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Setting Boundaries in Our Relationship with Our Reflection

Virtual learning from home has provided an environment that is very beneficial to dancers when it comes to addressing their relationship to the mirror.

by Isabella Finn

Moving from dancing in studios, where we constantly and meticulously use mirrors to critique and improve ourselves, to dancing in living rooms, where the only thing that comes close to a reflection is a tiny zoom square, is a difficult and challenging transition to make, but it can also be a productive one. The zoom era was the perfect time to gain a new perspective. The lack of a mirror left dancers incapable of using it in both healthy and unhealthy ways. Mirrors definitely have their benefits and are intended for good in the beginning stages of technique as they assist the dancer by giving visual cues, but after time it's easy to become dependent on them. Many dancers begin to obsess and live in the one-dimensional reflection the mirror provides, which causes for a difficult transition to non-mirror spaces such as the stage of a theatre. Dancing mirrorless at home can take away distractions, assist in training our bodies to complete lines, and internalize corrections. It can also improve your awareness of surroundings, helping to make the transition to the stage a much smoother one.

When you first start to dance, mirrors are important, because making corrections with the assistance of visual cues is more effective than internalizing and feeling the corrections. However, as dancers mature, so should their understanding, muscle memory and awareness of the body, and the mirror should be needed less and less. Many times the opposite occurs, and the mirror is used more and more. It changes from being a helpful tool to a distracting tool that helps you criticize yourself. This distraction could easily lead to dependency and addiction. From my observation in class, I've seen the mirror work both ways—to focus on flaws or to admire what you see. For some, including myself, flaws become all you can see. Self-perception is skewed, leaving dancers distracted, discouraged, and dissociated. For others, the mirror becomes a comfort and ego boost, reassuring dancers of their talent or beauty.

No matter why you use the mirror, your head placement can disturb the intended ballet lines, says Hannah Foster in her *Pointe Magazine* article, “The Mirror: Friend or Foe?” The “side eye” is a common thing for dancers; this involves the turning of the head while the eyes stay locked on the mirror. I've seen from my experience that the mirror essentially becomes the environment, taking away awareness from the actual environment the dancer occupies. This can cause movements to seem flat and one dimensional, making for a difficult transition to the stage.

In classes, teachers will sometimes have the class face away from the mirror, but there is a difference between turning away and completely removing the mirror from the studio. If it's still

there, the temptation is still there, and one look can ruin the awareness of your body in space. Dancing at home fully takes the temptation of mirrors away, allowing for more focus on the combinations and internalizing the muscle memory over the visual memory of movements. Not being distracted and being fully present to hear and apply the corrections allows for dancers to feel the corrections and movements within their bodies, which helps improve body mind connectivity as well as the overall awareness of all the body parts. Not to mention freedom from feeling self-conscious about factors that are out of the dancers control, such as body structure or bone structure. Without judging your body in a reflection, you can gain a sense of the body as a whole, as well as a sense of trust and self-confidence.

It wasn't until we moved to virtual learning that I realized how distracted and un-present I had been in live classes due to the mirror. Being in the mirror five or more hours a day for eighteen years, I had started to obsess over the parts of myself that I didn't like or approve of; the mirror caused me so much grief. I would get told "good job" in class and feel so motivated and confident, but one glance in the mirror, just like that, could put me into a negative headspace. The mirror distracted me from focusing on learning combinations and being fully present, robbing me of many opportunities to experiment, internalize movement and gain confidence. And due to the fact that I basically lived in this one dimensional reflection of reality, I had no sense of spatial awareness or projection in my movements which made transitions to the stage very difficult for me.

This new way of life through virtual learning without mirrors has allowed for me to become free from the mirrors that kept me from being satisfied with my work. When we began learning virtually, and even now sometimes, I find myself doing the side eye, attempting to see my reflection in my tiny zoom square. This is when I realized I had a very bad habit on my hands, maybe even an addiction. I had to set boundaries for myself.

Zoom gives the lovely option of making your zoom square disappear onscreen, so that all you are left with is the instructor or the accompanist's square. Because I'm not at a point where I can have the temptation present without caving, I set this boundary for myself. Once I started doing this, I felt that I could move and dance without the fear of my own judgement. I believe that this sense of freedom has helped me internalize movements, corrections, and intentions. I find myself enjoying looking and being a part of the actual environment around me rather than a one-dimensional reflection of reality; my other senses are finally being enhanced.

Without the mirror, I feel that I am projecting more, finishing lines, and getting more out of the class with fewer distractions. This new environment allows dancers to embrace the environment around us and learn to become more aware of the body. Though the zoom studio era has been difficult, I believe dancers are going to mature greatly and come back to the studio even stronger, ready to enter the stage more equipped.

The pandemic situation forced dancers to be more creative and more aware of their surroundings, enhancing senses that have never been stimulated. They will not only be able to focus more on where their bodies are in space, they will be training to perform not for a reflection in the mirror but for an audience. This way of dancing will bring life and dimension into movement, making it that much more intriguing to the audience. The auditory aspect of dancing will improve with the absence of mirrors as well, strengthening dancers' musicality. Each dancer on stage becomes responsible for listening to the music and staying on time.

There have been many limitations set on dancers during pandemic times, but using these limitations in a positive way to self-improve and become more aware is actually going to advance their ability to internalize and project. Although challenging, the absence of mirrors is very beneficial and can only assist in helping to become a more engaged and aware artist. With this approach, dancers will come back aware and better equipped to handle the harsh transition from studio to stage.

Isabella Finn will graduate with her Bachelors of Arts in Dance and Art History in Spring of 2022. She hopes to join a professional ballet company in the future.

Resources

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