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Author

Lubovitch, Lar

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Undergraduate

Letter to a Young Dancer

No formula exists to become a dance artist, but one modern dance legend offers both inspirational and practical advice about what you can do to succeed

by Lar Lubovitch

I know who you are. You are the one amongst many who will make the leap from being a dance student to being a Dancer. You have existed for hundreds of years. You are part of a tradition that has been passed by hand from dancer to dancer to dancer. You have been living and breathing on the energy dreams are made of. It is a powerful source and there is nothing illusory about it. Trust it. Dreams have been the origin of all Art and the inspiration that has transformed impossible fantasies into verifiable realities.

The puzzle for you now is how to actualize the dream, how to utilize the formidable energy of dreams which, by the way, is not a gift given to everyone. Among those to whom this gift has been given are fewer still who have the skill and courage to bring it out of one's mind's eye and into the visible world. I am glad to say that you will not be able to Google the answer you are looking for. The internet cannot tell you how to become a dancer. You will need to consult your own imagination. You will need to create a way to create reality from the stuff of dreams. Your dreams—your realities, no one else's. You will have to invent yourself. There are no precise models to follow.

To gain access to the thing that you want, you must create experience. Your experience will be guided by the choices that you make as you continue inventing yourself. I do not mean to make it sound mystical or out of reach. In fact, there are practical choices to make. First, you must choose a city to go to where serious dance is happening. Where are the best dancers taking class? Choose that class and you will meet many young people who share your goal and many dancers who are better than you, who can inspire you to aim higher. Dance with anybody who asks you to, perhaps other young dancers who are experimenting with choreography. Go to see every dance performance you possibly can. Hold in your mind's eye the dancer you want to be. At one of those performances you will see dancers on stage doing the dancing you want to be doing. Perhaps it is a specific choreographer in whose work you recognize yourself. If that happens, then choose to align yourself in any way you can with that company. Are they offering any intensive courses? Are they holding auditions? Send a resumé. Where are those dancers taking class? Go there. Speak with them, be seen.

Any dancer or creator wants to know that you love their work. Tell them. Don't be timid, but don't be obnoxious either. If you have the opportunity to audition for that choreographer, or any other, do not push your way to the front. Dance wherever the situation places you. The center of attention is the place where the best dancer is dancing. If that is you, you will be noticed wherever you are. Be collegial, dance respectfully with the dancers with whom you are sharing the audition. Do not think of it as a competition. It is an experience shared by many dancers who want the same thing you want. Sharing that space in a generous manner shows integrity. That will be noticed and is just like being in a company where everybody is working together towards the same objective.

If you do not get what you want, do not despair. The three things you need most to survive the intensity of your desire and the many disappointments that may likely be part of your experience are courage, courage, and courage. If you have to pay your way with a job outside of dance, remember you are doing it to support the thing you love most. It has to be the thing you love most, because that is where the courage you need to keep going is generated.

As to what a choreographer is looking for in a dancer, I can only speak for myself. Choreographers, like dancers, are self-invented. The best ones have devised a way to make a dance that is uniquely their own and through that process have usually discovered the qualities they search for in a dancer. I cannot make a dance unless I have a dancer who offers me inspiration. I do not want a dancer who acts like a submissive “tool,” waiting to be told what to do and how to do it. That is student-dancing. I am concentrating on imagining the dance and don't want to interrupt my thoughts to teach them how to dance or answer questions. I am making it up and can't answer questions about something that does not yet exist. That will come later after the dance is finished. I need a co-creator, another imagination to draw from besides my own. When I offer a phrase of movement to that dancer, they show it back to me with more than I had expected or asked for. They are vulnerable, as am I, and feel exposed. That is a natural part of attempting to create something from nothing. It's like free-falling without a net. Trust is called for and the dancer must be willing to risk being wrong and not take it as criticism.

Often, I don't know what I am looking for until I see it. To arrive at that moment, the dancer will have been "wrong" many times. It's just part of the process, like a scientist trying many experiments before he finds the answer. The experiments don't take it personally, nor should the dancer. The most creative dancers live for and love this process while those who feel judged can find it depressing. It is best for them to work with someone who tells them what to do and how to feel. Many excellent choreographers do work that way—I am just not good at that. The dancer I value is a movement poet. They intuitively invest movement with depth and gravity. They recite a line of dance with imagination beyond what the steps alone possess. Steps are empty vessels until a dancer infuses them with meaning and physical poetry. I don't think this can be learned. I think it is inborn and comes naturally from a place that is not the conscious mind. It's a gift. I have found that many dancers have this gift, but have not tapped into it. The dancer I am looking for can't resist it. It's automatic. It's who they are.

When I am looking for a dancer, I do not hold open auditions, sometimes known as "cattle calls." I find that scary and uncomfortable. It brings out a competitiveness in some individuals that cause them to push much too hard, and I find that unappealing. I am not looking for someone to "kill it," just dance it, with composure, grace, and a sense of self. I do however have auditions by invitation. Those attending have been recommended by dancers with whom I am already working, by former company members, or teachers whose judgement I value. Sometimes I have seen them dancing elsewhere and invite them myself. I also look at resumés that are sent to me and invite those whose experience implies potential.

When I have gathered a group of dancers together, one of my company members will conduct the audition so that I can sit and watch. We will have chosen a long difficult phrase from one of my dances. If you are the dancer I am looking for, I may very well have noticed you warming up

before the dancing has even begun. I can't explain why. It's something in my eye that finds you. I don't care about your height, your face, your race, or body type. It's the way that you dance that matters. I am looking for the dancer with movement imagination who imbues the phrase with something poetic. It's a mystery, but I know it when I see it. My eye will go to them wherever they are in the room. On the practical side, I will need you to have extreme technical ability, because my work is very demanding. You will have a fair amount of time to learn the phrase, but not a lot, because seeing if you are a fast study is also quite important.

Early on, it is obvious to me who is qualified, but I would never be so rude as to dismiss anyone before the audition is over. That you are there, allowing yourself to be so vulnerable, and dancing your heart out commands my complete respect. I may not be able to offer you work, but I will want the audition to have been a rewarding experience for you. When everyone knows the phrase well enough, I will then take over and "coach." This is probably one of the most crucial things for me to know about a dancer. I will coach them to think differently about what they are doing. I will talk about things like style, dynamics, interpretation, spacing. It is vital to me that the dancer can demonstrate the intelligence and creativity to change what they are doing and hear what I am saying.

If I am fortunate enough to find a dancer in possession of all the above mentioned attributes, I thank the great unknown that I have found them and they have found me.

Best wishes,
Lar Lubovitch

For over fifty years, Lar Lubovitch has choreographed dances celebrated for their musicality, humanity, and rhapsodic style, for his own company, as well as major dance companies around the world, including American Ballet Theatre, the Paris Opera Ballet, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and the Royal Danish Ballet. A winner of many prestigious awards, he has also choreographed for Broadway and ice dancers. Called "a national treasure" by Variety and named "one of the ten best choreographers" by the New York Times, Lubovitch is now a distinguished professor at the University of California, Irvine, staging his masterworks for their dancers, as well as continuing his involvement with the professional dance world.

A version of this essay was written in 2015 at the request of Trey MacIntyre, for his students at the North Carolina School of the Arts.