

In The Balance - Healthier Dancer Event 10 October 06- Elmhurst

The day began in the foyer of Elmhurst School of Dance overlooking a class of young dance students who seemed eager to learn and develop their skills. These dancers had ambition and drive and I found myself wondering what their futures would be. Looking back this was a wholly appropriate introduction to the day which discussed how we can train healthy, happy dancers for successful careers in the dance profession?

The panel in the first session, made up of Rachel Rist, Maggie Morris and Matthew Wyon, ultimately agreed that both depth *and* diversity are needed for a successful and lasting career in a dance industry which demands a vast amount of diverse and adaptive skills as well as excellence in all these areas.

One of the issues raised was that ballet dancers are trained to their peak at the age of 18, however Dance Companies are resistant to employing dancers at this age and want dancers with experience. The question is how do dancers then get this experience?

In order to combat this problem, there was the suggestion of more funding for dance companies to set up apprenticeship schemes for young dancers, with a model put forward from Phoenix Dance Company in which dancers with the company were able to gain a qualification and given a sabbatical, which then left room for an apprentice to join the company for a year. Another suggestion was to re-look at the timing of dance training, so that dancers peak at an older age when dance companies are more comfortable with employing dancers, just like athletes are trained to peak at the right time.

Matt Wyon looked at the intensity of dance training in comparison with intensity of dance performance. He explained how dancers can find it difficult to cope with the high intensity work of performance at first as traditional dance training is not set up for this. As dancers are so good at what they do, they can often perform movements of high skill without working to a high intensity in terms of heart rate; they are trained to make steps look easy so that is what it can become to their bodies. The danger with this is that the biggest perceived cause of injury to dancers is fatigue. If they are not prepared for the physiological demands of performance, this is when injury can occur. In professional rugby players, there is a 15% injury rate, compared to 80% from the dance profession. Matt suggested implementing training so that dancers are prepared for the high intensity performance work a career in dance demands.

In a panel made up of Toby Norman-Wright, Joan Duda and Angela Pickard the importance of psychological health and motivation as an integral factor of the success of a dancer's career was discussed. The panel drew attention to two types of emotional states, ego-involved; when people look around them for confirmation of their ability, and the other emotional state in which confidence is self resilient, there is an inner confidence that can face external knocks. The issue with the ego-involved state is that it is difficult to maintain confidence when things go wrong, for example, an injury.

In terms of motivation the importance of a dancer having an intrinsic love of dance throughout their training and career was noted. It was suggested that the key to high quality and quantity motivation is that the student has a sense of confidence and can meet the demands placed on them. This will then provide strong foundations, a positive sense of self and a resilience when the student enters into a dance career.

The panel also discussed another essential aspect to creating these strong foundations; that of the student/teacher relationship. The panel identified some important factors in this relationship; a regular feedback system between teachers and students, continual professional development opportunities and that teachers communicate with the students. For example if a teacher isn't saying anything in class because they are stressed, it is important to explain this silence and how it does not mean that the dancing is bad. Perhaps at times with the pressures of expectations we can lose sight of the effect we can have on students. By continually evaluating our work we can make sure that our intentions are put into practice.

In terms of motivation, another strong factor for students was body image and the pressure that dancers can face. A panel made up of Emma Redding, Jann Parry, Wayne Eagling and Laetitia Lo Sardo discussed the issue of body image. The latter described how at one point during her training she felt that her body was becoming more important to her than her dancing and she began to experience unhealthy patterns.

In terms of what is needed from the body for successful dance performance, Emma Redding explained that a healthy level of body fat with a healthy BMI is best for optimum performance. At Laban there has also been research into somatotypes, different body shapes. Emma raised the question of how ethical would it be to use this research to predict successes in dance.

From a critic's point of view, Jann Parry felt that what she really wants to see is articulate bodies that can carry out the choreography well, as well as the emotion and personality of the dancer. In terms of audience expectation, Jann felt that the advertising for dance often portrays sexy, beautiful bodies, especially in Musical Theatre. She also felt that dance does seem to reflect things like fashion, with the models getting skinnier and more strange looking along with ballet dancers. Wayne agreed that dance has become muddled by other things, for him the main thing is that the dancers can carry out the choreography. He also looks for intelligent dancers. His preference is the Balanchine look, however he feels that this is just aesthetic preference. He also drew attention to the fact that in ballet companies you need different shapes and types of dancers for different characters so there is room for flexibility in dancers' body types.

Wayne raised an interesting point when he described being on a judging panel in which he didn't want to put a dancer through to the next stage as she was too unhealthily skinny; he felt this would create an unhealthy role model. Members of the floor drew attention to the fact that in this instance, the way the dancer looked was put before the technical ability, they asked whether this can work the other way; that technical and performance ability can override physical aesthetics.

It was suggested that perhaps it is the employers that need to be involved in this discussion as it is the Industry that continues to set the demands for the career of a dancer. This seems like an interesting thought to pull the day's discussion together, as this change in the Industry would then have a follow-on effect on dance training, as training is being set up to meet the demands of the Industry. Equally, this can be seen in the opposite sense; one feeds into the other, today's students are the future dance Industry, if they are educated in these types of discussions, if students are encouraged to be the strong, resilient people that dancers are, perhaps they can use this drive to re-shape the future of dance. This can only be done alongside the teachers of today, as Rachel Rist said, 'great dancers cannot be produced without

great teachers'. Great teachers also need to work with an Industry in which the main aim is to work with great dancers, with nothing else muddying the choices.

The day ended how it began, young dancers taking a class, this time partnering. As I watched the class I realised that we all have an influence over these students' futures, whether directly or not and in varying degrees. As someone who works in dance, as an audience member, as a teacher, our opinions and our voices will shape their futures. I think that those that have trained in dance have so much physical power and emotional strength, if we can translate this drive into our opinions, voices and choices, we can carve out a happy, fulfilling and successful future for the journey of a dancer.