

Is It the Last Dance?: Ballet Dancers at Age 30

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“The dance artist leads a life very much like any other artist, with certain notable exceptions. . . . Significant achievement in the art becomes at best an exhausting goal, at times an impossible one.”¹ Early dance training is part of a process of acculturation that solidifies the commitment to the rigors of dancing. An occupational identity begins to form during adolescent development, fusing self-identity with occupational identity. The average adolescent is captured by the “magic in the mirror” and does not imagine a time when the dancing will stop. The time-limited nature of the art form and other life-style implications of becoming a dancer seem of little consequence.

Sooner or later, all dancers confront the limitations of the body and of their career potential. “For some, the knowledge that they have made it to the top reinforces their memories and sense of being special, and rekindles the often-cherished belief that all good will now finally come to them. Although there is audience applause, and there can be some satisfaction in feeling superior to those who haven’t made it to the top, disappointment may occur in finding that some of the sought-after rewards are not there. Fame may come and, rarely, fortune; happiness can be achieved if it is based on the satisfaction of accomplishment. But happiness cannot be based on fulfillment of a childhood fantasy of being the most favored, the most beloved; nor can it be based on having gained the teacher’s ultimate approval. Even if the latter is achievable, it does not last. Serious disillusionment is possible at this point.”²

While many authors have described the time-limited nature of a ballet career, very little social science research exists. The market is full of accounts of dancers revealing their personal trials in the ballet world. The most controversial is the sweeping indictment presented by Gelsey Kirkland in *Dancing on My Grave*.³ Such autobiographical literature creates a vivid portrayal of the ballet world but has little impact on that world. “Clive Barnes, when he was writing in the New York Times, noted that ‘A dancer’s career can be seen, in its simplest form, as two graph lines. The first is an ascending curve of a dancer’s artistry, the second is a descending curve of his physical condition. Where these two lines intersect is the peak of a career. After this peak, the dancer’s artistry usually continues to increase, but his physical losses outbalance the increase.’”⁴

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“No one knows for certain when the majority of dancers actually do retire, since no one has compiled official statistics about ballet dancers. . . . Some dancers, like Nureyev or Fonteyn, may be able to dance until they are quite old: audiences attracted by their fame will forgive their declining technique, and choreographers will tailor roles to suit their dwindling abilities. Most dancers are not so indulged. The majority are forced to quit far earlier. Their bodies simply give out, and either they suffer a serious injury or they lose the stamina they once had. . . . Others realize that they will never be the stars they had dreamed of being when they were younger. Discouraged and washed up by age twenty-five or twenty-eight, they have run out of patience.”⁵

“And what do we know of retirement practices of dancers? I know of only one attempt at systematic examination of this question, and a limited one at that. We have studies on retirement of older persons in general, teachers, professors, managers or clerical workers . . . none on dancers. The decision to end a dance career appears at first glance to be personal in nature, but the curious nature of that personal decision is reflected in the observation that it is one not supported by occupationally structured paths.”⁶

Purpose of The Study

In 1979 a study was undertaken to examine the nature of a major stressful dilemma encountered by professional female ballet dancers—the decision to stop dancing.⁷ It was replicated in 1987 with a new sample. The study goes beyond the stereotypic portrayal of the ballet world, discovering the effects of aging as dancers relate them by grounding the research in an understanding of the ballet world as a social system and of adult development theory.

From voluminous reels of taped interviews of professional female ballet dancers aged 25–38, an account of a particular form of the “age 30 transition” is presented. Examination of this transition identifies the ways in which women in the ballet world confront the stress of a significant career shift and life-style change. The interview data revealed some of the precipitators of the retirement decision as well as a rich description of the transition process.⁷ The study

focuses on the themes of threat to identity, personal disruption, shifts in artistic productivity, predisposition to injury, and loss of self-esteem during this period.

This paper summarizes those findings as well as reports on current trends in the field that attempt to respond to the needs of the ballet community in preparation for career change or retirement.

Methodology

The research methodology for the study was ethnographic. The ethnographer seeks to describe a culture using criteria that his/her informants employ as they observe, interpret, and describe their own experiences during the course of life.⁸ The ethnography was accomplished through participant observation. Participant observation is the process of field work whereby the researcher "immerses" himself/herself in an organization or social setting. This type of data collection allows the researcher to capture the participants on their own terms by forcing them to learn the analytic order of the culture being reported. Direct observation and interviews were used. "An interview is an information-providing speech exchange in which some of the knowledge of the consultant is given to the interviewer. The information may be a replication of the ethnographer's prior knowledge, but it is essential that the response is not assumed to be predictable."⁹

The original sample consisted of 20 professional female dancers in the 27–35 age range. The subjects held positions of corp member, soloist and principal dancer in major ballet companies as well as in a random sample of regional ballet organizations. All the companies included in the study are listed in the *Dance Magazine Annual—Music and Dance Performing Arts Directory*.¹⁰

The follow-up sample (1987) consisted of 8 female ballet soloists aged 25–38, from nationally recognized companies that tour the major metropolitan cities. Six dancers were identified as possible participants by dancers who had participated in the earlier study and two were asked to be interviewed during field work. Semi-structured interviews lasted 3–4 hours and were taped and transcribed.

The data were subjected to content analysis. The logic of confirmation then followed the same as in more structured research; only the nature of the data was different. The logic evolved from sequential analysis. A theoretical model was constructed from specific observations or interview themes.

To conduct the sequential analysis, the indices and concepts were defined, the frequency and distribution were tabled, and individual findings were then incorporated.

Dancers at a Turning Point

At around age 30, the female ballerina faces the decision/transition process because of biologically and culturally determined pressures toward retirement. Conflicts and developmental issues may appear as a spontaneous emergence

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of discontent, frustration, and preoccupation with future life-course that is not associated with or triggered by a single event. The conflicts are internally and externally induced, and produce a powerful experience of personal identity under assault. As reported by one respondent:

"I felt cut off from everyone . . . I couldn't really express my feelings to the younger dancers and the more 'senior' members told me I was being silly . . . I had years to dance yet. But it didn't feel that way inside of me. At a time when I needed support and understanding the most, I grew increasingly withdrawn, as if there was no way for me to connect with the company. After a while I convinced myself the only answer was to leave the company . . . I was afraid I couldn't cut it anymore. But my God you don't walk out on your life like you walk out on a job."

Ego Identity

Because dancing and the role of dancer are such a core part of ego identity, its loss can be devastating. Using Erickson's definition, the ego identity is more than the sum of the childhood identifications.¹¹ It is the inner capital accrued from all those experiences of each successive stage, when successful identification led to a successful alignment of the individual's basic drives with his endowment and his opportunities. Also in keeping with Erickson's belief, the dancer's internalized sense of role must be continually examined in light of the social system context. As such, a crucial component of ego identity formed while the dancer was young. Ego identity as dancer and commitment to an occupational world happen early in the developmental process. When a professional ballet dancer considers retirement, he/she is giving up a sense of self, the primary sentient group, critical mentors, and life-style.

In Joan Brady's, *The UnMaking of a Dancer*, a young woman describes her struggle, "I spend so much time lying to myself. I mean, really, I know I'm smart enough to get out of this business. What am I doing here? Why do I bother? Why am I so afraid? I'm not even sure I want to perform. So I lie to myself—or put things off so I don't have to listen to what I'm thinking. So what have I got? Years of work just to make myself eligible for the job of cog in someone else's creation. But it's worse than that. I don't even have illusions about becoming a soloist anymore. So what am I working for? To stand in a line of twenty-four girls with the sole aim of being indistinguishable from any of them. I don't look like an experienced dancer, and I'm too old to be anything else, Much too old . . . Twenty-three."¹²

Adult Development Theory and Career Transition

Before continuing with the dancer's story, however, it is beneficial to review briefly the contribution of adult development theory that aids in understanding the impact and significance of career decisions and transitions in the context of the life cycle. A life-course transition involves moving into a period of liminality. This liminal phase allows

the individual to move from one stage of development to the next. Accomplishing the developmental tasks in each of these phases means psychological growth and resolution of some of the conflicts left over from earlier phases. A developmental crisis can occur during one of these transitions when the individual's internal resources and the external system are overwhelmed by demands for adaptation and change. This view of adult development integrates a dynamic view of personality with social systems theory—the individual is examined in the context of their social organizations.

The interrelationship of the occupation of dancer and the identity as dancer presents many developmental challenges. The interviews made it apparent that the social system of the dance world had a major impact on the age 30 dancer's experience. A conflict or misfit often exists between the individual's developmental needs and the requirements of that art world.

Toni Bentley muses on her place within the ballet world in her journal, *Winter Season*. "I'm truly sad today. I'm twenty-two, and feel that my career is at standstill. For eleven or twelve years it has moved forward, and now it is stagnating and going nowhere. What can I feel but some sort of ending? I should be happy I am still young enough to begin again, but I've no money, no lover, no future I can see, only the same ballets, season after season. . . . I know I must leave. My direction and view must change, and yet . . . yet forever I ask why and how and whence comes this pain. Is it the competition? The solitude? Is it the physical pain, fatigue and strain? Is it my position in the corps, where I am unneeded and seemingly unnoticed? Do I affect my success, or do they, the management?"¹³

From a developmental perspective, many of the conflicts and dilemmas facing the dancer are also common for other professional women at age 30. For many young women, the pull of the desire for relationship and family is countered by the pull for career and autonomy. There is an increasing conscious urgency because of the experience of time running out, partly as a result of biological triggers combined with social pressure for childbearing. Other major themes and tasks include:

1. The struggle to separate from the family of origin. While most women have physically separated or left home, psychological bonds of dependency often remain. In some cases, the dependency has been transferred from the parents to a husband. It is around this age that many women attempt to become psychologically separate and "whole," partly in preparation for taking care of their own children. This form of individuation has been facilitated by the women's movement.

2. The examination of what was produced by "putting down roots" in the twenties. This examination is almost always followed by a reappraisal of the path one's life is taking.¹⁵ For some, this leads to the experience of disillusionment and loss expressed as, "I never knew it would be

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like this." Cost and "pay-offs" are weighed with a much more critical eye. Also emerging from the evaluation is the intensification of efforts to have some form of traditional stability in lifestyle . . . in terms of relationships, occupation, and goals. It is a period when the dreams and visions of youth can be compared to the concrete manifestations of accomplishment.

3. Attempts to resolve the conflict between affiliation and achievement needs (i.e., love vs. success).

While many women around age 30 begin to encounter the unconscious stirrings of the themes mentioned above, the retirement of dancers is especially significant as a demonstration of the interplay of adult life cycle development and occupational development. All of these themes were expressed by those interviewed. Retirement pressures were painful because of the loss of identity and the conflict produced by internalizing the constraints, conventions, and standards of the dance world. Membership in the dance world as a professional demands a particular kind of conformity, even to the extent of accepting age-graded stereotypes about performance, competence, and health.

Results

A major significant finding of the interviews was the extent to which the dancers themselves colluded with the social system in maintaining certain standards, conventions, and mythology. Of the themes most frequently identified, the following were seen as the main precipitators of a career transition:

1. The struggle with the ballet aesthetic—overemphasis on youth, technical virtuosity, distorted image of the feminine, and a body aesthetic that is alarmingly similar to anorexia nervosa in other populations. Dancers interviewed described the demoralizing effects of dancing with a "weight clause" contract or being verbally attacked for not losing 4 or 5 pounds. They also described the love-hate relationship with their bodies in their efforts toward perfection in physical execution.

"It's funny the way the public thinks that dancers treat their bodies with such respect. Just look around this place . . . diet pop and cigarettes . . . skin and bone bodies eating celery sticks and talking about food! I'm looking forward to being normal, but I think I'll always worry about my weight."

2. Preoccupation with injury and the effects of aging. This was true even of those who never experienced a serious injury. In several instances there was an overdetermined quality in the preoccupation. Dancers spend a great deal of time comparing notes on aches and pains as well as constant observation of each other's physical strengths and weaknesses. Some respondents identified the way in which they become more compulsive about their personal rituals for food, warm-up etc., while others described "violating" their rituals in a counterphobic way. Yet others seem to flirt with injury regularly, perhaps as an unconscious expression of the conflict of remaining in the ballet world.

"I became so afraid of injury that I began to hold back on certain movements. I couldn't seem to control it. Fear governed my life. The result was that I became more and more restricted in my range of movement that I lost strength and flexibility. I ended up really injuring myself in performance."

3. Competition is a way of life in the ballet world. For the dancer there is a definite sequence of events, auditions, and apprenticeships that must be followed toward advancement. Being discovered and instantly promoted to soloist only happens in the movies. Dancers are in a constant state of tension. There is no tenure in the dance world, and seniority means ambiguity about the future. Younger dancers are constantly struggling to "get in" while corps members are struggling to "get out." Soloists worry about the future of the next role or the new ballet.

"It's very hard to be real friends here. You can get close to someone only to discover that she is your rival for that role. Many of the teachers really capitalize on it too. They keep reminding you who is doing better and who looks wonderful. You may look great in class today but you could be totally off tomorrow."

4. The dance company functions as a family system and some dancers are trapped in adolescence within it. Many of the dancers reported that in the beginning of their careers with a company, especially those who relocated to New York at a young age, it was very satisfying to feel part of a large family. However, as stated earlier in this paper, the need to differentiate and separate from the family becomes increasingly important at around age 30. There are limited options for differentiating in a dance company. Some differentiation takes place as the result of competence or skill. As in the case of adolescents, some forms of differentiation are maladaptive (such as injury or aberrant behavior).

For some, the "family" became oppressive and engulfing. A few described a stereotypic adolescent struggle with the rules and regulations of the company. Many young women come of age within the dance company, which serves as family. A significant number were separated from their families of origin in their teens, an important developmental period when images of healthy femininity are internalized.

Like some families, the dance world fosters dependency, not autonomy, in the psychological sense. While dancers live independently in major metropolitan areas, they are psychologically dependent on the organization and culture of the dance world. They are the boys and girls of the dance.

"Who wants to stay like a kid forever. It's not that I didn't appreciate the love and caring from other members of the corps, but I worried that I would never feel like my own person. The older I got, the more it troubled me. You feel like just another face in a large family."

5. Relationships and the search for intimacy. Again, there is a strong pull toward affiliation needs, or what Stewart referred to as the relational dream.¹⁵ The dancers interviewed were evenly divided on the question of intimate relationships, either finding another dancer or "going outside." Both choices involve potential conflicts. It is difficult to maintain any relationship with the demands of a touring schedule.

"The pool of available men is small . . . many of the great looking guys are gay." "Dancers can be divided into two groups . . . those that party and go out and have a life, and those that go home directly from the theatre and prepare for the next day."

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Several dancers described relationships that served a transitional purpose in supporting the dancer's struggle to leave the dance world. This transitional relationship was essential to the dancer's decision to leave. The relationships served to reduce some of the fear of the unknown of life after dance. Marriage was seen by many as the solution to the question of career transition.

6. Fame and the aging dancer cannot be compared to fame and the aging athlete. Dancers are not used to inspire advertising campaigns after their retirement, nor do they achieve the levels of salary or benefits of athletes. Being famous in the dance world does not even guarantee success by moving into a new position within that world. Former virtuoso ballerinas do not necessarily make great artistic directors. The most recent case in point is the demise of The Chicago City Ballet established by distinguished ballerina Maria Tallchief. This leads many dancers to question the commitment to the pursuit of fame when the first signs of physical decline appear.

7. Assessment of the lack of career alternatives within the dance world. The number of nationally recognized women choreographers in the ballet world can be counted on one hand. The craft of choreography is expected to be naturally endowed and not learned through apprenticeship or study. There is no natural process whereby a performer studies choreography and is not required to show results until they have mastered the craft. Many dancers assume that they will make the transition from performer to teacher or coach. Teaching, however, is another skill that must be developed. Increasing demand for academic degrees has made it difficult for professionals to move beyond the confines of the dance studio environment.

The most significant finding, however, was the difference between responses in the 1979 and 1987 study with regard to perceptions of career alternatives. There was a marked increase in the number of respondents who identified educational opportunities that could lead to new careers in the dance world. These included dance writing/criticism, physical therapy, dance therapy, and dance company administration.

Conclusions

The implications of the findings of this study could be important in affecting what for many dancers has been a premature departure from artistic productivity.

- At the organizational level, questions of dance training must be examined and reformed.

- Dancers often approach the retirement decision process in great turmoil, often as the result of fear of entering a work world for which they feel they do not have marketable skills. Many respondents commented on the image of dancers as stupid and its effect on their self-esteem.

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● There is a critical lack of support structures within the organization to help dancers deal with and confront their feelings of disillusionment and loss experienced at different points in their careers. Some organizations, however, are addressing these needs, such as PACH, the Performing Arts Center for Health in New York City. DANCE USA recently presented a panel discussion on career transition and the dancer. Most notable is the work of The Actors' Fund of America. A recent issue of "In-Step," a newsletter for Career Transition for Dancers, states: "This innovative program, started in 1985 by the Performing Arts Unions, is administered by The Actors' Fund of America. Currently, 182 performers are now being aided by this excellent new service. Over 40 dancers have already made successful transitions to alternative careers and another 26 will join the group by the end of the year." The staff includes vocational counselors and social workers. They run an ongoing series of workshops and seminars. The program will soon expand to provide services in Los Angeles as well.¹⁶

● Dance seasons, performance and rehearsal schedules do not facilitate or allow for outside training or educational activities that could promote a less disruptive shift from dancing to other work orientations. Retirement benefits and disability compensation plans are seriously inadequate and in many cases are nonexistent.

● "Yet another issue is that the arts have traditionally been starved for funds in the United States. This has discouraged the establishment of state-supported training institutions for dancers, which, in other societies, has encouraged the development of postperforming career opportunities and, ultimately, pensions. This has led to the present free-enterprise system of dance training and socialization, which, whatever its benefits, certainly exacerbates the problems involved in creating a continuous career pattern for dancers."¹⁷

● Medical practitioners should put the presenting problem of illness or injury in the context of the developmental issues of the dancer. These findings have numerous implications for medical practice.

As for dancers themselves, the most disturbing theme borne out during the interviews was that frequently dancers had no plan or goal for after the dancing stopped. In some instances a simplistic solution was sought for what is a complex problem. Others demonstrated denial as a primary defense to protect themselves from engaging in the transition. Some attempted to prolong their career in spite of their own ambivalence, whereas others ended their careers prematurely (in terms of realizing their potential).

As in all major life transitions, the individual needs support and understanding. Most significantly, for the dancer it means temporarily disengaging from the myths and ideologies of the dance world long enough to evaluate the real alternatives and opportunities available and having access to other support systems and resources.

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