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Dancing Is All About the Transitions

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is my great honor to have been asked to be the keynote speaker for the 2016 NASD Annual Meeting here in historic Richmond, Virginia. It is wonderful to see some familiar faces and friends from around the country, and I was thrilled at the opportunity to compose my thought and ideas regarding this year's topic. The title "Dancing Is All About the Transitions" is a phrase that has graced my vocal cords for decades in the studio, for as we all know, what happens between the "tada" moments in dance, the transition, is the essential element that defines the difference between a good dancer and a great one. The moments between can often be disregarded by the developing young dancer as less important or not as much fun to focus on, but the clarity and through line of a beautiful movement transition brings a sense of *being* in the moment, an awareness of nuance, and an integrity to the movement that is a joy to behold.

The transition I have been asked to ponder for today's get together is that of the high school dancer and their transition as they enter the university for their undergraduate degrees or enter the professional training programs to start their climb up the professional ladder. I have worked with high school age dancers for 23 years now, and have been proud to lay the groundwork for the careers of many successful dancers, choreographers, and dance educators around the country and around the world. I have walked decades of dancers and their parents through the vast search, application, and audition process for universities and training programs. It is slightly ironic in that I myself started dancing in college and continued through my MFA at Tisch as the root of my formal training. It's sort of "bass-ackward" that I only learned about it in my professional teaching career. I never had the neighborhood studio or competition studio experience, but my students have. There was no performing arts high school in suburban Philadelphia for me to attend and now I'm in the thick of it. My conversations with colleagues and my students who have made these transitions have enlightened me, and I believe together we will re-open the door to this very important topic, and I hope to shed some light from the trenches.

I have a ringside seat for my first year student at the Governor's School for the Arts and their transition from their neighborhood studio or competition studio into our performing arts high school, which follows a conservatory model. This is not unlike the transition we speak of today. Often, the new students are like deer in headlights. Trying to find facilities, faculty, or food. They are confused by the schedule and where their sacral iliac joint is. They are riddled with self-doubt and fear that their acceptance was a clerical error. We find it necessary to reassure them that they are in the right place at the right time and we will teach them the ropes. In the first half of the year, we let them know that we are on a mission of discovery together.

We discover what they know and what they don't. We get to know their physical attributes and shortcomings. We get to know each other and value the time we will spend learning together. The first part of any smooth transition is to let them know that they are not in it alone and they will not be booted out in the first semester; for our job, our passion, is to take them on journey to be a better dancer, a better person, and a fine artist. They don't necessarily think that. My mentor, Erick Hawkins, stopped me outside the door of the studio on my first day of rehearsal with the company and he could see I was nervous. He advised me

to leave my hopes and fears outside that door and to be in the moment for our only mission is to produce movement with violent clarity and that is almost certainly unattainable. He said the ego has always stood in the way of the journey, because it is too focused on the destination. He reassured me all we have is one long momentum path and it is never perfect. And every student in transition needs to know that.

Each year I meet with my juniors and seniors at the Governor's School to start the conversation about their futures. The first transition we go through is getting them to you. In an average graduating class from our performing arts high school, one-third will remain involved with dance in college and one-fourth will pursue dance as a major. It varies from year to year with the talent pool and size of the class, but on average, those are the numbers. Our launching off point is always "What are you looking for in a dance program?" *...chirp, cricket, squirrel…* "Do you want a ballet or modern emphasis, conservatory or non-conservatory, urban or rural, instate or out of state, professional training track and no college at all?" Their faces bleach with fear as they embark on the daunting journey ahead of investigating dance departments and what each unique program has to offer. Having been a 20-year participant of the National and Regional High School Dance Festivals, and hosting the regional festivals at our very own Governor's School for the Arts, I have had the opportunity to stay in touch with the changes and developments in university programs around the country and get to know their faculty, some of whom have become life long friends.

I have recognized that many departments have been in transition over the past few years where there are many new and varied offerings, which are great but have created a wider variety of programs, which can make it more difficult for the student to decide what to do. Dance degrees are available with an emphasis in pedagogy and include a teaching certificate for public schools. Some dance departments integrate with their physical therapy programs to allow the dance students to complete all of the prerequisite courses in physical therapy so that when it is their time to transition from their stage career, they have a head start in pursuing their new career in physical therapy. I have discovered several integrated majors with their exercise science programs and even discovered a university that offers in-state tuition to out-of-state students to encourage higher-level students to their program with minimal debt at graduation. To parents, this holds a lot of weight and opens their mind to sending their child out of state and reassures them that the post-graduation income in the field of dance may not be able to support a high level of debt, but maybe this they can handle. If the parents are willing to encourage a college dance education, they are only halfway there. I find myself cutting to the quick with parents and saying, "Are you asking me if this career path is a fantasy or a dream?" for a fantasy lives only in the mind, but a dream can come true. I reassure them that there are many careers in dance that don't necessitate a 10-year tenure with ABT. A dance education can bring their student the success the parent desires *for* them through many channels: performing, teaching, writing, researcher, archivist, or working with children and adults with special needs. Most parents can only see their child on stage. They are not even in the class or rehearsal hall, so imagine how they have no ability to clearly see the options.

I have found that dance departments that offer summer intensives at their universities do a great service to the potential student by letting the student get to know their faculty and facilities. It gives the dancer an opportunity to experience the town, city, or cow pasture that they will live in for the next four years if they were to attend. Often, scholarships are awarded at the Regional High School Dance Festival for these programs and have attracted some of our top-notch dance students to attend that university. Case study: Deana: Point Park; Gabe: Ailey/Fordham; Courtney: Butler University.

However, my opportunity to learn and keep up with programs around the country is fairly unique and definitely not the case for the average parent or neighborhood studio instructor, and a percentage of your students come from that background profile. As I guide the student with some questions they should

research regarding each department, often they'll say, "I never even thought of that." As I looked through the National Association of Schools of Dance advisory entitled "Transition from High School to Undergraduate Degree," the information is great, the topics are valid to me a dance educator, but there seem to be more questions than there are answers. It's the answers that will spark the student's passion for your program.

In my experience of looking at college websites, they are not necessarily geared to the way students think, and don't necessarily supply the answers to the questions that they have. A website that I have found to be student user friendly is SUNY Purchase. It speaks to the high school student and supplies information they desire in one convenient location. Many websites seem cold and too heavily weighted with dry course lists, mission statements, or nondescript performance information. Yes, you are on YouTube, we send kids there to see samples of performance and classes and it is student friendly, but as a student sits with his or her parent, it is your website the parent will relate to and it needs to excite and inform the student in their parents presence, a common experience.

As a department Chair and mentor to these young artists, I wish every college or training program had a "Yes we do/No we don't Directory." And what the heck is that, you ask? For example—now my friend and dance conference junky told me I had way too many listed, so here are just a few:

- *Yes we do…*
  Offer several opportunities for you to audition to perform each year. Students from performing arts high school and competition studios perform often and experience guest choreographers, and they find it important.

  It is embedded in their love of dance, a big reason they want to pursue dance. Let 'em know.

- *Yes we do…*
  Allow you to double major or have integrated course studies with other departments to prepare you for a career after dance or enhance your career while dancing.

- *Yes we do…*
  Give you the opportunity to choreograph and be produced during your tenure in our program.

  This could be important to those from performing arts high schools who have most likely experienced composition class, and they may have a passion for it. Phyllis Lamhut was part of the reason I attended Tisch. She is a brilliant comp teacher. Brutal at times, but darn she was right. One time she told me my head was in a bucket and to go to the bursar's office to get a refund. The definition of old school.

- *Yes we do…*
  Offer talent-based scholarships, need-based scholarships, or in-state tuition for out-of-state students.

- *Yes we do…*
  Have a guest artist program and professional affiliations across the country.

- *No we don't…*
  Require a strong ballet background to be considered for our program. Often, very talented students may come from a region of the country where there are not qualified ballet teachers.

- *No we don't…*
  Require you to attend college for 4 years. Ours is a 3-year program with required summers to get you out into the professional arena at a younger age.

- *No we don't…*
  Keep our faculty in hiding. We are readily available to our dancers, especially in the transitional year and pride ourselves on our department advisor program.

  This will set the parents at rest knowing that there is help during the transition and that their child has resources to succeed.

And you see where this is going.

I have started my own directory at Governor's School for the Arts, but for your institution to produce a "fast facts" worksheet could answer a lot of questions and provide the potential student with an arsenal of information about your program right from the onset.

Often at Governor's School for the Arts, we will connect current juniors and seniors with our recent alumni who have attended or currently are attending university dance programs around the country. This connection allows them to get a real-time feeling for the dance programs with a human touch, coming from someone with a similar background in dance. Providing a network of current students in your university program that could peer-mentor the potential new student by answering their questions, and speaking to the spirit of your program and their experience, could not only be an invaluable tool for recruitment, but also be the first step in their new transition to an your undergraduate program. This will help build a sense of pride with in your department, and give a young and human perspective to the potential new student. Create a diverse group of your students that come from competition studios, performing arts high schools, and professional training programs, and let them mentor potential new students with similar training and performing backgrounds. I know as a tour guide at Bucknell University, I answered many questions about our dance program, and often the next year they would be in class and remind me of how we had spoken on their campus tour and that it helped them make the decision to attend and dance at Bucknell. It also taught me to walk backwards.

So, we got them to you. Let's "time lapse photography ourselves" to their freshman year!

In a study called *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Students*, by Arthur Levine and Diane R. Dean they discover, and I quote, "The current generation of college students is not prepared for this world. They lack many of the skills, much of the knowledge, and a good deal of the perspective it will require. On average, today's students are the following…" and the list went on and on. Ouch! This is the opinion of people of our generation, but I would like to highlight a few of their findings that I deem particularly relevant to today's discussion so that we as educators can embrace and harness these qualities and strengths.

How do we take some of these findings and use them as a means of transitioning this generation into a university or professional training program, and create an environment in which we can build strong dance artists, budding intellects, and well-rounded individuals? Well, let's think.

We all know that this generation consists of digital natives, where most of us are digital immigrants. College students are attached to their phone and laptops because for them it is second nature. Three of

my former students, who are freshmen at Virginia Commonwealth University, FaceTimed me on the opening day of Governor's School for the Arts to say hello to their former classmates, and also to welcome the first-years to Governor's School for the Arts and reassure them they will find it their home after the transition. Now, it was not a transition into a degree program, but it was a use of digital technology to help those first-years feel welcome and see how far they, too, can go. And your students need the same thing.

We realize that incoming freshmen are weak in face-to-face social skills. The art of conversation and high-level communication in-person is dwindling and yet they are remarkable. I had a shy student that finally opened her mouth to ask a question to me in the hall after class. As I was answering and she was listening, her thumbs were texting a completely different conversation to a friend. Was this rude or a higher form of intellect that I will never achieve? It is these unique developments and aberrations that we must learn from them, and embrace and channel our new knowledge to mentor the next choreographic multi-media superstars.

Another thing that struck me in this study was that they are immature, needy, timid, protected, and tethered to their parents who they perceive as their heroes. So, the lesson, the take away, is that they need to be weaned off their parent in a generous environment that empowers them to be their own person.

The next generation is hard working, but confuses the quantity of work with the quality of the product. They are uniformed of their potential because they were raised in a world where everyone got a trophy. They do not have an honest comparison of themselves with those who are truly successful. If a student doesn't get cast, we let them know that the choreographer has defined needs to fulfill their particular vision, and perhaps this time around it wasn't them, but to work hard at honing in on their skills and expanding their variety of abilities, and perhaps one day they'll find true success.

This study tells us that this is what high school students and budding freshmen have as assets. They probably think we lack the skills necessary to even teach them. By harnessing their common characteristics, we have a far better chance at that smooth transition. Likened to the movement transition I mentioned earlier, knowing the student body will give their transition into your program, no matter what its iteration, a sense of being in the moment, an awareness of nuance, and an integrity to that transition—that will be a joy for you to behold.

It is not so important to remember that we are in the business of dance education, but more so that we are the mentors, teachers, and confidants responsible for that human spirit that will be the next generation of dancers and teachers, choreographers and artistic directors, audiences and patrons. It is no small job, but an art form unto itself.

Maya Angelou once said, and I heard she was quite the dancer (I made that up!),"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

That is why we are artists, because somewhere, sometime, someone made you feel that you had no other choice than to pursue dance. My mother used to tell me, "Your job is what you're paid for, your calling is what you're made for," and clearly I am in a room of people who have found their callings. It has been my honor to share my thoughts and feeling with you today, and to continue an ongoing dialogue on this topic, for "dancing is all about the transitions."

Thank you and I hope you have a wonderful weekend.