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RELEASING YOUR INNER HOWLER MONKEY:

Making the Transition into College

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“BUT THAT’S NOT DANCE!”

The first year of college can be a confusing time. After years of technical training at your home studio, the professor of your first college contemporary course now wants you to turn in your feet and hunch your shoulders. Or maybe you walk into your first dance improvisation course and your professor expects you to sing or make strange sounds *while* you turn in your feet and hunch your shoulders. You are left wondering, “What did I get myself into? This is not *dance!*” You forge ahead because you have the drive and heart of a dancer. You acquiesce to your professor’s request for “misaligned” form. You visit the art gallery as required for composition class, perhaps even squeak out some vocal humming in “improv.” All the while you stare questioningly at the one student who actually seems to enjoy those things, the one who keeps breaking unspoken rules of dance class etiquette, the one who ditched her tights and cut her hair, the one who succumbed to the gravitational pull of her new BFF, the floor, the one who howls like a monkey, both on demand and of her own volition. You can’t help but wonder why your professor praises her recklessness yet doesn’t seem to notice the extra inch you’ve gained in your battement. As strange as you find this classmate, something about her willingness to let it all hang loose makes you doubt yourself. If this scenario describes your first week, first year, or entire college experience, you are not alone.

Many dancers enter college with plans to join a professional company after graduation. Fantastic. This is a great goal! If, however, you have already sketched out your post-college professional career on paper and it looks pretty similar to your high school or studio dance experience, then college is going to be a long four years.

THINK IN TERMS OF “AND” RATHER THAN “EITHER–OR”

Am I suggesting technique is bad? Of course not. Am I suggesting limiting yourself to dance-as-you-know-it *is*? Absolutely. We live in a culture of quick knowledge accumulation. Gone is the age of wrestling with the unknown and exploring possibilities. Everything we need to know we can find on our smartphones. Sometimes, though, a period of wrestling and exploring yields immense creativity and new ways of thinking. Mucking around in the unknown gives us time to make new choices, choices that yield interesting new dances and interesting ways to perform

them—dances that have not yet been done! Choreographers today are searching for dancers who question, dancers who make bold choices because they have spent time searching for new ways to approach their art form. Don't get me wrong: Technique is important, but rather than thinking in terms of "either-or," think in terms of "and." You can have fabulous technique *and* a ferocious sense of play. You remember play. Kids do it all the time, and you were surely a kid once. Think back to a time when you were curious about things and how they worked. To understand a butterfly, you didn't consult your iPhone; you flapped your wings and tried to fly. You didn't worry about who was watching or if your wings flapped more elegantly than the kid next to you. You just flapped and flew. In the process you learned about butterflies and you learned about yourself. As you got older, you added more and more methods of learning to your repertoire, which is great, but do you still call on the part of your brain that learns through play? If not, it's time to flap and fly again!

Play can (and should!) happen in all your classes. Play leads to more creativity, greater physicality, and even better writing. Play leads to risk-taking and risk-taking leads to growth. Yet this pesky thing called fear often gets in the way: fear of looking silly, fear of "doing it wrong," or fear of being called "boring." Those fears are pretty normal, and whether they admit it or not, your peers are experiencing them too. Fear of the "and," however, can paralyze you. If I ask you, my young dancer, on a single occasion to tendu with a sickled foot or to plié with a slumped torso, will you lose the ability to reproduce the "technically correct" version? Of course not. If I ask you, my young dancer, to vocalize a strong "HA!" to accompany a center jeté, will you lose the ability to produce a softer jeté at a later time? Again, no. If I ask you, my young dancer, to touch and then embody a sculpture of an old man whose spine is hunched, will you kiss your proper head-tail connection goodbye forever? Or what if I ask you to speak or write from that crippled old man's point of view? Will you lose yourself in the process? Nope. Quite the opposite, actually. Every new experience you allow creates a richer you. Think of a painter who works only with the primary colors—the truest versions of red, blue, and yellow. What if he never discovers that orange and green and purple are within his grasp? What if he never discovers that the color orange makes his red and yellow more vibrant? We, your professors, understand your resistance and your apprehension. We have been there ourselves. We know your creative journey will take time, but sometimes we get impatient. We only have you for four years! We long for you to embrace the "and," to see the exploration of uncharted territory as a pathway rather than a distraction. We urge you to invite in that which you do not know or understand.

"Okay, fine," you say. "I do wish I were freer, less timid, in my dancing. I want the confidence to take risks. I want to be the one making the bold new dances. So now what? What do I need to do to get there, to that place you're talking about, that place of wrestling?" So glad you asked.

SIX STEPS TO RELEASING YOUR INNER HOWLER MONKEY

1. Say Yes.

No one likes to risk failure or look silly. Get over it. Say yes to everything. Say yes to yourself. Ask for forgiveness rather than permission in all of your classes. In other words, don't wait to be told what to do; take chances, break the rules. You might even set a trend.

2. Bring Your Whole Self to Everything You Do Every Time.

Picture it—You’re making strange sounds in improv class, which, in turn, causes you to create movement very different from your norm. Don’t leave that discovery in improv class. It is now part of you. Hold tight to the feeling it evoked. Allow yourself to be changed by it. Meditate on it in dance history class as you study our courageous pioneers. Channel it in your jazz or West African class and you will hear and feel exciting new rhythms. Unleash it in ballet class and you will probably jump higher. Let it emerge in your writing assignments and your language will become more evocative and colorful. Bring your new “whole self” to your rehearsal that evening. Doing so will help you make bold choices. Bold choices bring purpose to everything you do.

3. Exposure, Exposure, Exposure.

The amount of dance you have seen and the amount of information you have about dance fits into your pinky finger. I wish someone would have told me this when I was in college (They probably did!). See more. Go to as many live dance events as you can by choreographers you know nothing about. Research them online. Find out who inspires them and research *those* choreographers. Start a journal. Note things you question; things that make you uncomfortable; things that provoke, interest, and challenge you. Resist the urge to label a choreographer or a dance “good” or “bad.” Be open to new ideas. Be bold. Grapple with your biases. Then see more. (*So You Think You Can Dance* doesn’t count. That’s already in your pinky.)

4. Get Out of the Studio (What??!).

Yes, technique is important, but growing as an artist is about so much more than technique. Make friends with music majors, art majors, and creative writing majors. Go with them to concerts, gallery openings, and poetry readings. Find out about the creative processes of artists working in different mediums. How does the violinist approach phrasing? How does the sculptor create shape? How does the poet transform imagery to spoken word? Bring their ways of working into your dance practice. Again, invite in that which you do not know.

5. Trust Your Professors.

If you’re unsure why your professor is asking you to howl like a monkey, do it anyway. Better yet, set up an appointment with that professor outside of class. Ask about her creative process and creative journey. Ask how she transformed from “timid, follow-the-rules dancer” (because I bet she was one) to howler monkey. Most dance professors enter the teaching field because they want to mentor young dancers as well as teach. Don’t wait until your senior year. Build relationships now.

6. Trust Yourself.

Enough said.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Want to howl even louder? Check out the following for tips on making the most of your college dance experience:

Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You about Being Creative by Austin Kleon is a great short read about cultivating your creativity.

Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches by Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver is an incredible tool for understanding and honoring your lineage as a courageous dancer, artist and human being.

Studying Dance: A Guide for Campus and Beyond by Karen Schupp is an in-depth first-year survival guide that should be on the shelf of every college dancer.

REFERENCES

1. Guarino, L. and W. Oliver (Eds.) 2014. *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
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