

## Diving forward—or is it going *backwards* to pursue a graduate degree in dance?

*One professional dancer grapples with the thrill of a freelance dance life versus a longing for stability and a passion to learn more*

by Beverly Jane Bautista

Five years into my professional career as a dancer in Los Angeles, I vividly remember writing on my list of goals: *Master's Degree in Dance*. At that point in my career, I had experienced more than I could have imagined when I set foot in the *Entertainment Capital of the World* from Chicago, Illinois. After graduating from Ball State University, my professional dance career included dancing in a *Pepsi* commercial in Buenos Aires, filming a television episode for Disney's *Shake It Up*, and even a few live tours with artist Nicki Minaj, including live performances at the *Billboard Music Awards*, *NBA All Stars*, and *Good Morning America*.

In between these dance jobs, I trained at commercial dance studios in Los Angeles, and eventually, I received my own weekly class to teach at Debbie Reynolds Studio. Since my professional dancing opportunities were inconsistent, I decided to find more part-time jobs as a dance teacher and choreographer to sustain my income and continued to grow my experience as a dance educator.



### **My Catalyst Moment**

My experiences traveling and dancing with a major artist had been some of the best learning moments in my life, yet it also made me hone into what I knew I ultimately wanted—financial stability and development of my passion as a dance educator. Don't get me wrong, I wish every

young dancer could experience everything and more when it comes to jobs in the dance industry. It's just that the mindset of the "starving artist" had become more vivid to me, and I felt myself torn between stability and my passion for dancing.

Also, I just wanted more. I wanted to be in an environment with curious people, to be surrounded by professionals who could encourage and challenge my curiosity. I craved conversations that mattered and learning about dance history, all the things that could take me to the next level of professionalism as a dance educator. What I wanted, I decided, was to be a graduate student pursuing a master of fine arts degree. So I needed to find the right dance program.

Through word of mouth, I stumbled upon resources at the Actor's Fund, which serves dancers in the Los Angeles area. Their mission is to foster stability and resiliency, providing a safety net for performing arts and entertainment professionals over their life span. It provides free resources, counseling, and small grants for financial assistance too. They offered a workshop called, *Dancers Who Teach*, where I met professional dancers who became dance educators and professors but were still actively a part of their previous dance communities. One of the speakers was a professional now on faculty at a strong dance department, Chad Michael Hall. He sparked my interest in applying to the MFA program at UC Irvine. It turned out to be a key step in my search.

### **Fears, Questioning Self, and Timing**

The feeling of being out of control is my biggest fear; I try but I can't seem to escape it. The biggest decision of my life before grad school was having moved across the country to pursue a professional dance career. Now, I was considering yet another huge life choice? I was nervous about letting go of my current work in Los Angeles because I had developed a good rapport with employers who supported and trusted me. A few workplaces provided me consistent income and a safety net, because I could accept a temporary dance gig and come right back to teaching consistent classes. This was a form of job stability I had not experienced in the first 6 years of living in Los Angeles.

So, I was in charge of my own schedule, shifting from teaching, choreographing, and performing, but there was always something nudging me because I wanted more. I wanted to think critically about dance and write it. It would be great to learn from dance faculty who wanted to invest in me. The problem was, I had grown so attached to my dance students, colleagues, and access to my network of professional dancers. The familiarity of the Los Angeles dance community was comforting, so I wrestled with questions.

*Was I ready to leave a place I had known for over a decade in order to pursue a master's degree in dance? Was this taking a "step back" to go back to school? Was this the right time to leave Los Angeles? If I come back, will I find work? Will I even want to move back? Will my workplaces have enough time to find a replacement? Where will I live during school? How will I pay for my monthly expenses? Will I be accepted into the school I'm applying to?*

## Searching for Schools, Tours, Researching

To figure out where to apply, I launched into research. I sent emails, text messages, messages over social media, and scheduled phone meetings. I met up with friends for coffee, a smoothie or a meal, and read every article about grad school. I had lots of questions and exhausted my network of people who had a graduate degree in dance. I wanted a linear answer with linear scenarios, and I wanted to see where I fit into that mold.

I decided to create my own process; a checklist to keep myself sane. The following lists arose from various resources I found to be helpful in making an informed decision before applying to an MFA dance program. [For links to these resources, please see the Further Resources list below.]

### Advantages

- New levels of training in dance as an educator, choreographer, and performer
- Being surrounded by a community of like-minded individuals
- Recognition and networking with other professionals in the dance field
- Tools to transition into other areas of the dance world

### Disadvantages

- Feeling like career momentum has come to a halt
- Student loans

### Practicalities to consider

- Graduate school is not for everyone
- Some artists prefer workshops and training that can fit into their current schedule or financial life
- Would an MFA support a career in dance?
- Did I want to uproot my current life to attend school as a full-time student?
- How would it work to balance life, school, and work?

Before I applied to any school, I went on a few tours to get a feel for each school and the people involved with admissions. I asked myself: *Could I see myself attending school here? Could I afford it?* One tour that stood out to me was on UC Irvine's campus. The graduate admissions counselor gave me and my boyfriend, who was also interested in applying to a graduate dance program, a tour of the campus, and he took time to get to know us. He asked us about our stories, sat and ate lunch with us. Here's where we found out that your professional experience mattered and what was promised with mentoring. One thing I frequently asked on tours was, "What are you looking for when accepting students into your program?" The thing that will always stay with me was his reply, "*We are looking for students who already know what they want—even after graduate school.*"

## **The Audition Process & Waiting Room**

I narrowed my search from three schools to one and applied to UC Irvine. The audition process for graduate school is something I will never forget. I could barely sleep the night before, and I had to be on campus at least one hour before the allotted warm up time. It was very early, but it was my choice to give myself enough time to focus before the audition began. The drive from Los Angeles is usually an hour or less, but in rush hour, it can stretch to 2 or almost 3 hours!

When I arrived at the sign-in registration table, I remember feeling nervous and excited as I received my audition number. I felt anxious during the ballet portion because I had not taken a consistent ballet class in over 12 years. My personal practice felt rough. Consistently teaching for the past five years had its benefits, but in this scenario, it worked against me.

Despite the first portion of the audition, I felt confident during the modern audition and when I showed my choreography reel to the faculty. Surprisingly, the writing prompt exercise felt natural, and I enjoyed the in-person interview. It always feels good to change into professional attire and speak to a group of people who want to get to know me. I always hope my demeanor comes across as genuine, sincere, and confident. As the day progressed, I felt myself become more confident as I surrendered to the process. I did the best that I could, and after that it was a waiting game.

## **The long wait for a yes**

To this day, I will never understand why it took so long for me to receive an answer. Truthfully, I don't think I'll ever ask. I went through a quarterly life crisis during those three months of what felt like purgatory, questioning if I was ever a dancer in the first place. The auditions took place in January, and I decided to wait to call them until the day of the deadline. I honestly hoped I would receive a call prior to the deadline, but I did the best I could to be patient. At this point, I hadn't received a yes or no through an email or phone call.

I called the day of the deadline to find out my results, but since no one answered, I left a message with the front desk and didn't hear back that day. The following day, I reached someone at the front desk, but no one from the prospective graduate student committee was available, so I left another message. Again, I didn't receive a call back. I realized *I was done trying*. I had given up. I had done everything I possibly could, and it was now in God's hands.

Apparently, God was listening because I received a letter of acceptance email within the hour! I remember thinking, "God, that was not funny, but thank you." From the time I wrote down my dream till the time it became a reality, it was over three years. The process was painful, but it grew me in ways I didn't know I needed growth. It made me question my worth so that I could be honest with myself when it came to my "why?" I had been holding on so tightly to what I wanted the outcome to be that I almost forgot about why I wanted to apply in the first place.

*Was this acceptance the only way I could achieve my mission in life? No. Does acceptance into graduate school define my worth? No. Was it my time to be a full-time student again? Yes. With*

a huge grin on my face, I responded: “It would be my honor to accept your offer for the available slot. Thank you so much for this opportunity.”

I was stunned and equally elated. I knew I wasn’t just going back to school, but I was falling forward into my purpose.

*Beverly Jane Bautista is a native of Chicago, Illinois and a resident of California for over a decade. She is a dance educator, choreographer, and soon-to-be dance historian. Her experience includes tours with Nicki Minaj, working on television shows like “Shake It Up” (Disney), “Lip Sync Battle” (Paramount Network), and live award shows. She hopes to inspire dancers and educators through dance history and hopes her experiences can encourage dancers to be diverse movers and critical thinkers.*

### **Further Resources**

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