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Abby Lee Miller Wasn't the First Dance Teacher Who Yelled at Students

Is the bullying of young dancers exaggerated for TV? Or is it just “dance business as usual”?

by Albany Adele

“I thought I asked for an attitude, not an imitation of a dog lifting his leg over a fire hydrant.”
Antony Tudor, circa 1950

“I told her that her daughter looked like road kill.”
Abby Lee Miller, 2012

When looking at both of these quotations, you might not notice much of a difference until you look at the dates. These words were uttered by two famous dance instructors over sixty years apart—Antony Tudor, a master ballet choreographer of the twentieth century; and Abby Lee Miller, a twenty-first century reality TV star. What do they have in common? Both are comparing their students to unflattering images of animals. Someone unfamiliar with the dance world may find these comments disturbing or unusual, but ask anyone who has been classically trained in dance and they will most likely remember hearing a similar remark from their teacher. Why has this behavior from dance instructors been accepted for so long? Better yet, why is it being televised in the twenty-first century?

For an industry that claims to be progressive, it is extremely ironic that verbal abuse is highlighted in the media through popular dance television. The series *Dance Moms* (2011-2019) featured Abby Lee Miller, an infamous American dance instructor known for her harsh teaching style and ruthless comments directed at young dance students. Despite her unethical methods in the dance studio—ridiculing her dancers' physical appearances, screaming at them, and ranking them each week on her notorious “pyramid” (just to name a few)—Miller, along with hundreds of other dance instructors before her, has normalized abusive teaching and profited from it, even after her shows are no longer being produced.

Abby Lee Miller may be only one example of authoritarianism in dance, yet her impact on the dance industry and national television is enormous. After only a year on the air, the season 2 premiere of *Dance Moms* averaged at 2.5 million viewers on the Lifetime network (Ng). The series ran for eight years and gained a massive global audience that continues to grow in the present day. There are multiple reasons people watch *Dance Moms*: there's drama, outrageous behavior, aspiring child stars, and let's not forget about the dancing itself (although it seems to be least prioritized). Writer Danielle Georgiou, posting on the American Dance Institute website, unpacks the detrimental aspects of the show in her article, “The *Dance Moms* Complex.” She explains how *Dance Moms* “gives dancers the wrong idea; if they aren't making a stir, or causing a buzz, then they aren't accomplishing their goals—then they aren't a good dancer” (1). The show completely takes away what dance represents at its core: artistry, self-expression, and community. Instead, it provokes the ideas of individualism, unhealthy competition, and exploitation of child dancers.

Who in their right mind would want to watch a grown woman scream at children on national television, you might ask? Dancers, that's who. I remember being a young, impressionable thirteen-year-old watching *Dance Moms* in my bedroom, secretly hoping that my dance teachers would give me the kind of attention that Miss Abby gave her students. In my mind, I would rather have had my teacher tell me I looked like utter garbage in front of my entire class than be completely ignored. When it comes to the dance world, dancers are often conditioned to believe

that any recognition from an authority figure is positive. In Robin Lakes' article "The Messages Behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals," she articulates how, "the dancer views teacher abuse as a compliment—that it is an honor to be attacked. The students learn to love the attention, even if it is negative attention" (7). Lakes says that dancers are taught to look to their teacher as not only an authority figure, but as a higher power. The teacher can do no wrong; they possess all knowledge of dance and the student should be grateful to even be in their presence.

Abby Lee Miller directly enforces Lakes' theme through her most famous saying: "Everyone's replaceable." This phrase implies that dancers are disposable and that they provide no value beyond their physical labor in the dance studio. In *Dance Moms*, there are many scenarios where Miller upsets one of her students to the point of tears, threatening the child with the notion that they are more than welcome to leave the studio because someone else will gladly take their place. Lakes further drives this point home when she quotes Daniel Nagrin, who danced for legendary choreographers Graham, Sokolow, Holm, and others: "Some of the best learning is being taught by some of the worst, nastiest people in the world...If you are being brutalized and you can't stand it and you can't learn, go someplace else" (8). Once again, the dancer is in the wrong.

In these cases, a dancer's only options are to endure continuous abuse from their teacher or be forced out of their studio. Georgiou points out that "if *Dance Moms* has taught us anything, if you don't do it Abby Lee Miller's way, then you might as well find another 'hobby'" (1). The show enforces the idea that winning a competition trumps being treated fairly in the dance studio. In Miller's case, it doesn't matter if she pushes a dancer to the brink of quitting, because she's still making a profit. If anything, the drama caused by such a scene would increase the television ratings.

So why is this immoral behavior from dance teachers still tolerated in today's society? It can be traced back to the age-old methodology of dancers being seen as objects by their choreographers, and being treated as such. The technical and learning aspects of dance may result in abuse from teachers, and the art-making element of dance can also contribute to dancers' suffering. Choreographers often whittle dancers down to nothing more than their physical bodies in space. Their humanity is not prioritized, and according to Lakes, in some scenarios, "When dancers are being utilized for an artistic vision, their feelings do not matter. They are a distraction to the artistic process of the teacher" (5).

World-renowned choreographer Jerome Robbins once claimed that when he was working with dancers, "all [he] could see [was] the work, for everything else [he had] blinders on" (Lakes 5). Similarly, Abby Lee Miller insists that she "can make something magical and wonderful out of nothing" (BrainyQuote). Both choreographers present the idea that they hold all artistic power, while the dancers merely move around in space like pawns on a chessboard. The person in control strips dancers of their own artistry, claiming that the choreography alone is what makes a dance great. This idea of the choreographer possessing all artistic control and power is nothing new in the dance world, which is why it is still being presented in today's media.

Although *Dance Moms* is dramatized, there is a reason it is categorized as Reality TV. The children on the show are experiencing what many dancers still endure on a daily basis—the only difference is that these dancers are shown on camera. The fact of the matter is that abuse is deeply rooted in the dance world and is now being televised for large audiences to witness. Can we really say that progress has been made in dance teaching when shows like *Dance Moms* are upholding the ongoing tradition of authoritarianism? With the increase of mental health awareness for dancers within the past decade, it seems ironic that a show known for belittling dancers is still topping the charts as it's shown in re-runs.

Dance Moms may be an extreme perspective on the reality of dance studios, yet this pop culture phenomenon lives on in the minds of dancers and non-dancers alike. Any person can turn on their TV and see young dancers getting yelled at by their teacher. For someone who has never danced, they may assume that this is just the norm. For many dancers, it unfortunately still is.



Albany Adele graduated in March of 2022 with Bachelor degrees in Dance and Education Sciences from the University of California, Irvine. She plans on earning her teaching credential as well as continuing to teach dance to youth in her community. (photo: Skye Schmidt)

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