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What's Missing From Dance Education (Part 1)

By Nadia Khayrallah

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Are higher-level dance education institutions equipping their students for a life in the field--and how could they be doing it better? In a profession as multifaceted and ever-changing as dance, there is no single answer. However, we asked JComm members working in various facets of the field--including performance, choreography, administration, education, and writing--to reflect upon their own education, what they felt was missing, and what components they wish to see included in dance education in the future.

Today, our first three members, Kim Savarino, Tina Hsiao-Tung Huang, and Sherylynn Sealy, address issues ranging from administrative and financial education to history and anti-racism.

Kim Savarino:

(Performer, Third Rail Projects | Communications Associate, MAP Fund)

As background: I received a BFA in dance from a conservatory style program situated within a public university. I wish we had received more training around creating, producing, and financing work. I very clearly remember a five minute conversation around budgets, in one class, in one semester. We could have spent a year on that topic alone! I wish personal finance were a part of every higher-level dance program--whether we like it or not, this is a very tough career to make financially viable, and we need to be realistic about that fact and prepare people as best as possible for post-graduate life.

I would LOVE to see university programs participate in anti-oppression trainings and weave anti-racism into their curriculum (#dreams). Dance is descended from a lineage of cultural oppression and imbalanced power hierarchies. It's our responsibility as a community to own that history and build a new future that is dismantling it, and that includes our educational systems.

Tina Hsiao-Tung Huang:

(Dancer | Writer | Advocate | Company Manager, Isadora Duncan Dance Foundation)

The dance department at my university was focused on choreography and performance. In addition to rigorous technique training, we were required to learn stage management, lighting design, and etc. as part of our coursework. I wish the other "behind the scenes" aspect, i.e. arts administration, had been part of my education. I wish we had opportunities to visit and talk with different dance companies and/or theater venues about the inner workings of sustaining and developing dance outside of campus.

Sherylynn Sealy:

(Freelance Artist | Educator | Innovator)

If I could supplement my arts education with one thing, I would add more art history. I do my own research on dance technique and choreography and have received training in both. However, my knowledge of history and how certain genres came to be is much weaker. I also would have benefitted from a deeper knowledge of human physiology and health/wellness. This would help me to take better care of my muscles, and learn more about stretches and exercises that will allow me to stretch my body to its full potential.

My training is mostly based on technique and choreography from dance studios and intensives. However, in settings where I am learning about African-American dance history while networking with former dance majors, I hear that this aspect of dance history is not as strong in their dance programs. I understand that while many dance programs provide rigorous dance history courses, course work often excludes a deep exploration of non-eurocentric dances. As a dance educator, particular in a school where the community is ethnically diverse, a non-eurocentric dance background could create a more inclusive dance curriculum to suit the needs and interests of all students.

[< back](#)

[previous listing](#) • [next listing](#)