancers are in a practice of constant vulnerability. They are seekers. They want to continue improving themselves to be multi-dimensional dancers, artists, and people.

I’ve found that in my academic experience, competition dance is considered a bit vapid and generally looked down upon. My first day of grad school a professor asked me about my dance journey, and I began to tell them that I grew up doing competition dance. Their response, in surprise, was, “Most people don’t admit that.” Why not?

Competition dance is not usually something I advocate for, but I can’t diminish its merits. Whether I like it or not, it has played a huge role in my dancing and development of self. And objectively, it has helped prepare me for the uncertainty in my career(s), even today as a graduate student. In the competition dance world, I was given teaching, performing, and choreographic opportunities that helped me support myself. Along the way, I worked multiple jobs in the service industry, administration, and even tech, and in all of them, I used the adaptation skills I learned from growing up doing competition dance.

My first experience as an Artistic Director for a youth company was at a competition dance studio. I also found myself in a position to give back to young dancers and became a mentor. *This is a community.* I’ve been called upon for consulting, letters of recommendation, referrals for work. All this supplemented my experimental, more authentic, and improvisational work. At

my college, we currently have students who are working in the convention circuit as assistants to faculty. They are able to supplement their education and living expenses because of a competition dance opportunity. They are continuing to network and grow in a professional dance space outside of the university that will lead to job opportunities.

I would like to see more acceptance and empathy for dancers from the competition world in the entire dance community. Less judgment is needed surrounding the type of dance world a dancer came from or currently occupies. We are all sharing and exploring space. The fact is that all dance is important. Movement practices teach action and agency. If the dance community as a whole continues to fracture our field into different subcategories and hierarchies, we will never be able to unify in our diverse skills and elevate the importance of dance in society. Maybe it starts with more acceptance of competition dance. Alongside all the messiness, corruption, and exploitation, dancers are still able to grow, adapt, share, create, and thrive... and isn't that a metaphor for life as a whole?

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