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Rivalries, insecurities, and dance competition—is there any escaping the pressure?

Here's how to find a balance when you're competing with yourself and others

by Maddie Simmons

There will always be competition in dance, whether it is between you and your peers or strictly with yourself. With TV shows like *Dance Moms* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, as well as the increasing popularity of dance competitions, I feel that the competitive nature of dance has become overemphasized. Although being competitive can be useful in that it pushes you to strive for success, it can also have detrimental effects on your self-confidence and can lead you to lose the enjoyment that dance can bring.

Let's be honest, how many times have you watched someone else dance and thought to yourself, "Man, I wish I could dance like her"? This comparison to your peers can happen regularly as a subconscious habit, but of course we did not come into the studio as little toddlers in pink tutus already comparing ourselves to each other. So where does this mindset stem from? And how can we learn to work with competitiveness so that it benefits us as dance artists?

At a young age, we find out about the competitive nature of dance. We all know what it's like to dream of getting a star role in a show. We practice countless hours, perfecting the steps and developing the character before going in for a big audition. Take *The Nutcracker*, for example; I remember auditioning for "Clara" at just seven years old, and how devastated I was when I did not get the part. Maybe you have experienced similar feelings when you didn't get a part you wanted, or were torn between feeling discouraged and feeling happy for a friend who actually *did* get the part. Maybe you have said to yourself, "What does she have that I don't?"

Such experiences can cause you to begin comparing yourself to the dancers around you. Or maybe you've been on top of the world for getting a part you wanted, but these feelings quickly turned to guilt when you notice the other dancer's disappointment. We are not always taught how to cope with the competitive aspect of dance, and as we grow up we often develop this mindset of always comparing ourselves to our peers. There is no denying that the field of dance is a competitive one, and this may not always be a good thing.

One downside of having an overly competitive approach to dance is that it takes away from the artistry and enjoyment of dancing. If you are too busy trying to be better than the person next to you, you may not be putting in all of the effort you can towards improving yourself as a dance artist. With the rise of dance competitions, studios have begun to focus on teaching the acrobatic elements of dance, such as tricks and turns, instead of focusing on the artistic side. In an article featured in the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* that asks whether dance competitions are compatible with the artistic ideals of dance, student Michele Zandman of The College of New Jersey, Ewing, states that "dance should be an activity a person does for his or her own enjoyment...it is one thing to perform a dance for others to enjoy and know they appreciate the artistic value behind it, but it is an entirely different thing to turn the art style into a competition" (2007 JOPERD).

Now, this isn't to say that dance competitions do not have their benefits, but I feel that if dancers are only trained to perform in a competition setting, it will affect how they learn, behave, and perform. When you are taught to always push to do the most turns and highest jumps, you might not pay much attention to the in-between steps, which are just as important. I also wonder if being exposed to such a competitive side of dance at a young age could cause dancers to become overly competitive with themselves and their peers offstage as well. Still, there's a lot to gain from a competition background, and I admire the skill of these dancers.

So what are the benefits of being competitive? One thing is that it pushes you to continually strive towards improvement and to be a better dancer than you were the day before. If you approach your dance training with a feeling of satisfaction in your ability, you're not likely to see much improvement. But if you see every opportunity as a challenge to better yourself, you will notice drastic changes in the way that you dance. This also ties in with being competitive with your own self and having a strong work ethic every day in class. Something as simple as staying five minutes after ballet to work on that one tricky combination, or using downtime between exercises to practice difficult steps, could really pay off in the long run.

Dance author and educator Janice Lapointe-Crump argues for the benefit that dance competitions have on their participants. She says these "contest[s] may spur students to go beyond technical skills and raw talent to artistically move hearts and minds" (Lapointe-Crump). She also argues that although competition dance usually emphasizes virtuosic steps like turns and leaps, it can also focus on the artistry, musicality, and vitality. I think that there are definite benefits that come from a competitive dance background; it's just a matter of finding balance between the physicality and the artistry of what you are performing.

Competition is something that will continue to be very present in the dance world, and you can either let it discourage you or learn to use it to your benefit. The key is to find balance between pushing yourself to be a competitive dancer and stepping back to just enjoy dance for what it is. The Latin root of "compete" is *competere*, which means "to seek or strive together" (Lapointe-Crump). Keeping this in mind can help encourage healthy competition within a dance department by striving to succeed together. I challenge you find ways in which you can use competition for your own benefit and the benefit of your peers. We watch our peers in class all the time, but rarely do we comment on what we see or think. A simple statement such as "you looked really clean in that combination" could really make someone's day and boost his or her self-confidence. Don't be afraid to compliment each other in class, and even give each other constructive criticism (when appropriate, of course).

We must lift each other up, not put each other down. It is so easy to become victim of "fear of being judged" in the studio environment when you are surrounded by so many talented dance artists, but you cannot let yourself succumb to this fear. The classroom should be a place where we can experiment with our artistry and try new things without feeling like we will be judged in the process. And the truth of the matter is most of the time your peers do not care if you mess up an exercise. Everyone is focusing on his or her own artistry, so there is no need to hold back.

The reality of dance is that we strive toward achieving perfection but are fully aware that it is unobtainable. How do we work with this? We must remind ourselves that we are given this wonderful gift of dance and must not forget how truly lucky we are to be able to do what we love, every day.

Works Cited

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