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What's Missing From Dance Education: Handling 'Authenticity' Gone Wrong

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For our series on dance education, we asked JComm members to reflect upon their own experiences, what they felt was missing, and what components they wish to see included in dance education in the future.

In this piece, Lillian Altreuter calls upon college dance programs to take more responsibility for student mental health, especially as curriculums push dancers to new levels of emotional vulnerability.

From age five until I graduated high school, my dance education was firmly grounded in classical ballet. I revelled in the clarity I found at the barre and cherished every moment of hard-fought control. I was a highly anxious young person, prone to depression and obsessive thoughts. Ballet cleared my mind and kept me centered. Minor mistakes didn't seem so awful in ballet class. If my hair came undone during pirouettes, my teacher would laugh, call me Gisele, and let me try again. The rigors of technique forced out any anxious thoughts; a good ballet class was like meditation to me.

I was wholly unprepared for the groovy and emotional world of collegiate contemporary dance. If ballet was Zen meditation, my new improvisation-heavy curriculum was Freudian analysis. Suddenly I was asked to dig deep, deeper, deeper; an average dance class had me plumbing my most visceral memories for choreographic fodder. "Authenticity" was the constant refrain. I never thought to hold anything back: my ballet training taught me to push through creative blocks, always moving forward in pursuit of art. So I pushed myself as hard as I knew how, and in so doing, triggered myself into a spectacular three-day agoraphobic episode.

Giselle goes mad in the wake of her lover's deceit, her hair cascades down in lush waves and she transforms into a pathetically beautiful forest sprite. Homegirl really set the tone for the dance community's attitude toward mental illness. My professor's passion for authenticity did not include coping mechanisms for authenticity gone wrong; I came perilously close to failing a semester because I was panicking too much to participate in class. Nobody knew how to fix me. My madness wasn't aesthetically appealing, even in an abstract sense, so the artists and teachers I looked up to didn't know what to do with me.

Attend any undergraduate dance concert and you see dozens of young dancers coming undone, just as I did. Do we spare a thought for these young sylphs' lives beyond the narrative constructed onstage? Who are they talking to? Who is supporting them?

Dance instructors have a unique window into their students' psyche. They should be the first ones to spot red flags; if a soccer coach is trained to notice signs of abuse, why aren't dance teachers responding in kind? The notion that great art can only come from a "troubled" mind is bunk. Let's educate ourselves and get Giselle the help she needs before she joins the Wilis.

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