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The Move to Success! Is it Really What You Think?

Does making the move to New York City or Los Angeles guarantee success in the dance world?

by Mikensie Johnson

The performing arts are no doubt some of the most difficult career paths to follow. Those who choose to pursue this type of career have most likely been told time and time again that there is no money in this industry, that the rate of success is very small, and that opportunity is only available in a very select number of places. In my experience, many dancers feel the need to move to a major city in the United States in order to find success, usually New York City or Los Angeles. These cities may seem ideal for dance because of the hype they have received over the years, but this does not necessarily mean that they provide the best ways to achieve success in the performing arts industry.

Originally from Minnesota, I have now lived in California for about four years in pursuit of an undergraduate degree in dance performance. As an eighteen-year-old fresh out of high school, I wanted to make the move to Los Angeles in order to pursue a career in the commercial dance industry. The easiest way for me to make this transition was to attend school somewhere in southern California in order to put down roots in this state. At the time, Minnesota did not appear to provide the resources I needed to pursue a professional dance career. Looking back now, as an almost graduate from the University of California, Irvine (UCI), I could not have been more wrong. The problem I had with this way of thinking was that I was so incredibly focused on moving to California, I practically blinded myself to the opportunities that were right in front of me, so close to home.

One of the first examples of this that comes to mind was when I attended a school in Minnesota founded by former Alvin Ailey soloists Toni Pierce-Sands and Uri Sands, with teachers who were former Alonzo King's LINES company members. This facility started its own company, which is now touring across the United States as TU Dance. Another example of the opportunities in Minnesota is its commercial industry. While it may be easy for some to dismiss the idea that there is much commercial work in Minnesota, I found myself to be very involved in it. Because there were fewer people to compete against in Minnesota for commercial work, I was able to build up my resume quite a bit. I got a ton of experience with working behind a camera, networking, and understanding of how agencies run in different regions (I was part of two different agencies at the time).

From the age of thirteen until I moved to college, I took on various jobs in dance, modeling, and acting in order to build up my resume. The connections I was able to make through these jobs would have made it much easier to continue getting work in these fields in Minnesota versus, the difficulty every aspiring artist faces in the competitive realm of Los Angeles. Although I don't regret my decision to move, I do think a lot about what my life would have been like if I had chosen to stay in Minnesota.

I haven't met many other people from Minnesota to compare stories to in the Orange County area, but there are many students at UCI that are here from other places. Koryn Wicks, a current second year graduate student about to receive her Master of Fine Arts in dance, is

originally from Richmond Hill, a suburb outside of Toronto, Canada. I asked her various questions about her decision to leave Canada and move to the United States. As part of her undergraduate career, Wicks attended Adelphi University for dance, which is in Long Island just outside of New York. She had hesitated to leave the Toronto area because her entire family was there, but her mother told her that New York is the “capital of the dance world.” Wicks ended up transferring to the Ailey School in New York in search of a conservatory approach to dance education and she continued to live there for eight years before moving to California for graduate school.

The path that Wicks chose to take for her dance career ultimately took her from home to two of the most sought after places to live and pursue the performing arts in the United States. Being an out-of-state student myself, I have heard a version of this story many times. Like me, Wicks admitted she did not know much about the dance scene in her home region of Ontario. Her response to this was to immediately say that there is more opportunity in Los Angeles and New York simply because “it’s a bigger pond.” While I do not disagree, in that more artists have congregated in these regions to find and provide work for one another, Wicks is another example, like myself, of someone too focused on moving somewhere else when they might have had a multitude of opportunities right in front of them.

While many dancers move to find success, it doesn’t have to be for everyone. Sometimes, it takes a little extra push to leave home, like Wicks experienced with her mother. One of the big factors in successfully moving away from family is determining whether or not the individual doing so is mentally and emotionally ready. In a *Dance Magazine* article titled “In Training: Leaving the Nest,” various dancers were interviewed about their experiences leaving home in pursuit of a more intense dance-training program. The dancers discussed in this article did not set out to move to New York or Los Angeles, but sought out strong programs that specifically met their individual needs. Each dancer in this article had to move in order to attend these institutions because they were not located close enough to their hometowns. In these cases, homesickness was a big factor in whether or not these dancers were successful once they moved out.

It is important to have a supportive family and to find time to talk to them if being away from home poses a big challenge. The University of North Carolina School of the Arts and the Houston Ballet Academy were both sought after schools for the dancers interviewed in this article. For them, it was not the location that motivated them, it was the quality of the schools and training facilities. This is a very important concept to take away here. Of course one must be ready emotionally to move away, but having a reason and a purpose in doing so is essentially what really motivates artists to act on it. Mallory Mehaffy, a dancer discussed in this article, moved to attend the Houston Ballet Academy at age sixteen. Since then she has joined Houston Ballet 2. Mehaffy is a perfect example of someone who did not pursue dance by moving to New York or Los Angeles and was still able to find a career perfectly suited to her individual needs, with the mental and emotional support from her family.

When deciding where to move, taking individual needs into account is extremely important. What works for one person may not work for the next. This was revealed when I talked to two different aspiring artists from the East coast. The first was Emily Hoff, a fourth year undergraduate pursuing a degree in dance at UCI, originally from New York. The second was Robert Slaski, an aspiring actor from New Jersey who made the move to Orange County to

further his acting career in film. Both had very different reasons for moving to the West Coast, and both have developed very different plans for their career.

Hoff said she came to UCI because it was one of the best dance and education programs that she got into. Although she had many positive things to say about the opportunities she has been exposed to here, her heart still longed for the hustle and bustle of the New York culture she grew up in. After graduation, she plans to move back to New York, a decision motivated by “knowing there is a lot of dance happening in New York and missing the culture.” On the other hand, Slaski intends to stay in Southern California and move to Los Angeles by the end of the year. In his opinion, New York is very geared towards theater work for actors, while Los Angeles is more for those that want to pursue the film industry. Although he grew up very close to New York, Slaski stated that, “It takes a certain type of person to live in New York. Los Angeles on the other hand, well anyone can live in California.” I have never been to the East Coast, but from what I have gathered it is a very busy lifestyle that I do not think I would enjoy. In this sense, I can agree with both Hoff and Slaski in that it takes a certain type of motivated person to want to live in the constant hustle and bustle that is New York City.

After thoroughly discussing this topic with these artists and reading through various articles on the subject, I have come to the conclusion that success does not depend on location, but on the individual needs of an aspiring performing artist. Many times performing artists can get caught up in the idea of moving to a popular big city, so much so that they miss out on the opportunities that are right in front of them. I myself am guilty of this. Success is possible by taking a step back and looking at the various opportunities nearby. For some, moving to a big city might be necessary because there really may not be many jobs in the surrounding areas for a particular skill set. Although this may sometimes be the case, it is essential to be careful not to get caught up in the idea that you can only succeed by following popular trends on where to live. Having a successful career in the performing arts depends on the individual and how they go about making it happen, not necessarily the location in which they live.

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Mikensie Johnson graduated in 2017 from the University of California, Irvine with a B.F.A. in DancePerformance and a minor in French. She hopes to continue dancing and wants to travel to various cities and countries around the world while doing so.
