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Perspectives on Dance from a “Non-Dancing” Dance Mom

A daughter interviews her mother and finds out about an unknown swing dance past

by Jill Oates

My mom, Kristie Oates, is not the typical “dance mom.” When I was young she did not encourage me to take ballet classes, had no idea about the difference between a good or bad arabesque, and did not understand or desire to be involved in the world of pink tights and tutus. She did not grow up taking dance classes like ballet or tap, and would not consider herself a dancer, although she has had quite a bit of experience with social dancing as a young adult. However, as I continued to do ballet throughout high school and completed a Bachelor’s of Fine Arts in dance at college, my mom’s views on dance grew and evolved through a combination of her experience dancing and her time spent as the mother of a dancer.

Growing up, dance was not a large part of Kristie’s life. She never took dance classes or saw her parents dance, although she had heard stories of her dad being good at dancing while roller skating. For her, dance was associated with school dances or what you saw in musicals, while forms like ballet were foreign, associated in her mind with slow music and little action onstage. As a child in junior high, she remembered dances as times filled with hoping and waiting to be asked to dance. Those times were mostly spent enjoying the music rather than being centered on the dancing. As Kristie continued into high school, she spent less time standing around waiting at the school dances and started to participate, but only to slow songs, not daring to dance on her own to the faster songs.

When Kristie was 20, dance started having a bigger role in her life. From 1982 to around 1991, she and her friends began to go to bars and do West Coast swing dance on the weekends. Swing dancing had been born in the 1920s and appealed to youth, as it was not only social entertainment but also a type of rebellion against higher authorities (Renshaw, 83). However, for Kristie swing dancing was less rebellion and more a way to connect to another person and the music in a distinct moment in time. While dance was not a large part of her childhood, music was, both at home and school. Kristie remembers music always being played at her house, and she learned to play various instruments from 4th grade through high school. Swing dancing became not just something that she did on the weekends to pass the time, but it became an integral part of her life, as a way to escape into another world through movement. “In some ways, it’s like a good novel,” she says, “A perfect escape from the stress and mundaneness of the real, day-to-day life.”

In the 1990s swing dance was revitalized in the United States as dancers in their 20s and 30s were drawn into its energy and excitement (Renshaw, 85). Kristie’s experiences aligned with the response of young adults throughout the country in this time period. For her, the connection to her partner determined the success or clumsiness of each of her dancing experiences. She started out by being taught by a strong leader as a partner, allowing her to feel free as she learned to move. However, this also led to her relying on her partner to know what they were doing instead of learning the technique and steps on her own. As a result, Kristie said, when with a good partner, “I felt like I was beautiful, that I could fly.” Dancing was a large part of her dating life, as a good way to connect and engage in conversations and helped her gain confidence when meeting new people. With a good partner, she says it was like “Slow Dancin,” by Johnny

Rivers, "...Swaying to the music, No one else in the whole wide world..." Through dancing, Kristie was able to lose herself into another world with her partner at the time.

On the other hand, she admitted that when she didn't have a strong partner to dance with she didn't even want to try dancing. When asked about her least favorite part about dancing, Kristie exclaimed, "My ineptness. I am uncoordinated and thus truly not very good." Even with the freeness she was able to experience with a good partner, she was very self-conscious and worried about whether her moves were acceptable to others who were watching if she didn't have a skilled partner who could lead. She says she stopped dancing because she didn't have anyone to dance with anymore, and she is not comfortable dancing with my dad, who is not a very good dancer. Reflecting on her attitude in the past, Kristie seemed to regret that she let worries about other peoples' reactions stop her from dancing and even seemed to consider the idea of returning to dancing with a more positive attitude.

Through her time social dancing, she learned a lot about herself as a person and formed a strong relationship and respect for social dancing as an art form. However, even after having over ten years of social dancing experience, Kristie claims that the biggest impact that dance has had in her life is through being a dance mom to me. Her experiences with swing dance and then taking me to ballet classes and watching dance performances for eleven years gave her different opinions about the dance styles. When asked if social dancing should be a part of university dance programs, Kristie confidently and quickly responded, "I think it should be mandatory. It too is an art and can provide students with another creative outlet as they perfect their skills in their chosen dance forms." This respect that she gained for social dance came up throughout our conversation. In her mind, the difference between social dance and codified dance forms is that there is a clear sense of joy and release in social dancing, compared to "the need for unrealistic perfection expectations in the codified dance forms." This isn't the typical stance that a "dance mom" has on the dance world, but her time doing social dance gave Kristie a larger appreciation for that world.

Even with her idea of codified dance forms as stricter and less enjoyable than social dance, being a part of my journey as a dancer allowed her to learn more about ballet than she ever thought was possible. Kristie described some of the big takeaways that she has learned from being a dance mom as, "I have learned how competitive it is, how precise dancers need to be, how athletic dancers are, how little monetary recognition they get for the work that they do, and that despite all of those things there will always be many competing for few jobs because passion refuses to be ignored."

While she may not have the passion I have for ballet, she has learned to respect and value more than just the music when watching a ballet performance. While the stereotype for most dance moms is that they need to step back and let their child decide if they love to dance, Kristie had to learn to find the value in a type of dance that she had never understood in order to connect with and fully support my dreams. As a teacher, she appreciated one of the most important lessons that dance can teach children: "I think persistence in the face of rejection or perceived failures is the ultimate way to success in all areas of life and wish I could somehow convey this message to all of my students."

Because I faced multiple rejections, injuries, and failures while dancing, Kristie was able to see how dance forced me to persist. She recognized the universality of this lesson for everyone in life, especially as a teacher for her students in her classroom. As a dance mom who never quite understood ballet, yet was able to find freedom in social dancing, Kristie Oates has a unique

perspective on the various values of social dance and ballet that have allowed her to appreciate dance in new ways.

Bibliography

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