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Do dancers focus too much on dance alone?

Finding a healthy balance between dancing and activities outside the studio can improve your artistic practice—and life in general

by Terra Deal

In 2008 the hit band, The Killers, came out with a new song titled, *Human*. The chorus has a line that asks: “Are we human, or are we dancer?” We can’t know for sure what the band meant, but if you are a dancer, you’ve asked yourself the same question. As a dance major at the University of California Irvine (UCI), you are considered above all, a dancer. Your week days consist of constant technique classes, dance-related lectures, and long rehearsals. On weekends, you’re on campus rehearsing for multiple projects or performing at various venues. While I enjoy dance and find my practice worth every hour spent in the studio, I also feel that having outside passions and hobbies can feed you as an individual, both in and out of the studio. So, how do you find a healthy balance between training to become a professional dancer or dance teacher and spending time outside the studio as a human? Are dancers who find creative outlets or passions outside of the studio worried about falling behind? I decided to go straight to the source and find out what some dance majors at UCI think.

My first conversation was with 3rd year dance and psychology major Rae Michaud. She lit up with enthusiasm when I explained the topic and began discussing her constant personal battle with finding time to pursue passions outside of dance. “My first two years at UCI, I thought that immersing myself in the dance department was the best way to make a name for myself,” she said. “I signed up for every technique, auditioned for every show, and committed to every project I got asked to be a part of. By the end of my second year, I started noticing my health deteriorating and my love for ballet slowly fading away. I couldn’t find motivation to go to classes and knew that I lost my inspiration.”

When dancers dedicate themselves to the studio and their training, they often become obsessed with improvements to their performance quality and technique, rather than simply finding the joy within the practice. Michaud had a realization before starting her third year at UCI: “I ended up quitting ballet, cutting back on my rehearsal hours, and decided to take time to focus on things outside of dance and pick up another major.” Michaud ended up finding joy by writing poetry, taking pictures, organizing and decorating her space, and practicing yoga. She has seen a significant difference in her mental health this year and has been enjoying her time both in and out of the studio.

I knew I wanted a perspective of a younger dancer in the department to compare Michaud’s discovery to someone who had an outside passion before coming to UCI. I talked to Jacob Boarnet, a 1st year dance performance and criminology law major, who said he knew before going into college that he wanted to do both majors. “Studying both truly makes me appreciate my time spent in the studio more and gives me the opportunity to realize how lucky I am to have more than one passion.” I asked about the number of hours he spends in the studio versus studying for criminology and discovered that Boarnet felt like he initially dedicated more time to his studio training, like Michaud. He believes that pursuing other passions can influence a dancer to discover their authentic artistic self. While the focus of dance is in the studio, there is a part of dance that is built on everyone’s own experience. Outside passions, experiences,

relationships, and hobbies combine to give inspiration to dancers and further enhance their maturity as a performer.

My last interview was with 4th year dance performance major and anthropology minor Sara Schroerlucke. As a senior, Schroerlucke has come to realize that she is not a dancer, she is an artist because of her “newfound understanding for the creation of art.” Her biggest realization over the past four years was that getting involved in other activities outside the studio gave her a new perspective in her technique classes and confidence in other aspects of life. “Sophomore and part of junior year, I realized I was narrowing my potential and possibilities. I became negative, depressed, and bored. Dance needs to be seen in new lights, otherwise it gets stale.” As a 4th year B.F.A dance major myself, I have also come to this conclusion.

Coming into UCI, I spent more time in a dance studio working on my technique than in my own home with my family. The mirror dictated how good I looked, my instructors pushed me to work harder on my technique, and I competed against my peers for roles and performing opportunities constantly. When I decided to go to school for dance, I was afraid the college environment would alter my focus in the studio. My first and second years were dedicated to my technique classes and staying in shape. But I found myself losing interest in my classes and pulling farther away from the mirror each class. It felt as though my vision of the “perfect dance career” was blurring like an unfocused camera lens. Ironically enough, the only thing I began looking forward to were my photography shoots. I had been practicing photography since high school, but never considered it worth pursuing since I already had dance to focus on. With the support of my creative parents, I decided to start my own small photography business my second year at UCI to earn some extra money. I slowly began taking headshots and performance photos for peers in the dance department, but it wasn't until I got hired as an assistant photographer and purchased my first highly professional camera that I realized I had a passion for photography that was equal to my passion for dance.

The biggest reality check for dancers who spend all their time focusing on dance is that even professional dancers have a life outside of the studio. *Dance Spirit* magazine published a 2015 article titled “My Non-Dance Hobbies,” which explored the outside world of various professional dancers. Whether it is surfing, knitting, or rescuing dogs, these professionals discuss how, at the end of the day, each is an individual human who has other interests and passions. Similar to what I discovered in my three conversations with different dance majors, dance is above all the main focus; however, countless hours in a studio negatively affected their training and overall lifestyle, while having outside interests positively affected their training. We are dancers, but more importantly...we are humans that dance.

Dancespirit. "My Non-Dance Hobbies." *Dance Spirit*, 23 Mar. 2017. Web. 02 May 2017.

Terra Deal, B.F.A performance dance major was a part of the 2017 graduating class at the University of California, Irvine. She will be moving to Laguna Beach in late Summer 2017 and plans on pursuing dance and photography in the Southern California area.
