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Dance Major Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3qz4v7tp>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 8(1)

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Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/D581049994

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Is a career in dance worth all the sacrifices?

Sometimes, there's a struggle between your passion and a longing for financial stability. At other times, your practical grandmother has the answer.

by Sydney Leong

"Are you impressed, Lola?" I always showed video clips of rehearsal to my *lola*, which is Filipino for grandmother. She looked at me and said, "Not really." Brutally honest woman. "But you are so flexible and strong... you would make a good nurse!"

Throughout her life, my grandmother always prioritized being able to provide for her loved ones and did so through nursing and juggling her many side-lines. Her comment was mildly discouraging, but I know she just wanted me to build a secure future. I took a look at my dreams outside of dancing. Someday, I want to own a home, celebrate more holidays with my family, maybe even start my own family. Can I do this while working as a dancer?

Growing up in the Bay Area, the moderate success and/or bankruptcy of local dance companies laid out bleak prospects for a stable future. "How much do dancers make?" I tell my dad it depends on the company and its resources. He is concerned. "What are the numbers? These are things you need to know." But I did not want to ask those questions. As a teenager, I only wanted to prove that I had enough drive, passion, and willingness to work hard to fuel a professional dancer's life. My first dance teacher announced to us every day: "99.9% of y'all won't become dancers" because Dance (with a capital D) was apparently



The author as a young dancer with her grandmother, Catalina

only for those who were ready to demonstrate their dedication through tough sacrifice.

"Dancers are crazy." My dad says, "You have to give so much of yourself just to be given so little. Is it worth it to you?" When I was thirteen, insecure in my goals, and the resident expert of dance in my family, my parents could offer me no reassurance that

our investments would pay off. Although my mother was more than willing to reach into her savings to support my training, that question hung over me: "Is it worth it?" I was skeptical whether the Vaganova school I was enrolled in was as invested in me as I was in them, so eventually, I ended up quitting my classical education.

For eight years I continued to ask the same question as my dance life challenged me to make decisions. Is it worth missing all the summer birthdays as I train out-of-town each year? Is it worth transferring school districts three times in three years when it would be unnecessary otherwise? Is it worth asking my dad to pay out-of-pocket for a surgery that would not compromise my health but was needed for dancing? Is it worth working 24 hours a week while taking 32 quarter units so I can attend that summer intensive? Is it worth the sharp pains in my spine and pelvis and ankles? Is it worth it?

My first dance teacher would preach: "True love is loving without expecting to be loved back." And I believed it past the point where I had nothing left to give. Throughout middle and high school, I hung onto the hope that someday I would see my goals materialize. Finally, during my first year at university, I realized that somewhere in the waiting, I had severely neglected many other aspects of myself; I graduated high school not knowing how to talk or relate to others, and I missed out on so much personal growth.

Then there was the fact that I wasn't the only one investing time and money in my dance practice; my family also made sacrifices for me to excel. However, I did not seem to be improving fast enough to justify the means. Finally, I decided: "It's

NOT worth it." I quit dancing with a heavy heart, blaming dance for taking too much from me, and sometimes blaming myself for not having enough passion to follow through with my goals.

A year later, while denouncing my love for dance in the streets of Taipei, I suddenly saw how the art form consisted of more than status-seeking individuals. I saw dance as being able to pour life and spiritual strength into a community. I fell head over heels all over again. The long break gave me perspective and with it a genuine love for dance that is neither blind nor unconditional. This new love, however, has new conditions. In order to make it work, I needed to set some boundaries—in order to dance, I would not be willing to sacrifice my physical, spiritual, mental, or financial wellbeing, nor risk anyone else's.

I used to cry whenever my dad asked me practical questions about my career because I felt as if he was pressuring me to realize how selfish my goals were. But I finally understand he only wants to prepare me to succeed. Thanks to his persistence, I can finally give up comparing my work ethic or opportunities to those of others, and I no longer believe that passion alone can fuel a dancer's life. I can finally ask, "When will dance start to support me?" I can look for programs and companies that meet the needs of their artists. I used to feel so ridiculous for questioning whether "luxuries" such as medical insurance, physical therapy, paid vacation, and retirement plans even exist in the United States for professionals. Now I know that I need a clearer idea of the costs and benefits are in order to understand whether a career in dance is worth the investment.

Last year at our Christmas party, my grandmother hosted a karaoke competition, which I won (hee hee). I remember her clasping my hands, clearly surprised, and saying, “Wow, you will definitely get hired.” Turns out, it was to be her last Christmas with us. Before she passed, I called my mom, letting her know I was on my way back home. She told me through her tears, “I’ll be fine. *Lola* would want you to stay in school. Dance well, so that she will be impressed okay?” But I went home and spent her final unconscious days with my family. Her visiting friends approached me, asking if I was the granddaughter she was bragging about after Christmas. I smiled thinking about how my little karaoke performance gave her more confidence in

me than my BFA. Although simple news, it became a great comfort to know that she was indeed convinced that all my work at school was not a waste of time or money.

Thanks to the stability my parents and grandparents have built, I can relish in the freedom to pursue dance. My financial wellness might be less predictable than my cousins’ who are pursuing nursing degrees, but if one day, I need to give up dancing full-time in order to pursue other dreams, I can give myself the freedom to do so. In the meantime, I plan on being generous with the magic I learn from dance, to bless those around me. I do not have all the answers yet, but I am determined to make my career worth all the sacrifices I and my family made along the way.

Sydney Leong expects to complete her BFA in the fall of 2020 and looks forward to continuing her training at State Street Ballet's pre-professional track program, hoping to dance professionally abroad. She also wants to explore how indigenous dance and movement traditions are kept alive and bring meaning to practitioners in Taiwan and the Philippines.