

A Death in the Dance Major Family

In memory of London Monae Thibodeaux (1997-2017)



In the spring of 2017, several young women at University of California, Irvine danced in a compelling senior thesis about the trials and triumphs of growing up African American in America. Choreographed by Alize Irby, the piece was called “Bloom” to emphasize the joy of finding yourself and growing into your place in the world. It started with the dancers playing schoolgirls, being told by their teachers how valuable they were. Other sections explored self-doubt, friendship, and finally celebration, in a thoughtful, joyous dance work. The dance major cast bonded even more than they had before, some of them dancing at UCI for the last time before graduation, others about to break for summer recess. As they celebrated, they could have no idea that one of them would die in a tragic traffic accident within a few short weeks, just before her 20th birthday.

London Thibodeaux was a singular kind of dancer, wanting to do everything from hip hop to African, ballet, flamenco, Dunham, and contemporary dance. She had long, elegant limbs, a wide smile, and boundless energy, leaving a vivid impression on everyone she met. She seemed constantly in motion, laughing, teasing, always upbeat. Her energy could keep you awake—and you always wanted to be awake with her, friends recalled at a candlelight vigil held shortly after her death.

Like so many young performers, London had started early, the daughter of a dancer who supported all her activities growing up in Southern California. She joined dance and cheer teams, performed in countless recitals and competitions, and trained in many styles, a great plan to support a career in today’s dance world. Before coming to university, she took classes at local magnet schools and at the Culver City dance academy run by Debbie Allen, who spoke movingly at her memorial.

London had some opportunities not a lot of dancers-in-training get—first playing a young dancer on the TV show “All of Us” in 2006. She also appeared in a tap finale on *So You Think You Can Dance*, and then behind Pharrell Williams when he sang “Happy” at the 2014 Academy Awards. She had completed her second year as a dance major at UC Irvine, and had also just auditioned for the Ailey company program in conjunction with Fordham University in New York. Her future lay ahead of her on an ordinary Saturday night when she got into a car with three friends. Two young men with her also died that night, Kasean Herrera and Jeremy Shankling, friends who had supported her dance performances. They were recent UC Irvine graduates who had promising jobs as software engineers. A third of London’s friends sustained critical injuries but survived.

The death of a vibrant young person is always particularly painful, reminding us that we never know when our last dance will occur, or what we will leave behind. As faculty members and staff, we wept for her family, and hated to see our young dance majors and their friends encounter this tragedy—it wasn’t the first for some of them, but undoubtedly a wrenching one for all. Within days, the candlelight vigil was arranged by CADC, one of the University of

California Irvine's renowned hip hop crews. I hadn't even realized until then that London had danced with a crew, something dance majors often find hard to add to their already crowded official requirements. London wanted to do it all. Her fellow CADC members performed at her memorial, with hard-hitting passion and conviction. A group of dancers also came to represent her high school dance team experience; and her fellow cast members of "Bloom" performed a section of that dance without her.

As happens when a dancer dies, her moving body left an impression. She did not slog across campus as so many tired college students do, perhaps unsure or wary of their next move. London stretched her arms wide, felt the beat, kept up with her crew and her dance major friends. They won't have to use words to say all the things they remember about London, because they'll have the chance to dance out their feelings and continue being the dancer London wanted to be.

Her friends remembered the energy and the talent, but perhaps most lovingly recalled her support of them, always having a good word for everyone, and a glint in her eye that said they would all get through the hard times, and have some fun dancing while they did. She's launch into late night capers when others were flagging, her friends remembered, but sometimes she was "a quiet storm." London could be flamboyant or humble, humble or outrageous, by turns—"a light that shone on all of us."

Her fellow dance majors have plans to honor her in the upcoming school year.

by Jennifer Fisher, founding editor of *Dance Major Journal*