

## Ballet: It's Not That Serious. It Was Never That Serious

*A goody-two-shoes ballerina becomes a rebel for the first time*

by Emma Giselle Mertens

My dad used to always tell me, “The best artists are those who are not afraid to be different or to look weird.” I would smile and agree, because he’s not wrong. My dad is a really smart guy. But I did not realize why he was telling me this. Looking back now, I understand his reasoning. He was trying to break me out of my shell.

Growing up as the oldest daughter with three younger siblings and parents who worked in education, I always felt pressured to be “perfect.” Now I know that’s impossible. But I was a very quiet and serious child. Training in classical ballet since the young age of 10 certainly did not help with this. Ballet training is already strict in itself. But if you start to focus your life around classical ballet, correctness and perfection starts to become an obstacle to mental health.

I found the pressure of trying to be “perfect” started to weigh on me. And when things started slipping out of my control, I found myself spiraling. The things that I found enjoyable about ballet soon started to become frustrating and bitter. I was forcibly trying to jam myself into a mold that I had constructed out of the rules that I had fabricated for myself. By the end of my senior year in high school, my relationship with ballet was at the brink of extinction. Despite being enrolled at the University of California, Irvine as a dance major, I was already mentally preparing to move on from ballet and let college be the last four years of my life where I could call myself a dancer. However, things changed.

In just my first quarter at UCI, I was introduced to so many people who loved dance so much more than I did. It was infectious. Notice how I say dance and not ballet. These people loved DANCE—and they were incredible. I was in awe and inspired by their overwhelming talent and passion. And the best part, none of it was ballet. Dance is so much more than just ballet.

For the first time in my life, I was asked to not look pretty or perfect. I was told to roll on the floor and to stop being graceful. I was so far out of my comfort zone. And honestly, I struggled. But it was okay, since the ideals of perfection that I strived for in ballet were no longer being asked of me in modern. In fact, it was looked at as incorrect. I started to question why I even

liked ballet in the first place. It certainly was not its structure and rigidity. What was it about this art form that kept me crawling back?

In the beginning of my sophomore year, I enrolled in my first choreography class. When I was told “there are no rules in this space,” I could feel my stomach plummet. A space with no rules means there’s no limitations, but it also means there’s no way to ensure that what I make is good.

If there was no structure that I needed to follow, I could literally create anything I wanted. And that was terrifying. I had no idea where to start, and I could feel the anxiety rise up through my lungs. A space where there are no rules or limitations? That means the possibilities are entirely endless. All of my training had led me up to this point and at that moment I felt lost. And to my core, despite having taken modern for a whole year, I truly thought all I know is how to do ballet. But the thing is, dance can be anything. You are not restricted to ballet. I could create literally anything I wanted.

Eventually I got over my anxiety and started to choreograph something. And surprisingly enough, I found myself actually having fun. I thought to myself with a grin, “I am breaking every single rule in ballet right now.” Self-proclaimed little goody-two-shoes me felt like a rebel for the first time in my life. And it was exhilarating.

I was enthralled by all the ways I could deconstruct the rules of ballet. It was a rebellion of sorts—my own revolution. I started going to ballet classes thinking of all the ways I could make it more exciting, within the restraints the technique had already placed on us. I was turning my chronic daydreaming tendencies into something tangible. I started being curious again—asking questions and being creative. Ballet class became a game of how do I make my movement more interesting, while it still remains ballet. I tapped into a child-like play in my approach to class, something I had lost and forgotten for so many years—because when you’re an adolescent growing up, everything is made to be serious. I promise you it’s not that serious. It was never that serious.

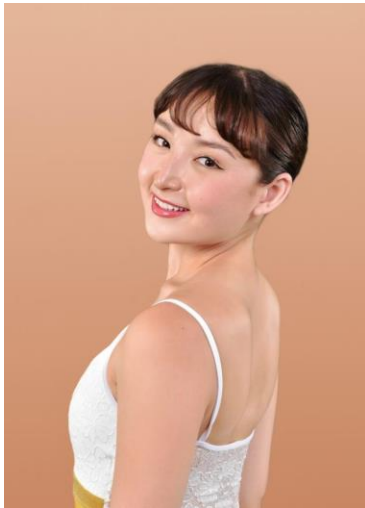
My relationship with ballet started to shift. I started having fun in class. Mistakes no longer felt like the end of the world. I stopped being afraid of being wrong. And I started to get stronger. I was pushing myself differently. The cloud of misery that was holding me back started to dissipate. Ballet was fun again, all because of choreography. I would go into a ballet imagining new things to choreograph and I was eager to create something new. There is so much to learn when being a choreographer. I learned that I actually like using my voice, despite having been

quiet most of my life. And apparently, I prefer watching other people dance, as opposed to performing myself.

Choreography taught me how to be a better dancer. There is so much value to be learned when you are the one behind the audition table. You start to understand what choreographers or artistic directors are looking for. Half the time it is not even the actual dancing. Artistic vision works in mysterious ways and everything is so subjective. When I presented my first piece at UCI, it was the most fulfilling experience I had ever had. Being a choreographer and seeing my piece on stage was more rewarding than any performance that I had ever been in as a dancer. In that moment, I could say without a shred of doubt in my body, I wholeheartedly love dance.

When I told my dad I wanted to pursue the B.F.A in choreography he was surprised. “Since when did you want to be a choreographer?” he asked, “I thought you just wanted to be a dancer.” I smiled. “I think I want to break out of my shell for once. I want to be different. I want to create something new.”

*Emma Giselle Mertens graduated from the University of California, Irvine in 2023 with a B.F.A in Choreography and Dance Performance. She will join Golden State Ballet as an apprentice and aspires to keep dancing and choreographing post-graduation.*



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