

Could you do the Freelance Dance?

When creative autonomy offers an authentic, fulfilling career, your dream of joining one particular company may not be the only way forward

by Katie Summers

My childhood Saturdays were spent in a stuffy dance studio with Trader Joe's salads and soft-serve ice-cream from the Costco across the street. My weeks were filled with ballet classes, rehearsals, and homework. Every spare second I had was spent in front of the computer, watching endless videos of my most beloved companies. I would watch online versions of company class or profiles entitled "The Life of a Ballerina." I was fascinated with *the* company— you know, the one my instructors constantly referenced, the one that seemed to be the paramount picture of success. I remember movie nights with friends watching *Center Stage*, that 90s film full of fabulous clichés of cigarette-smoking, pointe-shoe-hammering ballerinas, and being certain that my future self would be a distressed girl begging artistic directors to take a chance on me.

Transitioning to college, my technical and artistic focus shifted as I began to learn about the sparse number of contemporary/ modern companies across the United States. I looked closely at a world previously unknown to me and began to wonder what would possibly suit me. Then, after my freshman year, I attended American Dance Festival's Six Week School— an enthralling place that radically altered how I perceive life as a professional dance artist.

I remember being in a Q&A session with Stuart Singer and Jesse Zaritt, two contemporary/modern freelance dancers who were flourishing in their careers. They spoke about the progression of their careers, from company member to a life of artistic autonomy. Stuart Singer, upon leaving SUNY Purchase his sophomore year, joined the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. He spent four years there until deciding a major shift was needed. In a magazine interview, he said, "I wanted a range of experiences.... I think I perceived on some level that this long-term commitment to one choreographer wasn't how I wanted to build my career" (Burke). Zaritt had also joined a high profile company, dancing with Shen Wei Dance Arts for about five years before leaving to pursue a freelance career full-time (Shuster).

Both men talked about how keen they were on their immensely fulfilling careers because they now possessed the autonomy to make distinct artistic decisions which consistently led them to a place of artistic satisfaction. Zaritt spoke of how much he adored working with his peers, as opposed to an older generation, because he was able to be a part of something new, something precious, unsustained, and revolutionary. Never before had I heard of artists pursuing dance in such a way. This single session left me with a perception of freedom that changed my idea about the successful- professional- dancer paradigm and left me with knowledge of a greater artistic liberty. No longer did I hold a view that kept me confined to a particular career path. It's as if dams were bursting open as I came to realize how many rivers could flow from one career decision. My path formed into something uniquely mine, something precious and life-giving. Something endless and feasible. Something unfinished yet solid, unbreakable.

After this moment in time, I became aware of the wide pool of dancers and choreographers who know little about freelance dance art. Most dancers I know see a freelancer as an artist who hasn't "made it" yet—a dancer who is proceeding from job to job, scraping by, doing her best to get a gig. It must be noted that, in a few cases, this is a truism. However, as I've

noted from my personal encounters with other dancers and choreographers, freelancing can be fulfilling. To me, this choice to dance and create independently had been quite unknown and unspoken about before then.

In Siobhan Burke's article for *Dance Magazine*, "No Average Day," the author profiles former Merce Cunningham Dance Company member Melissa Toogood—a woman pursuing a freelance career in New York City. We see Toogood progressing throughout her day: in her apartment, on the train, in the Pilates studio, in technique class, and in rehearsal. Such a day is not so different from what a company member does; however, what is plainly distinct is the autonomy to choose who she wants to work with and when she would like to work with them.

"I have to continuously evaluate where I am and where I want my career to go," says freelancer Brynt Beitman in Laura Di Orio's article for *Dance Informa*. "It's like I am my own director choosing the rep I do when I agree to work with people. In a full-time company, your path is more laid out for you." This idea that the artist is his own boss is expanded by Stuart Singer in Burke's "Freelance Stars" when the freelancer speaks about the importance of keeping an organized calendar through tenacious scheduling and lucid communication. "It's a huge part of my life," he says.

Freelancing clearly requires a great deal of work, both mentally and physically. There are the frequent subway stops across the city or the self-discipline to continue going to class, the organization required to make a well-balanced calendar, or the need to juggle multiple jobs at one time. However, the freedom given the artist could be revolutionary in leading them to exponential growth.

"Freelancing pushed my limits as a dancer and the limitations I had placed on myself and made me a far greater dancer than I ever imagined I could be," says Jace Coronado, as quoted by Di Orio. Dancers are given the opportunity to work with cutting edge choreographers, with a fresh group of dancers, and in a new venue. Life maintains that ever-needed hint of spontaneity, discovery, and adventure. Never is one day the same as the last. You need not be at the same barre, in the same spot every morning. You need not take the same technique, the same discipline, at the same time every day. There is room for discovery and development. There is room to jump in and explore something undiscovered.

When last scrolling through my Facebook home page, I came across a post by a former BODYTRAFFIC member who has been freelancing in New York and just landed a role in the Hofesh Shechter-choreographed Broadway musical "Fiddler on the Roof." This incredible opportunity may not have occurred if he had been tied down to one choreographer in one company.

The potential to cross lines of genre and choreography can only occur with professional autonomy. This professional freedom is the launching pad from which artistic growth, though difficult, is most accessible and most feasible. As artists we are called to push the boundaries of social and financial norms. We are called to question our process in order to continue our creative expression. We are called to create with a plethora of personal and artistic experiences in our pockets. We don't need a stamp of approval from an established corporation, we need only to create and continue creating with excellence and intuition.

Freelance dance is not about the inability to meet the mark. It is about the aptness to align one's technical capacity with creative freedom. If you are interested in freelance dance, here are some quick tips that I gleaned from my research:

- Choose part-time jobs that offer flexibility and extra shifts. Keep an emergency fund. Be aware that, though you have a paid project this month, you may not have one next month.

- Have an organized approach to scheduling. Are you better with an electronic calendar or the classic paper agenda? Always have it on hand so you can add projects as they come and never be absent or late.
- When you receive a job offer to dance, don't be afraid to ask about money. There is a bit of uncertainty in the business about whether or not to ask about compensation before or after an audition. Some think you have the right to ask before, others say wait until you have been cast to ask respectfully about what you will earn.
- Don't be afraid to network. Reach out to like-minded people you admire and tell them you're interested. "The worst that happens is you're exactly where you started."— freelance dancer Stuart Singer.
- Get yourself to class. It may be hard with a busy schedule, but keeping yourself in shape and continuing to learn is vital to maintaining a healthy body and an active mind.

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