

Why Dance Conventions Helped Me Become a Better Dancer

It turns out you can reframe competitive dance experiences, from being something toxic to valuable

by Lauren Gold

It is a Friday afternoon in February, and I am rushing home from high school early to grab my mountain of bags to pack the car for the first dance convention of the season. I usher my mom into the car quickly because I don't want to be late. My call time for my solo is just two hours away. I try to calm my nerves and calculate how much time I have to do my makeup, change, and warmup in my head, while my mother flies down the freeway to the convention center. In the blink of an eye, the weekend is over, and I have competed eight dances, taken countless classes from master teachers, and done multiple rounds of scholarship auditions to earn a sought-after scholarship. The past three days have taken all of my energy. On a very exhausting drive home, I wonder why I do this? Should I switch to dancing training in a conservatory setting, or will the toxicity of the dance competition world actually help me become the professional dancer that I have always yearned to be?

Many in the dance world view competitive dance as something that is toxic, made only for profit, leading to dancer burnout. I think that this is true to an extent. It is obvious that dance conventions and competitions are cash grabs, where you have to pay upwards of a hundred dollars to compete with a three-minute solo onstage, and pay \$300 or \$400 to take part in the classes held that weekend. It provides a classist approach to the art form of dance and its training. Conventions also brew a toxic environment, having teachers pick favorites, dancing on concrete and carpet floors, competing until 1 a.m. and having to wake up at 7 a.m. for classes the next day. They push dancers to the extreme with as much as 12 hours of dancing a day during the weekend; then the dancers have to go home and train long hours for the next weekend's competition. It's a recipe for burnout because many dancers start going to competitions and conventions at the young age of 7 and continue throughout high school. All of these factors can deter dancers from enjoying the positives of the competition.

I was fed up with convention life at some points in my middle and high school career. It was taking a toll on my body and mind because of the stress the environment induces. But I persevered, because I loved this art form and finished out my senior year of high school sticking with a competitive dance track. In the end, I resonated with what Kristen DeMaria found out in her thesis, *Competitive Dance: The Physiological and Psychological Effects from the Perspectives of Current Versus Retired Dancer*. For most competitive dancers, she said, "love of dance far outweighed any negative experiences they might have had" (5). Added to that, I found the experience useful during my time with the college audition circuit. I distinctly remember when I was auditioning for one of my dream colleges, and there were multiple combinations in different styles, that I felt confident in all of them, and in my performance. Coming out of that audition for a university that I later turned down, I realized that all of these convention classes in varying styles had prepared me for this. I was surprised that I had found something rewarding from my competitive background.

Upon reflection, I realized that even the stressful scholarship auditions of the convention world turned out to be valuable to me. These auditions occur sometime during the weekend, when the convention company gives scholarship money, usually toward the next year's convention, or towards their own nationals. These auditions forced me to pick up long and intricate choreographic phrases and then perform them seconds later, which is a major tool for dancers to have according to

Rain Francis of *Dance Informa*. Francis advises dancers to “challenge themselves throughout the year by taking classes and workshops... to learn the art of picking up new movement fast” (Francis). Conventions were key to giving me the fast-paced and diverse learning experiences I needed to ace my college dance auditions. I saw that I had learned by gathering all of the information I could from new teachers who taught the auditions, instead of focusing on just learning the steps. This really allowed me to shift my mindset, and it paid off. I saw more acceptances than I had expected, and I attribute my success to the skills I gained from putting in long hours of scholarship auditions at conventions.

Once in a college dance program, I learned that my now-positive views on what competitive dance gave me remained constant. I was able to find success in castings right off the bat with my audition skills, and in class I could handle the demands, because I was used to training for so many hours each week. Jessica Giles of *Dance Magazine* says that “the rigorous schedule of a college dance program might be a shock to some students, but competition dancers are often well-equipped to handle the demand” (Giles). Furthermore, I felt as if my experience with a diversity of styles set me up to take on more corrections and dive deeper into the artistic and emotional demands of a college dance program.

I feel as though my competitive dance background has had a positive impact on my dancing and will continue to show benefits in my dance career. As a senior, I auditioned for professional dance companies constantly and had to tap into my audition mode, appreciating the great foundation that conventions gave me. I am glad that I was able to recognize the ways competition dance has allowed me to mature as a dancer, and I hope that I can share my feelings with young dancers growing up in the competitive world and unsure about their futures.

Lauren Gold graduated from the University of California, Irvine in June 2022 with a BFA in Dance Performance and BA in Psychological Sciences. She plans to join a professional modern-based dance company in the future and to continue to explore the professional dance world wherever that leads her.

Works Cited

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