

Becoming a better dancer through social “dis-dancing”

Stuck at home? Here’s how to refine your existing dancing skills, while cultivating new ones during these times of isolation.

by Kent Shinomae

After just a few months of self-isolation, dancing from home seems to have become the new norm. You might call it “social dis-dancing”—the act of dancing with others not in the same physical space. Moving from the expanses of dance studios and theatres into training in your own home can feel sub-par and pale by comparison. The dreams of going back to how it used to be have started to set in, which creates a sense of negativity when taking online dance classes from our homes. However, in this less-than-perfect situation, there are a lot of upsides to online dance training that we can acknowledge to help us with progress and inspiration to further our growth as dancers.

While social dis-dancing, a term brought to my attention by Culture Shock Los Angeles, a professional hip hop dance company that I dance for, you can be challenged to start paying more attention in class and learn the steps and timing on your own. Surrounded by dancers in the studio, we tend to follow others when we are unsure about the combination. On Zoom, it’s definitely very difficult to follow the other dancers when you don’t know the steps. For one thing, you can’t quite see others in those small boxes in “gallery mode.” The lag in audio and video caused by poor internet connection doesn’t help either.



In *Pointe Magazine*, Maggie Boggs outlines some home advantages in her article called “5 Unexpected Upsides to Training Quarantine-Style.” She goes over five benefits for dancers to be aware of when training at home and how these can produce positive improvements. Reiterating a few of her key points, I’ll add my personal experiences relating to those concepts to keep our imaginations going and spirits up.

As dancers, we have become accustomed to mirrors in the dance studio and often rely on them for self-correction. Yet, mirrors can also cause a lack of attention during class when dancers end up staring at themselves, which can detract from learning dance. Now, many of us have found ourselves training in mirrorless spaces during this time of quarantine (me, left). The upside? Boggs mentions that without the use of a mirror, we will begin to discover the feeling of our muscles and placement during movement rather than how we look as we’re doing them. This will allow dancers to heighten their senses when executing steps.

With an abundance of dance teachers and choreographers doing live-stream classes on Instagram, posting tutorials on YouTube, offering one-on-one private coaching through Skype, and teaching master classes on Zoom, dancers are now given amazing opportunities to learn from people they would not have easy access to before. In Bogg's article, she suggests that with more free time in our schedules, we are able to branch out and learn from a variety of teachers, companies, and studios.

One dancer that I have looked up to for a long time is Marty Kudelka, Justin Timberlake's choreographer. For many years, my dream was to take a master class taught by Marty. He isn't known to teach classes regularly, so it has always been difficult to find when and where he would be teaching. But in lockdown, CLI Studios offered a week full of free dance classes online from famous choreographers working in the industry today. One of them was Marty Kudelka, so I was excited. It was an amazing experience to not only learn his incredible choreography, but also the useful tips and advice he gave when adding performance quality and textures to the movement he provided.

Everyone has different living situations and rooms in their homes that they are able to dance in. Like me, most dancers are probably working in narrow and confined spaces. Recently, STEEZY Studio released a helpful video on YouTube called, "*5 Creative Ways to Practice Dancing at Home*" to help dancers change the way they think about dancing at home. They mention that practicing dance in narrow hallways can improve your spatial awareness, footwork, and transitional creativity. In a studio, we are provided with so much space we don't know what to do with all of it. Figuring out how to use a narrow hallway can ironically allow your mind to expand. They suggest you challenge yourself more by learning a piece of choreography, then travel front and back or side to side to explore different transitions through space, as if you are performing across a stage.

Finally, Boggs suggests you take a dance class or an improv session outdoors if you are able to. She says that dancing in spaces like a backyard, patio, or balcony can bring a fresh sense of inspiration and motivation during the challenging times we are experiencing now. The vital change of scenery can offer new perspective by allowing our imaginations to wander freely as we choreograph or improvise outdoors.

Just remember, this time will not last forever and we shall be back in the studio one day, but in the meantime let's continue social dis-dancing and come out of this as stronger and smarter dancers.

Sources:

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