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An unforeseeable career path: concert dance, Broadway, and commercial dance

Have you ever asked yourself how your dance career will unfold? Will you dance in your dream company or land a major commercial dance gig? If my 20-year performance career is any indication, buckle up and plan for the unplanned.

by Marc Spaulding

Divine timing and the requisite talent are no brainers when it comes to what you need to secure major dance employment. However, most people underestimate the importance of being fearless. When a door opens in this industry, you have to be courageous enough to walk through it. Thankfully, I have always had the determination to do so.

In the summer of 1999, I had just finished my sophomore year of college at the University of the Arts, when I received a dance opportunity that was completely unexpected and outside of my narrow focus of concert dance companies in New York. At the recommendation of my then-roommate, I was hired to perform as a backup dancer for the multi-talented singer and actress Raven Symone. Although my first informal experience with dance was through hip-hop, it was no longer a priority to me. In fact, I had put hip-hop on the back burner to concentrate on my conservatory training (ballet, modern, and jazz).

Little did I know, within weeks, I would be fully immersed in the commercial dance world. I flew to Atlanta, Georgia and began learning choreography for Raven Symone's tour.

Soon after, I was on the road. As our tour work started to gain momentum, it became clear to me, I was going to have to take a



leave of absence from school. Thankfully, I had the support of both my parents. My six-month adventure included: performing as an opening act on the NSYNC “*No Strings Attached Tour*,” a nation-wide military tour, promotional performances on local broadcast television, and a world peace concert performance held in Bangkok, Thailand. At the completion of the tour, I promptly returned to school where I graduated on-time with the rest of my class.

Perspective Shift

Working with Raven Symone was a major catalyst for me to move forward. It expanded my realm of possibilities. I now had a much larger scope of what I thought was possible in my dance career. So, what

was next? Would I continue down the path of commercial dance, or follow my original plan and pursue company work? This was a legitimate question for me because the roots of my dance training heavily influenced my values. My teachers did not discourage commercial dance but they certainly did not encourage it. Joining a professional dance company was the ultimate prize.

Although, I coveted joining a company during my senior year of college, I auditioned for everything. I felt like I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. My friends and I would routinely catch the Greyhound bus from Philadelphia to New York, in hopes of landing a dance job. It was truly an exciting time in my life. I had little to worry about other than achieving my dance goals. My relentless pursuit of employment paid off fairly quickly. Two months after graduation, I was offered a contract as a full company member of *Donald Byrd/The Group* in New York. Over the subsequent four years, I performed with two major dance companies, Donald Byrd and *Philadanco*, and also with numerous seasoned freelance choreographers.

Obstacles and Self-doubt

Obstacles present themselves in everyone's life, and I was no different. Sure, I had experienced a taste of professional success in college while dancing for Raven Symone, and immediately following school with the Byrd company and *Philadanco*. However, things were about to change. In 2005, I left *Philadanco* in hopes of joining the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, but it did not happen. I was devastated and filled with doubt. All of the excitement and jubilation I felt a few years earlier was slowly fading away. To be honest, I was so determined to get into that company that I didn't consider how I would feel, or what to

do next if it didn't work out. After all, I was on their radar, as I had come very close to securing a contract in previous auditions. And most of my early training in high school had prepared me for this moment. I knew the movement aesthetic, culture, and I had the talent. This situation reminded me of something I learned from Raven's former manager, "talent is not indicative of success."

Once the reality set in I had to come up with a plan B. I spent long days working at the *Sansha* NYC dance store in Manhattan and running all over town to rehearse with various pick-up projects. Because of my pride and ego, I refused to ask my parents for help. I was living the true meaning of a "starving artist" lifestyle. In hindsight it is exactly what I needed. Through this experience I developed more humility and a deeper appreciation for my personal artistry.

In 2006, I took a leap of faith and went to a "cattle call" audition for the feature film *Hairspray*. After several call-backs, and a few weeks of anxiously waiting, I landed a feature dance ensemble role in the movie. We filmed in Toronto, Canada for six-months. During my time on set, I learned that the many clichés about filmmaking were true, like "hurry up and wait," "time is money," and how important it was to "just hit your mark!" I also grew an appreciation for all the unsung heroes on set. Working alongside a myriad of professional experts, I noticed how all the different elements come together in real time. Every day I was surrounded by art department members, camera operators, sound and lighting experts, wardrobe personnel, choreographers, and of course, the director.

Once I finished filming *Hairspray*, I returned to New York. What was next? I loved concert dance, but I knew that chapter

was over for me, at least in a conventional sense. Working on a movie musical sparked my interest in dancing in musical theatre productions. The only problem was, I could not sing! Knowing that I didn't have a conventional background in musical theatre, I had to act fast. Over the next few months, I took regular voice lessons and auditioned for several regional productions (outside of New York) to gain experience.

Eventually, I cracked the code. I received my first ensemble dance opportunity in a regional production of *Dreamgirls*. Later that year, I secured a role as Pepe in the International tour of *Westside Story*, followed by my Broadway debut in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*. I didn't know how my musical theatre pursuit would end up, but I wasn't afraid to find out. Eventually, I realized that performing in musical theatre productions was not my final artistic destination, but it taught many valuable lessons. I experienced the magic of merging singing, acting, and dance together to convey a story. And, I learned the professionalism and dedication required to

perform eight shows a week. The many skill sets that I acquired as a performer remain with me today. In fact, I stand firmly on them as I pursue my MFA degree in dance at the University of California Irvine.

Final thoughts

There is a place for everyone in dance; the issue is, does that place align with what you imagined? There isn't a singular formula for success in life—it looks different for everyone. Ultimately you have to take chances and understand that you are responsible for your own career. It definitely may not unfold as you originally planned. Be open to change, and when you are presented with failure, have faith that you are enough. You have the skills and the training to be successful. In retrospect, the silver lining of my dance career was not getting into the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. This one missed opportunity led to several amazing opportunities. The continuum of failure and success is inherent in every life journey.

Marc Spaulding is an MFA graduate student in UC Irvine's Claire Trevor School of the Arts. He has performed in major dance companies, on Broadway, in Television & Film, and presented choreographic works throughout the United States and Canada.

Helpful Resources for Prospective Collegiate Dance Majors:

A Career Guide for Dance Majors, www.winthrop.edu

General Dance. www.datausa.io

Kinetz, Erika. Practice, Practice, Practice. Go to College? Maybe. *The New York Times*, December 21, 2005. www.nytimes.com

Occupational Outlook Handbook. US Bureau of Labor Statistics, www.bls.gov