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Dance Major Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/80p7085t>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 11(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/D511162288

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Is it okay to tell a dancer their arms look like a dead chicken?

Insults not only show a teacher's inability to provide constructive advice, they can actually damage a student's love for dance

by Lauren Duran

A dance teacher has the ability to share their love for dance with their students to inspire them to become the best version of themselves, but there are also some teachers who end up hurting their own students. Corrections are important when it comes to learning dance technique, for the safety of the dancer and so they can improve their overall performance, but when the correction leads to the dancer feeling embarrassed, insecure and upset, that's when the term "correction" turns into "destruction."

I started at my dance studio when I was about 7 years old and shortly after I arrived, I began to build a relationship with one of my teachers. I always tried to do my best in front of her, wanting to show her I was passionate about dance, but I realized looking back I did my best out of fear. I wanted her to be proud of me. I never wanted to disappoint her.

The relationship I had with my teacher continued all the way through high school, and my desire to do my best in front of her continued to increase. My teacher would always tell me I needed to work on my arms; she said they looked bent when I danced. I agreed with her; I didn't like the way my arms looked so I worked on trying to straighten them as much as possible. I wasn't aware at the time that I had extreme hyper-extension in my elbow joints, which can cause them to look bent when you straighten them too much. Every class she made a comment to me about my arms. "Straighten your arms," "Your arms are bent," "No, your arms are incorrect."

Eventually she made me dance while holding a stick or a theraband to prevent me from bending my arms. I didn't like it, but I did as I was told. I was frustrated at this point. I was straightening my arms as hard as I could, and I was still just getting told I was never doing it right. She never showed me how to fix my arms, rather, she just told me they were always wrong. The verbal comments started as corrections, but eventually started to feel more and more demeaning. The insecurity about my arms began to creep up on me.

My goal at this time was to win a principal role in our *Nutcracker*, and I wanted to do everything I could to make that happen. My teacher had a big say in casting, so I worked hard to show her

that I had the ability to take on a lead role. Finally, after months of hard work and determination, the cast list came out and I saw “Snow Queen: Lauren Duran.” I was so joyful and grateful for the opportunity. I felt at that moment that I was on top of the world. Unfortunately, that feeling of pride didn’t last very long.

A few months of rehearsals went by and we finally got into the theater to tech the show. I felt so excited to perform my first principal role in a ballet. The tech rehearsals ran smoothly, and I became more confident in myself to dance the role of the Snow Queen. After our last dress rehearsal, my teacher had a company call to give us notes and corrections. When she got to me, I was anxious to see what she had to say and was hoping I didn’t let her down. The next words out of her mouth were said in an angry, assaulting tone of voice: “Your arms look like a dead chicken.”

My heart sank. I was mortified that my teacher, who I had known for 8 years, had just said that, in front of all my peers. She didn’t tell me how to fix my arms or give any sort of constructive feedback. All she did say was an unnecessary comment about my arms that left me feeling insecure and embarrassed. I left our final dress rehearsal in tears, feeling defeated. Later that night my teacher called me and I let it go to voicemail. “Hey Lauren, I don’t understand why you were upset today,” it said. “I told you how beautiful you looked and there was no reason for you to be sad.”

The voicemail was filled with lies that made me even more upset. How could she try to manipulate what just happened? To me, it showed she was aware that what she said was an attack on me, and she was trying to “fix it” by lying to me. After I listened to the voicemail and did not return the phone call, I laid down trying to process what had just happened. I didn’t want to perform the role anymore, I didn’t want to be in the show, and I didn’t want to dance. I woke up the next morning, put on a fake smile and performed the role of the Snow Queen.

That comment haunted me, and what made things worse is I had to act like nothing had happened. I still attended my teachers’ classes and I continued to be kind towards her, but deep down I felt defeated, and I could feel my love for dance starting to fade away. The combination of feeling betrayed by my teacher and having to take her classes weekly led to me feeling burnt out. My spark for dance went out and my teacher knew it. She eventually started to drift from me and she put her attention on other students. I had hoped that maybe she would ask me why I was feeling so low and I could have an honest conversation with her, but she never did. Our 8-year relationship felt like a lie.

Years later, I have moved on from that comment, and I eventually made peace with the situation. However, it's disturbing to know that a grown adult would take advantage of their position of authority to say that to a child. To publicly humiliate a child is wrong and to make a vile comment like that is destructive to anyone, but especially to dancers because we use our body as art and we spend so much time working on improving our artistry and technique. For a teacher to say that to a young student is very damaging.

In Leelo Keevallik's article "Bodily Quoting in Dance Correction" she spoke about why it's important to give dancers proper corrections to allow them to understand what they should work on. She mentioned the importance of having a teacher physically show the dancer themselves what they are doing wrong and then show the correct way to do it. Next is to ask the dancer to show the movement in the correct way, so they can feel it for themselves. It's crucial for teachers to explain why the correction was needed, so the dancer will understand its value (Keevallik, 407). Keevallik uses an example of a teacher giving a correction in a swing dance class. If you see a dancer is moving stiffly, "the teacher can subsequently explain how they feel the music" (Keevallik, 418).

Rather than commenting without explanation, that teacher spoke about letting the music guide your movements, thus allowing the dancer to better understand what the teacher was asking them to do. My dance teacher did not explain to me how to properly use my arms, thus I was not able to comprehend what I actually needed to fix. She told me to just straighten my arms, but in reality I was overstretching them. and because I have hyperextended elbows, they *appeared* bent. If she had shown me how to work with my hyperextension, then I could have worked on learning how to make my arms appear straight—which, funny enough, is through microbending my arms, I found out later.

In an article called, "‘I wish dance class NEVER ended’: An Activist Approach to Teaching Dance," the authors break down the different techniques dance instructors use, pointing out which methods are better than others. They discuss how authoritarian teaching methods have resulted in harming students, because it's oriented around just wanting control and not creating a nurturing space for the dancers. This teaching method can "escalate to humiliation of students for making errors, screaming, sarcasm, mocking, belittlement and bullying" (Shilcutt, et al. 108). Due to this fear of embarrassment, "dancers become conditioned into structures and patterns of silencing where teachers' behaviors provide subtle but constant indications for students of how they do not 'measure up'" (Shilcutt et al. 108).

There is a continuous cycle happening where teachers are taking advantage of their authority by making students feel humiliated, and dancers don't speak about it because they have been taught to just take the verbal bullying. When my teacher made that comment to me, I felt embarrassed and humiliated, and I felt like I couldn't do anything about it, so I was silent and took it. Authoritarian teaching methods do not provide a safe space to learn about the beauty of dance; rather, dancers become fearful of making mistakes.

Overall, learning how to give useful corrections and create a safe environment for dancers is very crucial for them to explore and learn about the art of dance. I look back on that story and now it gives me a good laugh, partly because I still can't believe a grown woman said that to a child. Maybe that means I've accepted that what happened was not my fault and I've moved on from it. Although dance involves discipline and structure, it's important to remember that this is an art form that is made to be enjoyed, and that passion and joy is what makes dance so special.



Lauren Duran graduated in the spring of 2023, with a Bachelors of Fine Arts in Dance Performance and Choreography and a Bachelors of Arts in Psychology. She aspires to dance professionally and pursue a career in clinical psychology with an emphasis on dance therapy.

Works Cited

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