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Redefining the Competitive Dance Industry: A Plan for the Dance Competitions of Tomorrow

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**Redefining the Competitive Dance Industry:
A Plan for the Dance Competitions of
Tomorrow**

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ABSTRACT

There is an absence of direct focus in the development of a dancer's education within today's competitive dance world, as current dance competitions have many holes in providing the proper training and education a young dancer needs. It is clear that dance competitions are for-profit businesses with a focus on making money, but it is time to turn these businesses into opportunities for growth, success, and a place where pure talent can be discovered and then launched into the next generation of professional dancers.

I am a strong believer in education. Therefore, I believe competitive dance should be another form of education. Unfortunately, in today's society, the focus has shifted from education to gratification, which is why I believe the time is now to address this issue.

I conducted a series of surveys to send out to competition directors, studio owners, convention teachers, professional dancers, parents of competitive dancers, and current dance majors in college pursuing a professional dance career. The survey asked various background questions about their involvement in competitive dance to where they would like to see the dance industry move in the future.

The surveys help in the fact that now I do know it is not the industry as a whole that needs a major uplift, but the small details that all affect and go into a dance competition. There are many things that could easily change to help protect and promote the dance industry, and after many hours spent going over responses and rereading what all the dance articles say, I will now present my ideas for a new type of dance competition.

As you can see, the undertaking of a new type of competition is large, but the benefits are crucial. Reshaping the competitive dance industry will take time, but it starts with a brave individual to stand up and be the change for what the dancers of tomorrow need. Overall, the main purpose of my findings and ideas is to preserve the integrity and artistry of the competitive dance culture.

Redefining the Competitive Dance Industry: A Plan for the Dance Competitions of Tomorrow

Introduction

My mom always says I practically came out of the womb dancing. She put me on stage at three weeks old as a prop with her college show choir. My mom comes from a long line of music educators and is a music and dance teacher herself. It was extremely natural for me to follow in her footsteps. I started taking dance class as soon as I could, age three to be exact. Lucky for her, I was smitten with the idea of being a dancer. I took as many classes as I could, and in third grade, I entered my first dance competition. Both my mom and my studio owner knew that if I wanted to see the dance world and keep improving, I, along with my home dance studio, would need to attend outside conventions and competitions. A dance competition is simply a competition between many dancers who create dance routines in various styles with different amounts of people in certain age groups. Dancers are able to compete in just one number or as many as fifteen numbers. A panel of approved and qualified judges rank and rate the dancers, usually ages five to eighteen, in solos, duo, trio, small group, and large group categories and award the top winners at the end of each day. A competition company usually schedules a nationwide tour, with events in various cities. These are called regionals. Regionals then lead to nationals, which normally take place in the summer at the end of the competition season. While not all dance studios choose to participate in these competitions, many do because of the educational opportunities.

At my first competition, I competed in only one big group dance. However, I loved taking classes from other teachers, meeting dancers from various studios, and refining my performance skills. The next year I decided to compete again and continued to do so throughout my high school years. By the time I was in middle school, I was competing with two solos and several group numbers at each competition. Yet, my dance teacher knew that competitive dance wasn't the only way to grow and be successful. Our studio competed in two to three competitions during the spring semester.

I thank my dance teacher for installing in me, and each of our studio dancers, a healthy mindset and attitude throughout all these competition years. Competitive dance pushed me to a new level, and I credit those experiences in helping me get to New York City as a dancer. I learned several extremely important lessons throughout my competition days that helped me develop as a dancer and as a person. Not only did I have to work as a team with my peers in our group numbers, but I had to push myself to be the best I could be to be successful and find a balance in both the group numbers and solo routines.

Dance competitions were not only a vital part of my life, but also a vital part of the lives of my peers. In the Pace Commercial Dance program, I estimate 9 out of 10 dancers grew up in the competition world, and the ones that did not get to experience that life, now wish they would have had that chance. Many of the competition alums are now invited to assist or judge at these competitions as well. In addition, several of the Pace Commercial Dance faculty travel on weekends to teach and adjudicate for some of the most successful dance competitions in the country. It is safe to say that dance competitions are quite normal for dancers, and many dancers have found success and strength through them. However, it is important to clarify that dance competitions should not be the only approach used to train as a dancer. Done properly,

competitive dance can heighten a dancer and their talent, work ethic, and drive, but it never should be substituted for technique or passion.

I am a strong believer in education. Therefore, I believe competitive dance should be included in dance education. Unfortunately, in today's society, the focus has shifted from education to gratification, which is why I believe it is time to address this issue. In the following pages, you will see the past, present, and future of competitive dance. At the end, I will propose a new type of competition that would be a proposition to the dance industry that is something I do plan to put into action in the future. After performing, I dream of a career in Dance Administration, and this research will allow me to develop a game plan for when I decide to direct and own my own competition to train the dancers of tomorrow.

Industry Overview

Competition is a struggle, a fight between entities opposing each other for a desired outcome. We see competition in many areas of life, including athletics, academics, the job market, and so forth. Dance is an art form. However, dance competitions have become a common component of a dancer's training. While competitive dance does not define a student's education, it does, however, enhance the student's drive and ability to work hard and improve. With over hundreds of dance competitions currently in the industry, there are hundreds of thousands of young dancers, from the ages of three to eighteen, participating in these weekend events. Dance competitions have turned into "big businesses," meaning the market's demand is high and the profit is extraordinary. According to author and researcher Hilary Levey Friedman, "Competitive dance refers to for-profit dance competitions that organize regional and national competitions for all forms of dance, as opposed to dance that is competitive only for admission

to companies and programs or for roles in special productions" (41). The competition season usually runs September to July, and dancers can participate in however many competitions they choose, with or without their studio. Therefore, individual dancers from studios can compete as "independents" if they attend a competition without their studio. For this paper, when I reference dance competitions I am only referring to dance competitions that include both a competitive showcase and convention classes. Some competitions include only the competition component. I believe in order to create a better competition for the future, we must only keep the competitions that place a large emphasis on education, meaning the teachers and judges take the time to educate and inspire the dancers of tomorrow through classes, feedback, and one-on-one interaction.

Dance, just like any other art form, is very specialized. All types of art forms require a minimum amount of education on the topic. Today, most people automatically associate dance competitions with what they see on reality television shows like *Dance Moms*, *So You Think You Can Dance (SYTYCD)*, and *Dancing with the Stars (DWTS)*. Competitive dance shows like *SYTYCD* and *DWTS* have heightened dance competitions and brought them into the spotlight, showcasing the commercialization of the art form. In addition, viewers of shows like *SYTYCD* and *DWTS* are being thrust into a unique type of dance education and quickly learn to appreciate various dance styles while watching these shows. The tremendous interest in these reality television shows has also increased the interest in competitive dance. These reality shows have brought dance to mainstream culture, and audiences are now more aware of dance than they might have previously been. *SYTYCD* executive producer Nigel Lythgoe recently said that bringing dance to television has "moved a generation and certainly revitalized dance and brought it before a much larger public arena than it's ever had before" (La Rocco).

Dance competitions are simply trending right now. “In capitalizing on the American obsession with rating winners and losers in everything from singing to cooking, competitive dance has brought dance out of the concert hall and into the strip mall, arguably making what has long been an elite art form more popular than ever before” (Levin). So when is the ideal time to spark the change? The time to capitalize on this movement is now, as “the competition world has become a strong source of inspiration for many young people, motivating them to choose dance as a career” (Gold 96).

If now is the time to boost competitive dance more than ever before, it is important to highlight the good and facilitate the education that comes from competitive dance. For one, dance competitions can take classroom dancing to the next level. Joe Lanteri, founder of the highly successful dance competition New York City Dance Alliance (NYCDA), said, “What we do is also a performance art. You can only do it in the classroom for so long” (La Rocco). A huge component of being a performer is obviously performing. Competitions aid students in their performance skills and provide many opportunities to present themselves in front of industry professionals. Dancers work extremely hard in the studio, so they think they should be rewarded with these extra performance and networking opportunities. According to Arizona State dance professor Karen Schupp, “One of the pleasures of training in a competitive dance studio is the number of performance opportunities. Giving students the chance to perform keeps them interested and passionate in their dancing. It also reminds them of how much fun it can be to dance and to express themselves” (27).

Education is also a crucial component of competitive dance. Lanteri continues, “From an educational standpoint, when the actual competition of an event is handled properly, you're being adjudicated by some very talented, reputable people, who are there more as educators than

adjudicators” (La Rocco). While this is not always the case, it is what the industry strives for. NYCDA is one competition that "emphasizes education over competition." Executive Director Lanteri said, "It's not about the trophy here. It's about the journey. This is the real deal. This is the closest thing they will get to the professional world. That's what keeps people coming back, not the fact that we give them an award" (Kinetz).

Another important purpose of dance competitions is to expose dancers to industry professionals at a young age and to what characteristics comprise successful dancers in this business. Dance competitions encourage young dancers to stay enthusiastic about dance, as it is extremely exciting to work with the industry's top professionals. Young children look up to the convention's faculty, and it is unforgettable when the faculty takes the time to teach, encourage, and inspire the students, as many teachers are also currently working in other major dance arenas. Many children stay in dance because of the feedback given and opportunities generated from competitions. If the focus is on education, competitions will always be successful.

Tremaine founder Joe Tremaine once said, "Teachers should inform parents that a competition, from the standpoint of training, is about performing onstage, obtaining a critique from professionals outside the school, and then working on weaknesses. Should an entrant receive an award, it should not be regarded as a guarantee that the student or group will become professional. Competitions teach the student sportsmanship, courtesy, and a professional attitude. If wanting to win an award is the sole reason for entering a competition, it's a misguided goal" (Horosko). Dancers and teachers receive back the energy they give at dance competitions. If these dancers and teachers exercise their effort, positivity, and excitement, they will gain it back along with so much more. Lastly, if one of the purposes of putting a child in competitive dance is to help bridge the gap between childhood dancers and professional dancers, then competitions

must be teaching and passing down what skills a dancer needs to be successful. Initially, competitions teach how to be competitive while keeping kindness in the equation. The dance industry is small and all about connections made, therefore it is important to start learning how to present and promote yourself. Competitive dance encourages students to push themselves past limits and into a place they never knew existed. In addition, professional dancers need to be self-sufficient and able to correct themselves, competitions can and should encourage from a young age that self-teaching mindset (Schupp 27).

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that competitions are not the end all. In fact, some competitions work against a young child's training. It is a case-by-case study, but if done correctly, competitions should aid in a dancer's career. It is extremely important to keep the competitions in perspective and focused on education instead of letting it turn into a spectacle. Dance Magazine writer Candice Thompson says, "By itself, a trophy won't really prepare you for professional life. More valuable than placing at competitions is the exposure you receive and the connections you can make while you're there" (48). At the end of the day, a dancer's competition trophies and plaques imply the dancer worked hard to get to that stage. Those same trophies and plaques then sit on a shelf gathering dust. However, the memories and training live on.

Working to your fullest potential and gaining exposure are the two most important things to remember when attending a competition. Renowned dancer, teacher, and choreographer Mandy Moore once said, "Competition doesn't determine the success you're going to have or what kind of dancer you're going to be. Don't let it define who you are as a dancer" ("Judges Panel"). It is important not to sacrifice technique, artistry, or the pure joy of dance for awards. Technique should be heightened if a student is competing in the right mindset. Substituting technique for competition will harm the students in many ways. *SYTYCD* choreographer and

master teacher Mia Michaels comments, "It's about balance. If the studio or kid just focuses on competitions, they can get so caught up in winning they lose why they're doing it. A lot of times competition kids dance like robots ... all tricks and no emotion or artistry. You can get caught in the formula of what will win a trophy as opposed to training a real dancer" (La Rocco).

Because the industry is unregulated, the judging scale of competitions varies from competition to competition. Author of *Dance Competitions: Are You Ready?* Jill Ann Wolins says, "Dance competitions are unique, as results are determined by a panel of judges and their opinions" (40). The key word in dance adjudication is opinion, which is why the panel of judges are crucially important and their job should not be taken lightly. Usually, dancers are judged by three to five judges based on a scale from 1-100. Their total score places them in a division, usually ranked platinum, high gold, gold, and silver. Many competitions have scratched the typical first place and have moved to awarding prizes for hitting certain point categories. Thus, there may be a group of top scorers, rather than one first place winner. After the score range awards, there are divisional and overall awards. The dancers who won these awards scored the highest of the day in a defined category, such as an age division, and usually receive a small plaque or trophy. The instant gratification of these awards is what draws in young dancers and sometimes more so, their parents. In fact, the given point score ranges and that every dancer receives a rank has angered some parents saying that it is "shameless and for-profit pandering" (Kinetz). However, one Pace Commercial Dancer stated if she could change one thing about the current structure of competitive dance she would change the structure "that everybody wins." In her opinion, "we would learn more with less awards." This is not shameless, as it encourages even the meekest of dancers to continue in their education and training.

Dancers can spend up to 20-30 hours in the studio each week only to be scored in a matter of a few seconds. However, the main goal of a judge is to offer constructive criticism while still inspiring the dancers (Gold). The best judges are able to appreciate the efforts given by every dancer, whether highly talented or not. NYCDA teacher and judge Suzi Taylor says when judging she "looks at how precise they are, how their musicality is. You look at how they affected you. How that piece stood out beyond all the other pieces that were shown" (Feidelson). The judges have a huge responsibility on their shoulders. Renowned dance educator Rhee Gold says, "Those who have a desire to judge need to understand the influence they will have on the future generation of dancers" (96). Dance competitions should not be taken lightly. When taken seriously and focused correctly, they can have a major impact on the dance world as a whole and push the dance industry into the right direction.

Literature Review

Before diving into how the current dance industry feels about the dance competitions of today, it is important to look at what both dance and non-dance scholars say not only about competitive dance but about youth competitions in general. Overall, there is not much scholarly information on dance competitions, as they are relatively new, especially to the awareness of mainstream culture. However, there is a long history of childhood competitions in America. Ultimately, competitive sports were created to keep children off the streets, in addition to giving them structure while allowing them to work as a team and respect authority (Friedman 26). Competition forces kids to set goals, be self-motivated, and make sacrifices for their art (Robson). The first organized sports were founded in the early 1900s when New York City created NYC's Public School Athletic League (Friedman 27). Years later, the for-profit baseball

organization Little League, which was created in 1939, became one of America's most successful competitive youth programs. Because of Little League and other organizations like it, fee-based programs became popular and common in middle-class families (Friedman 30). Thus, opening the door for non-sport competitions like pageantry and dance.

Yet how did the competitive dance “sport” emerge from such a historically respected, renowned art form? Simply, competition is a natural part of dance. Dancers compete daily for roles, performances, attention in auditions or class, and eventually jobs within the industry (Robson). Dance has always been a competitive sport by nature. In fact, it has been said that a parent is more likely to win the lottery than have a child who is a successful professional dancer. When the first formal dance competitions in America were formed, their aim was to help students and their teachers make connections, learn new techniques, and display their talent. Dance Masters of America first originated the solo dancer competition in 1963 with many private dance competitions following soon after in the 1970s (Friedman). Dance competition director and The Pulse CEO Pam Chancey explains that the goal of dance competitions in the 1960s “was to challenge professionals and add prestige to the art of dance. At that time, many people criticized dance competitions for attempting to turn dance, an art form, into a sport” (Friedman 42). Nowadays, according to dance educator Janice LaPointe-Crump, “Competitive dancing is a sport, a category of dance, in which contestants endeavor to do their best by performing beyond what the experts expect” (4). Whether “sport” or not, competitive dance takes both dancers and dance to the next level. However, because there is no national standard for dance competitions, there is a lack of uniformity across the varying organizations, which can be misinterpreted as cheapening dance. This is why the for-profit competitive dance world often has a bad reputation.

As mentioned before, there are several benefits to participating in competitive dance. LaPointe-Crump remarks, "a contest may spur students to go beyond technical skills and raw talent to artistically move hearts and minds" (4). Cultivating artistry at such a young age is extremely important to develop highly-creative individuals not just for the dance world but for humanity as a whole. The best dancers are creative-minded, contribute to society, and are confident in their talent. Dance teaches lessons that go beyond the stage and studio.

Nowadays, a competitive edge is important in not just dance or childhood sports, as American childhood is now extremely competitive by itself. Yet, it is important to find a balance of competitiveness and fairness in today's society. So why do parents push their kids into competitions such as Little League or beauty pageants? According to *Raising Children in a Competitive Culture* author Hilary Levey Friedman, parents want their children to "be better than average in all things, so they tried to provide them with professionally run activities that would enrich their minds, tone their bodies, inculcate physical skills, and enhance their self-esteem" (31). Simply, winning is addictive to parents. However, it is essential that the parents shift the focus to excellence rather than results (Robson 164). In her book, Friedman outlines what she calls the "Competitive Kid Capital," meaning the five lessons children should take away from competitive activities. The Competitive Kid Capital is "internalizing the importance of winning, learning how to recover from a loss to win in the future, managing time pressure, performing in stressful environments, and feeling comfortable being judged by others in public" (219).

All these lessons can and should be applied to competitive dance. Because competitive dance is such a hypercompetitive atmosphere, it is dangerous to place emphasis on the destination rather than the journey. The emphasis should be placed on the training and growth to achieve the desired level of dance the industry requires. If a dancer goes into competitive dance

with the wrong mindset, they will in turn receive the wrong results and feedback. Childhood competition can promote or destroy a kid's mentality of how they approach their future. However, if done correctly, competition can push the child to be the best possible version of themselves, and I believe this is what competitions should strive to do.

Purpose and Hypothesis

As an aspiring dancer and future educator, there is purpose and intention behind every aspect of this thesis. I plan to put this into action and want to share my ideas with the dance community. If it sparks an idea or impacts someone else, then I have done my job. The dance community is small; therefore, the impact will be great. As mentioned before, the time is now to make this change and shift in the competitive dance industry. What started as a means of education has slowly shifted to a means of solely financial gain -- and not for the dance studio. The purpose behind my plan and action is to realign the focus back to education.

There is an absence of direct focus in the development of a dancer's education within today's competitive dance world, as current dance competitions have many gaping holes in providing the proper training and education for the young dancer needs. Currently, it is clear that dance competitions are for-profit businesses with a focus on making money, but it is time to turn these businesses into opportunities for growth, success, and a place where pure talent can be discovered and launched into the next generation of professional dancers.

Methodology

The first step in changing the current competitive dance culture is to learn what industry professionals think and say about the modern-day dance competition. To prove my hypothesis, I

conducted a series of surveys that were sent to competition directors, studio owners, convention teachers, professional dancers, parents of competitive dancers, and current college dance majors pursuing a professional dance career. The survey asked various background questions from current involvement in competitive dance to where they would like to see the future of the dance industry go. Because there are no academic standards or universal procedures for competitive dance, the voice of the industry remains the best source to provide helpful insight into the steps going forward. The responses and feedback from these questionnaires are what will shape my proposal for a new structure of competition.

Before beginning any research, my advisor and I completed a Social & Behavioral Research Course through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative in order to understand the ethical ways to conduct research with human beings. By learning the rules and regulations of working with people in a survey setting, I was able to create appropriate research questions that would not invade one's privacy or rights. After completing the training, I submitted my thesis proposal to the Institutional Review Board at Pace University along with my research questions and consent forms for each group of people I planned on interviewing. Upon receiving approval from the Pace Institutional Review Board, I was ready to begin researching.

To commence my research, I created six different types of questionnaires on Survey Monkey to be sent out in mass quantities. In order to reach different types of people quickly, my advisor and I decided that an online survey would be the most efficient method as it encouraged participation due to its simplicity and straightforwardness. The surveys ranged from 10-15 questions and, on average, took five minutes to complete. I received 85 responses in total, with 36 of those from current Pace University commercial dance students. I found it extremely beneficial to survey the many voices of this current generation of dance. The opinions and

thoughts of these students matter as a large majority of the Pace University dancers surveyed here have participated in competitive dance before. Thus, the students have a valid first-hand opinion and are also the future of dance, so it made sense to ask their opinion and mindset.

The next group of people that participated in the survey are professional dancers that were active in competitions. The goal was to see if and how these dancers have applied their competitive dance training to their current dance positions. I also received 24 responses from parents of competitive dancers. The parents are on-site observing their children at the competitions so I believe it is important to understand their point of view as well. Along with parents, I decided to survey dance studio owners, as they are the individuals deciding which dance competitions to attend. I received feedback from different studio owners all over the country. The next group of people - competition directors and convention teachers - are intimately involved with the dance competitions. It is crucial to understand why the directors started their competition and what they represent. For the teachers, it is interesting to see why they choose to teach and adjudicate for the competition and what they as judges try to pass on as they evaluate and teach each weekend.

The questionnaires gave me a detailed idea of what I would need to hone in on and change about current-day dance competitions. Through reading the answers, I could see the voices of these dancers, parents, and dance teachers come to life. I could hear the passion in their responses and the determination to keep dance a respected, progressive art form. I respect each and every person that completed my surveys, and I value their input and responses. My thesis would not be what it is without their ideas and time. It takes a village, but in this case, it takes people who are dedicated and committed to their art form and the people devoted to leaving a legacy on such a powerful industry.

Findings

After going over all the survey responses, it is evident there is a strong benefit to competitive dance. Countless people in the industry have been positively impacted by these competitions, as the nature of competitive dance has in some way launched their career forward. One professional dancer described her experience with the discipline and dedication in competitive dance as “the cornerstone of my performance career.” Through reading the responses, I could see that the benefits of competitive dance are clear: connections and relationships were made, work ethics were formed, and performance and technique was heightened.

In addition to the expected answers, I received some surprising responses. For one, a common critique of competitive dance from the student’s perspective is that the competition can be too emphasized or important. While many studio owners responded they did not care how students placed, a lot of parents admitted that they did indeed care how their child placed, or at least they thought in the beginning that was most important. One studio owner from Colorado wrote that “competition is a journey and winning is fun, but not our main focus.” While one parent from Houston, Texas said, “I used to care when they first started competing. But, I am in year ten as a dance mom, and it no longer impacts me. Of course, the accolades are nice. But, more importantly is how my dancers feel after they perform and whether or not they are growing and improving over time. They want to be employed in this dance world, and at the end of the day, whether or not they placed in the overalls of some competition will not determine their success long term.” I believe this parent has the correct perspective: “I can honestly say I don’t exclusively concern myself with the prize or the placement as much as seeing a group of dancers

or a soloist building their skills and experience with each other emotionally on stage. There are very few places where competition in a group setting allows for individuality and artistry. It's living, breathing art and creative expression that I care more about. I think it's good for kids to do group dancing because it allows them to not be first and strive toward something whether it results in a prize or not." It is a case-by-case scenario, but most of the time the studio owner is usually more committed to the overall experience and result, while sometimes the parent just wants the immediate satisfaction of the competition. If everyone involved could change their attitude and mindset, students might not need to feel the intense demands to place well.

Another common finding was that most studio owners do not agree with the current scoring method of these dance competitions. This is a problem because at the end of the day, the studio owners still attend these competitions and put up with the scoring method. Out of nine studio owners surveyed, five of them do not agree with the current scoring method at competitions. Regarding the scoring method, one studio owner from California said, "I would like to see judges score better accordingly to the dancers age and skill level. I feel like they judge beginner dancers harder than advanced dancers." Another teacher from Texas said, "I wish there was more education. The workshops are most valuable. Many of our students want to perform, audition or be a future dance educator. They need to spend time with professionals - in a classroom and not just performing for a score." So if a new competition came along that put emphasis on the education instead of the scores, would dance studios flock to the competition or would it be considered less competitive? It is also important to note that many convention teachers and judges also do not always agree with the scoring method or simply judging works of art, even when they are the ones doing it. One judge and ballet teacher for Jump, a popular convention competition, said, "I think when it comes to any piece of art, measuring it with a

number is an imperfect system. With that said, I think Jump does an incredible job at allocating points within its scoring system to reflect what we think is important in a young student's dance education." In such a short amount of time, how is it humanly possible to accurately judge a dancer on a complex scoring sheet while giving corrections over a microphone? One Pace Commercial Dancer said, "Your score is not a reflection of you as a person. It's is an average of three strangers' subjective opinions in that matter of time." And that is exactly right.

I am not the only voice emphasizing the education component of these competitions. One dance teacher from Texas responded to my survey that her "dance company only attends competitions with conventions, that way their time is spent training and performing. The critiques/feedback received is from working choreographers and dancers in the industry, and not outdated information given by some random hired judges critiquing them." Clearly the selection of teachers and material is extremely important. Another teacher from Kansas said that a competition is successful "if the students learn new material and can come back and share with the other students. We want them to be able to incorporate their learning and growth. It doesn't help to just get numbers assigned to skills. That doesn't help the dancer or the program." Clearly, education is welcomed and valued by all.

As a firm believer in education, I was pleased to find that 100% of the professional dancers that I surveyed who grew up in competitive dance received scholarships that helped fund their schooling and continued education in dance. I recently read that New York City Dance Alliance gave out over \$280,000 in dance scholarships to over 100 dancers last year. If every competition could follow in their footsteps, dancers all over the world could pursue their education fearlessly. However, the scholarships are not the only way dance competitions can help aid the future generation of dance.

In reading the results, it is clear that many professional dancers are where they are now because of the relationships and connections formed through attending these conventions and competitions. When asked what the one thing learned from competitions that you use in your career now, a Pace Commercial Dance Alumni said, “Be kind to everyone you meet. I made so many friendships growing up at competitions that have remained friendships and have turned into working relationships.”

Another interesting fact found through these surveys is the time, money, and sacrifice given by all parties involved to help make these dance competitions successful. Choosing to participate in competitive dance is a big commitment. The time the studios spend rehearsing the pieces varies from five to six months before the competition season to two months of dedicated rehearsals to one hour per week per dance. Parents spend money not only on travel, hotels, costumes, and convention fees, but also each competition dance requires fees from the competition. Each competition season is a financial investment. In addition, dancers give up much time and energy each year to compete.

The surveys helped me understand that it is not the industry as a whole that needs a major uplift, but some of the smaller details that have the power to make major changes in the competitive dance world. There are many small aspects that could easily be improved to help protect and promote the dance industry. After many hours spent going over responses and rereading what all the dance articles say, I will now present my ideas for a new type of dance competition.

It became clear from the beginning that the number one thing to change is the mindset of competitive dance. If in my new competition I shift the focus from competition to education, I will master the original need and problem. Before presenting an actual schedule, name, and idea,

it is important to understand the overall changes to the dance competition industry. The immediate need is to improve the scoring system. Instead of ranking dancers on a point system from 1-100, judges should simply give critiques to help make the dancers better. Alvin Ailey dancer Jamar Roberts has said, “Better artists would come out of the situation if competitive dance was not competitive. Kids would have to learn how to be real artists instead of tricksters” (Levin). In turn, we change the name from “competition” to “adjudication.” For example, judges could give out a good, excellent, or flawless ranking and then give their voice critiques instead of a complicated, easy to mess up system. Instead of picking “winners,” judges could pick one piece from every entering studio that they would like to workshop with the dancers maybe after the competition or after Sunday’s classes and then perform that same piece at a final showcase. If that plan was implemented, each studio would gain personal feedback and a chance to showcase their best work. This changes the focus and name of the competition to an adjudication and developmental situation.

In order to ensure that the judges give equal, undivided attention, there would be a limit on the number of dances allowed from each studio. While reading the answers to my surveys, I discovered that studios bring anywhere from 10-60 competition dances. By limiting the number of entries, the competition would encourage studios to bring their best dances, which in turn would create an exciting and inspiring atmosphere. Another benefit to limiting entries would be that the competition could keep to the schedule presented while younger dancers would not wear out quickly.

Because of the amount of dance, whether classes or competition, packed into a weekend, there should be a strict schedule for the entire event, starting Friday night with classes and ending Sunday afternoon with a showcase. It is a trend nowadays to start competition on Friday

mornings or even, worst case scenario, Thursday evening. This means students miss school and dance classes during the day, which if the overall goal is education, the dance competition should promote all forms of education. One studio owner from Kansas mentioned that her least favorite thing about competitions is forcing the kids to miss school if the competition starts on a weekday. "I am super against dancers being at a competition on a Friday and taking off of school and then competing till midnight." In my plan, if we limit the amount of entries, neither would be an issue.

This leads to the implementation. Master classes provided during the weekend should be varying in styles and techniques. Why shouldn't the mornings start with a full ballet class? And after lunch, do a full jazz class complete with a warm up, progressions, and technique. One convention teacher responded to my survey that "technique never gets old. It's not the current thing, it's not the out of date thing, it's the one thing that sets trained dancer apart from non trained dancers." However, in ensuring that all levels receive proper ballet and jazz technique classes, the competition must be equipped with well-rounded teachers, that is teachers who can teach many different dance disciplines. After each technique class, there could be tap, hip hop, contemporary, and maybe even ballroom or partnering. Many competitions today have 5 or 6 classes that fall under the "contemporary" category. They learn several different combinations on the spot and in turn are exercising their mind more than their technique. By setting both Saturday and Sunday up with technique class, followed by various disciplines, the dancers will improve on both technique and retention/picking up material. In addition to including dance classes of all styles, the competition weekend should also include classes on dance history, choreography, anatomy for dancers, and body awareness for the dancer's overall health, including cross training

ideas and nutrition advice. This would create well-rounded dancers and would help this particular competition to stand out from the rest.

In addition to the scoring method and competition/convention structure, I believe it is imperative to define the age categories and learning levels. The youngest participating age would be 7 years old and the oldest age would be 18. The categories would go as followed: 7-10, 11-14, 15-18. The 7-10 year olds would be classified as juniors, the 11-14 year olds as teens, and the 15-18 year olds would be seniors. The capacity of each room would also be limited in order to ensure that each student would be receiving individual attention and feedback. While these age ranges are broad, by keeping the classes down to three rooms, the competitions would be easier to take to different cities across the country. There will also be a teacher's room to inspire the teachers with new ideas and encourage them to continue their work in their studios.

The competition tour will visit different regional cities from October to April. It is important to get to all areas of the country as many studio owners do not want to make their students and families travel a great distance. The end of the regional tour will culminate with nationals in June, where selected workshopped pieces will have the opportunity to showcase on a national level. In addition, the studios and dancers will have technique and dance academic classes throughout the week. This will take the regional training to the next level. Guest professionals and college programs would be invited to share their craft with evening performances.

Another idea is to partner with multiple performing arts high schools and college dance programs to give out scholarships for school tuition or workshops the schools put on during the rest of the year. By encouraging school sponsors and/or partners, the competition could connect students to further their education through higher institutions. By setting up partnerships with

schools in each city or area the competition visits, the students in each city would have higher level dance programs in the area to look up to and strive to attend. By developing a mentorship with outside education, the competition leaves a lasting impression on the local studios and dancers. With all these ideas, it is time to put them into action as a real plan.

Overall, I was extremely inspired by the responses received from these surveys. From gathering responses, I recognize the dance community cares about the impact and future of the dance industry. When asking my peers what they learned from competitions that they now apply to school, the answers were incredible. One dancer said, “Competitions taught me to be competitive, but to remember my worth and understand that winning an award does not make or break me.” Another said, “I learned to always be an active participant in a classroom setting. No one is going to go the extra mile for you. It is up to you to put in the work.” And lastly, one said, “Time is of the essence. You have to go after the stuff you want, and even though sometimes the answer is no, you still have to keep going.”

Plan

The Chance to Dance is a one-of-a-kind dance experience. By combining the chance to take classes from the most prominent dance teachers with the chance to be adjudicated by the industry’s most knowledgeable and influential educators, your dancers will get an experience unlike anything before. In addition to gaining performance skills, your dancer will also be tested in their technique and overall knowledge of dance. *The Chance to Dance* is set up to allow the teacher and studio to leave the event feeling inspired, challenged, and proud of the accomplishments of each and every dancer. The workshop would begin Friday nights, with classes offered in audition techniques, dance history, anatomy for dancers, and body awareness.

In addition to building exceptional dancers, we believe in the construction of brilliant, well-rounded people, in and out of the dance studio.

Saturday and Sunday will begin with a 90-minute ballet technique class where the dancers will be able to properly start their day. After that, we move to varying performance classes in tap, hip hop, contemporary, and musical theater, and others will be provided. After lunch on both days, the dancers will take a 90-minute jazz technique class where they can once again perfect technique in addition to learning performance skills. On Saturday night, we invite the studios to participate in our adjudication where one piece from each studio will be selected, first to workshop and then to showcase after classes on Sunday. Studios can bring up to 10 numbers to perform in order to give each and every studio individual attention. After Sunday's classes, the teachers will workshop various numbers and then the dancers will perform that number at the showcase. Beside the numbers performed at the showcase, awards and scholarships will be given to continue further dance education.

We hope you will join us for this incredible, one-of-a-kind experience. We believe that you and your dancers are what make our experience so successful! The money you invest in us, we in turn invest in and encourage the dance community to continue to empower young dancers. We hope you will join us for the next *Chance to Dance!*

Conclusion

As you can see, the undertaking of a new type of competition is large, but the benefits are crucial. Reshaping the competitive dance industry will take time, but it starts with a brave individual to stand up and be the change. Because of the many holes and gaps in the dance competitions currently in the industry, dancers all over are suffering from missing elements

needed to be successful in the world of dance. When surveying professional dancers who grew up in the competitive dance world, my eyes were opened by the many lessons they learned. There are several more things we can teach and include in a dancer's education if we simply broaden our horizon and focus on providing the proper training. In the fifty years dance competitions have existed, the focus has drastically changed. New York City Dance Alliance teacher and prominent dancer said, "It was never like this when I was a kid. These kids are like gladiators. The dominating, the mind games, the winning. It's all strategic" (Feidelson). Things are clearly different. That is why the only approach to a changing industry is to shake it up with some new, well-educated ideas.

According to New York Times writer Erika Kinetz, "Dance in America is very much alive, and the competitive dance circuit is among the most exhilarating and, some say, least artistic of its manifestations." Overall, the main purpose of my findings and ideas is to preserve the integrity and artistry of the competitive dance culture. Seeing first-hand the benefits and joys of growing in dance while being surrounded by the best of the best, I know the focus and determination that the dance world needs. Hearing the complaints and struggles of my peers who are concerned about a self-centered upcoming generation of dancers coming up, it is my responsibility to take action and do my part to be an influence in a new generation of ideas and conventions. One Pace Commercial Dancer said about the competition industry, "Competitions should be used to further dance education, and foster a love for dance as an art and potential career as opposed to a recreational/competitive sport."

The dance community is a tight-knit group. We are united by a singular passion and a common goal. Together we achieve success, and together we protect and cherish our art form. We communicate, work, and excel toward greatness in the way we move our bodies and the way

we further promote our discipline. Thanks to shows like *Dancing with the Stars*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and the other multiple ways dance has been brought to life, there is a general knowledge of dance. However, like any art form, there are also many specifics to our discipline that only those who train diligently within it can understand. That is why it is our job as a dance community to spread awareness of our education and training, so people can grasp and appreciate our art form. With great power comes great responsibility, therefore we must passionately challenge and change our art form in order to promote overall greatness in the eyes of the general public and the lives of the many dancers that are yet to come. I have great trust in this coming generation of dancers. If it is anything like the 120 dancers I am currently surrounded by here at Pace, I know we are in good hands. As the next generation of industry leaders, it is our responsibility to go back to the root of what is important and make sure that anyone we cross paths with is affected by what we believe.

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APPENDIX

Chance to Dance Schedule

FRIDAY	Juniors	Teens	Seniors	Teachers
6:00-7:00	Dance History	Body Awareness	Audition Technique	Anatomy for Dancers
7:00-8:00	Anatomy for Dancers	Dance History	Body Awareness	Audition Technique
8:00-9:00	Audition Technique	Anatomy for Dancers	Dance History	Body Awareness
9:00-10:00	Body Awareness	Audition Technique	Anatomy for Dancers	Dance History

SATURDAY	Juniors	Teens	Seniors	Teachers
9:00-10:30	Ballet	Ballet	Ballet	Ballet
10:30-11:30	Tap	Hip Hop	Contemporary	Musical Theater
11:30-12:30	Hip Hop	Contemporary	Musical Theater	Tap
12:30-1:30	LUNCH			
1:30-3:00	Jazz	Jazz	Jazz	Jazz
5:00-10:00	ADJUDICATION & WORKSHOP			

SUNDAY	Juniors	Teens	Seniors	Teachers
9:00-10:30	Ballet	Ballet	Ballet	Ballet
10:30-11:30	Contemporary	Musical Theater	Tap	Hip Hop
11:30-12:30	Musical Theater	Tap	Hip Hop	Contemporary
12:30-1:30	LUNCH			
1:30-3:00	Jazz	Jazz	Jazz	Jazz
3:00-4:00	WORKSHOP			
4:00-5:00	SHOWCASE			

Questions for Competition Owners/Directors

*Redefining the Competitive Dance World:
A Plan for the Dance Competitions of Tomorrow*

1. What competition do you direct or manage?
2. How long have you been with said competition?
3. Did you start the competition yourself? If so, please give a brief history.
4. How many cities does your competition go to each season?
5. On average, how many kids come to each competition?
6. What is your target age of dancers?
7. What do you charge per kid for the competition?
8. How many teachers are on your faculty?
9. What styles do you include in your convention classes?
10. How many judges do you have adjudicate at once? Do you give them any guidance in their judging?
11. What is your favorite aspect of your competition?
12. What would you change about your competition if you could?
13. What is the format of your competition like?
14. How do you adjudicate the dancers? What is your scoring/placement method like?
15. Does your competition have its own nationals? Where?
16. What are you most proud of in your competition?
17. What is the most rewarding part of your job?
18. Any advice to studios coming to your competition?
19. Where do you see the current dance world headed?
20. What do you think of the overall training of the kids at your competition?
21. What is the atmosphere of your competition like? What would you like it to be like?
22. Do you give any special awards to push future education? (Ex: scholarships to other workshops/college scholarships)

Questions for Convention Teachers

*Redefining the Competitive Dance World:
A Plan for the Dance Competitions of Tomorrow*

1. What convention do you teach for? And what classes do you usually teach?
2. Why did you choose to teach for said competition?
3. Do you usually judge each weekend? All categories or any specific ones?
4. What is the most important message you try to get across each weekend?
5. What are some of the most common critiques you give each weekend?
6. What is the overall classroom atmosphere like in your class?
7. You get to travel all over the country and see several different types of dancers. What does the current training of dancers look like?
8. Where do you think the future of dance is headed? Where would you like to see it go?
9. What do you think the ideal competition looks like?

Questions for Pace Students

*Redefining the Competitive Dance World:
A Plan for the Dance Competitions of Tomorrow*

1. Did you grow up going to competitions?
2. If so, how many did you go to each year?
3. If not, do you wish you would have gone to one?
4. What competitions did you go to? Did you have a favorite? Why?
5. Did you get any college scholarship money from competitions?
6. On average, how many dances did you take to each competition?
7. Did you always go with your studio or did you ever go as an independent?
8. Did you always take the classes at the convention?
9. What did you learn from competitions that you can apply to school now?
10. What would you change about the structure of competitions?
11. Where do you think you can make a change (have influence) in where the dance world is headed?
12. Would you recommend that the competitive world is beneficial to a young dancer?
13. If yes, what piece of advice would you give them?

Questions for Parents of Competitive Dancers

*Redefining the Competitive Dance World:
A Plan for the Dance Competitions of Tomorrow*

1. What studio does your child go to? And what town is the studio in?
2. How many competitions do you take your child to each year?
3. How far do you usually travel for competitions?
4. Do you always go with your studio or do you ever take your child independently?
5. What is your favorite competition you go to as a parent? Why?
6. What does the atmosphere of the competition look like?
7. Do you sit and observe each class at the convention?
8. If so, what do you like about convention classes? What do you not like?
9. How many competition dances does your child compete in?
10. Do you care how they place?
11. On average, how much money do you spend for each competition?
12. What do you hope your child takes away from competitions?
13. Do you think your child will dance professionally in the future?
14. Has your child received a scholarship from a competition? (Ideally a college scholarship)
15. What do you do as a parent to make sure your child has the best weekend at the competition?

Questions for Professional Dancers

*Redefining the Competitive Dance World:
A Plan for the Dance Competitions of Tomorrow*

1. Where are you from?
2. What studio and did you grow up in? Where is that studio located?
3. At what age did you start going to dance competitions?
4. On average, how many competitions did you go to each year?
5. Did you have a favorite competition growing up? Why?
6. What are the three most prominent things you remember about your experience in that competitive environment?
7. What 3 key things did you learn from competitions that you use in your career now?
8. Did you receive any scholarships to help aid your dance career?
9. If you could change one thing about competitions right now, what would you change?
10. Where do you think the future of dance is headed? Where would you like to see it go?

Questions for Studio Owners

*Redefining the Competitive Dance World:
A Plan for the Dance Competitions of Tomorrow*

1. What studio are you from? Where are you located?
2. How many kids do you have in your studio?
3. How many competitions do you go to each year?
4. Do you have a favorite one you go to? Why?
5. How far do you travel for competitions?
6. How many kids do you take to competitions? What is their age range?
How many numbers do you bring to compete?
7. What makes a competition weekend successful?
8. How much of the year do you spend rehearsing your competition numbers?
9. Do you put more emphasis in your kids doing well in the convention classes or the competition itself?
10. What classifies a good judge? Do you use the feedback they give to your students?
11. What would the ideal competition look like to you?
12. What's the one thing missing from competitions right now?
13. Do you go to nationals each year?
14. What do you look for when searching for a new competition?
15. Where do you think the future of dance is headed? Where would you like it to go?