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If you want a dance career, why pick one style?

How training in different kinds of dance makes you a better—and more employable—dancer

by Amanda McCarthy

“I was taught that pointed feet and powdered swans reign supreme in the world of dance” - Nyama McCarthy-Brown

Growing up, we were always told that ballet is the foundation of dance, and that if you do not take ballet seriously, then your odds of becoming a professional dancer are almost impossible. Even in college dance departments, many schools are stuck in having a core focus on ballet, while lessening the importance of what other styles offer. I am not against ballet, but I am however against the hierarchy in dance that places ballet at the top. There is no one “foundation of dance,” because each dancer has different intentions with their dancing and different end goals, so one style can’t be at the core of them all. And that’s a good thing. Being versed in multiple styles of dance can bring dynamic qualities, choices, and technical range into each style, making some movement stand out from others.

I started dancing at the age of 3 and have always trained in more than one style – jazz, tap, ballet, hip-hop, and contemporary being the most prominent. On top of that, I would still expose myself to more styles, like modern or musical theater, through master classes or conventions, so I could at least feel semi-comfortable in the styles I was not training daily in. Coming into college, I was shocked to find out that many of the ballet dancers in my class had never done any other style. I remember being in Modern II and talking with my classmates about how uncomfortable they were with the movement, inversions, floorwork, etc., and how much they disliked modern in general. Four years later, the majority of those people who were stuck in a ballet-only mindset now love modern and wish they were able to train in more genres at an earlier age. Having only ballet training for so many years, their bodies were engraved with the restrictions of ballet movement and the ballet mindset that took extreme focus, so they had trouble releasing themselves enough to embody other dance form.

Each style I have trained in gives me qualities or choices that influence the next. Training in hip-hop from a young age has taught me musicality and textures, while contemporary taught me the importance of working through transitions, connecting my movement, and staying grounded. Ballet has helped me with footwork and paying more attention to my port de bras, and jazz has taught me how to make my movement clean and sharp. All these qualities I find present in my dancing and are the reason I believe I’ve been successful thus far in my pre-professional and professional career. Qualities that would not have been possible or as easily attainable had I only focused on one style.

Being able to excel in multiple genres of dance, it now becomes my *choice* for which pathway of dance I want to pursue, and not what I am limited to. Whether it’s joining a company, being a backup dancer, or trying Broadway, I give myself the power to choose one or all of these options instead of only being capable of pursuing one. I am creating more opportunities to become a professional dancer, and since this is something I am determined to pursue, I want a higher probability of success, because the field is highly competitive and employment is not always consistent. There will be times of going from one job to the next, and when you are

capable of doing a variety of things, your chances of job security improve.

I would love to experience and perform in as many dance careers as possible, because I really do have a love for all styles. Eventually, if you are versatile, you are able to learn which styles you genuinely enjoy doing, not just which styles you can do. You can then decide which styles you are best at, which you dislike, and which styles you can potentially pursue professionally.

As I finish up my undergraduate degree and am about to fully enter the professional dance world, I know I have strategically prepared myself for success. About two years ago I auditioned and was signed with MSA Talent Agency in Los Angeles, which is able to get me jobs and auditions that are mostly within commercial dancing but can extend to other platforms as well. This past year I have just completed my first season as an NFL Cheerleader with the Los Angeles Rams, a route I had never imagined for myself but nonetheless cannot picture my life without now. As my first consistent dance job, the organization has taught me professionalism in dance and business, given me once-in-a-lifetime performance opportunities and connections through the director and fellow teammates.

All this to say that I have gained a tremendous amount as a dancer from training, practicing, and pursuing the variety of styles and careers that dance offers. Being versatile in my dance training and going into the professional world with an open mind-set, I am allowing any and all opportunities that present themselves to me. As the dance world evolves, with more progressive ideas and practices, it may become more common for dancers to train in multiple styles or at least choose something other than what is being done around. It's important to find and experiment with ways that benefit your growth as a dancer, in addition to enjoying the journey along the way.

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