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The pathway into dance for one reluctant boy

No one likes to tempt the gods of stereotypes at an early age, but what happens when a passion for dance just doesn't go away?

by Michael Menzer

I wore white ankle socks and running shorts to my first ballet class. Up until this point I had done all of the activities a young man was supposed to do (and then some): baseball, soccer, karate, track and cross country, piano, violin, cello. I was sixteen years old and freshly out of the closet, though, and I'd realized that it was high time for me to pursue dance.

Looking back, I ask myself again and again why my parents never once thought to put me in a dance class. My sister took ballet lessons, I did baseball. I put on dance shows in our living room, my parents put me into karate. I was invited by the choreographer for our elementary school talent show (it was a fully choreographed affair, trust me) to come take lessons at her studio. In response my parents told me that "some people just want to take advantage of you." They signed me up for soccer.

And once it became clear that I was a little more effeminate than the other boys, around fifth grade, I turned my back on the idea of me as a dancer. *I wasn't about to give people any more ammunition against me.* There was already enough about me that screamed "homosexual," even at the ripe age of eleven. Funny how that works. Dancing would have just been the straw that broke my back.

But as a newly liberated teenager, the world was my oyster. All of a sudden, nobody could make fun of me for being a dancer, nooo, because that—that would be *homophobic*. Yes, the perfect defense. I quit

running (this was easy; I hated running), and I quit cello (this was harder but I knew what I had to do. Sacrifices had to be made).

I had heard of a ballet academy that was not too far from my house, one that a girl from my orchestra took lessons at. Luckily for me, lessons were free for boys! (Penis privilege begins at an early age in the dance world, I see this now.) Unluckily, my sister had had a bad experience there. Casting aside my mother's apprehension, I begged her to let me take lessons anyway. Thankfully, she didn't try putting me into another sport that time! But I walked in completely unprepared for a ballet class. My mom, after all, had seen how quickly I had dropped everything else. She was *not* about to drop ten dollars on a pair of ballet shoes just for me to quit somewhere down the line. (Look at me now. Eat it, mom.)

Here's the thing, though: as common as it is for boys to start late, there's no guide on *how* to do it. I had to research the ins and outs of dance belts on my own, and had to teach myself to do boy's stage makeup. Nobody was there to hold my hand like they do in baby ballet. Meanwhile, imagine me, in a pair of white ankle socks and running shorts (my daily class regalia well into the first few months of my dance training) in a room full of middle schoolers far better than me. Their legs went above 90 degrees, and I still can't do that. They had exquisite turnout, and I'm still never sure I'm using the right muscles. It was a constant game of playing catch-up, and while I had a knack for ballet, probably from watching my sister

all those years, I was still an awkward teenage boy, in too far over his head.

Looking back, despite the significant growth I made in the two years I spent at the studio, I really don't think I was utilized well or trained to my full potential. Thankfully, my long love affair with ballet is over now, but I can't help wondering what could have been if I had been challenged more and coddled less. At this point in my life, though, I've learned to be at peace with how "my dance journey" has progressed. I've recognized that ballet simply is not the path for me, and

that's okay! I'm a little too short to be the next James Whiteside anyway. (I do still think about becoming a Trock though.)

Where does this leave us, ultimately? Let me say this: dance teachers, challenge your boys. Challenge your late bloomers to be all that they can. Don't let them fall behind, don't let them get away with anything less than their full potential. They'll thank you for it one day, and if they don't, they probably weren't cut out for it anyway. Or they'll simply become a postmodern dancer, like me? To each their own.

Michael Menzer graduated as a dance major at the University of California, Irvine, in June 2020.