Dear Dance Competitions—Do better

Too many young dancers are put in compromising situations with adults they thought they could trust. A former competition kid asks: What needs to be done?

by Francine Mae Peji

In October of 2021, the *Toronto Star* printed "Breaking the Silence," an investigation detailing sexual abuse allegations made by dancers, some of them minors, against famous dance educators: Nick Lazzarini, Travis Wall, and Gil Stroming, among others. These highly sought-after teachers, known for their extensive credits in the commercial dance world as performers and choreographers on *So You Think You Can Dance*, the *Step Up* franchise, and the Emmy and Academy Awards, were accused of forcing sexual and inappropriate acts onto minors with the manipulative promise of career furtherment. It all came back to their positions as faculty members of Break the Floor, the production company that housed four of the largest dance convention circuits in North America: Nuvo, Jump, 24Seven, and Radix.

When I, a former convention kid, first read the horrific actions detailed, I couldn't help but overanalyze experiences I'd had in my ten years of competition dance. This investigation was a much-needed wakeup call for the competitive dance community. Now that I've made the transition from dance convention attendee to employee and educator, these stories became a catalyst for me to advocate for young dancer safety to stop the cycles of abuse that were being upheld in the dance competition space. Unbeknownst to them, young dancers would be put in compromising situations by adults they idolized to be taken advantage of emotionally, mentally, and in drastic cases, physically or sexually.

The oversexualization of young dancers in the competition dance industry has left too many young dancers vulnerable to risks to their safety. When you analyze the need for regulation in these spaces, the general lack of adult accountability, and the ultimate negative impacts on the dancers themselves, it's apparent that protecting young dancers should be the main priority for those involved. Keep the kids safe: it should be that simple.

One component that allows for dancers to be put in compromising places is the lack of regulation and reinforcement of rules regarding appropriate content in competition spaces. With so many competition circuits touring nationally, there is no governing body to regulate what goes on in every single dance competition that happens every weekend. As discussed in Elizabeth Schultz's 2018 master's degree study of sexualization of girls in dance competitions, the three main components in this process are: double-messaged song choices, vulgar choreography, and inappropriate costuming. Too many times I have seen young dancers winning first-place titles wearing small rhinestoned crop tops and briefs, performing to a song full of sexual innuendos that kids would miss, and adults would snicker at ("Candy Man" by Christina Aguilera was a favorite). Many times, their movements could rival stripper's routine, all for the purpose of trying to emulate the performances that typically win the first-place awards—all pretty disgusting to think about, hence the need to regulate.

Adding to the problem of sexualizing young dancers in competitions, “there is also no standard set of rules for those competing” (Schultz 17). Instead, every competition has their own set of rules regarding a dance’s content and levels of reinforcing them. On top of that, every judge also brings their own opinions, so the level of appropriateness for each dance is left completely up to each judge’s personal discretion. Not only is this process inconsistent and frustrating for dancers who want to win points, but it can result in the dangerous practice of praising such risqué dances. Without a way to quantify the standards that make a dance “appropriate” for the competition/exhibition stage, the performers are left vulnerable to anything and to anyone. If young dancers lack the emotional maturity to understand the content they are performing and who may or may not be watching, then they shouldn’t be performing that content. It’s up to teachers and judges to reinforce safety standards.

An important element in keeping young dancers safe is keeping the adults in the dance competition space accountable for their actions and the effects on the lives of dancers who depend on them. Competition and dance studio directors must understand how to prevent the hiring of abusive, ill-intentioned individuals to be around young dancers, or else they will continue to give predators a platform for the abuse already reported. After the aforementioned sexual harassment allegations made against the many ex-faculty members associated with Break the Floor, more stories have emerged to accuse popular choreographers, like Erik Saradpon from Temecula Dance Company and Mark Chavarria from Chavarria Institute of the Arts in Anaheim, of various crimes “including sexual assault, sexual harassment, coercion, and drug-related misconduct involving minors to name a few” (Fashjian). Gil Stroming, former owner of Break the Floor, emerged as a major enabler and perpetrator, when he was accused by an attendee of Break the Floor’s first events of propositioning her for sex, under the impression he’d advance her career by arranging the right auditions after flying her out to New York (Mendoza et al). In reality, he was using her naivety for his own purposes, leaving the unnamed dancer devastated and scarred for years to follow.

When dance educators take advantage of their involvement in a student’s life, lines easily get crossed and harm may be harder to identify. This can all be prevented with clearer regulations, including stricter rules regarding conduct for teachers and attendees. They should come from the companies behind the competition dance world, with consequences for doing otherwise, along with more extensive screenings and interviews to ensure the quality of dance educators and judges. This much should be routine for both studios and competition dance presenters: the student’s safety and sense of self should always come first.

Competition dance is already a psychological battlefield for kids, fostering environments of comparison, unhealthy competition, and quantifying and unquantifiable art at such a young age. When young dancers are sexualized onstage, just for a small adjudicated award and the small possibility of a cheap overall trophy to recognize their “high score,” it can leave them questioning their place in the dance world.

For some young dancers, a sexualized performance can compromise their self-esteem as they learn to present sexual presences onstage they do not yet understand, according to Lisa Sandlos’s “Shimmy, Shake or Shudder? A Feminist Ethnographic Analysis of Sexualization and Hypersexualization of Competitive Dance.” To kids competing, if educators and adults in the

competition space they trust don't see anything wrong with the sexualized material being put onstage, then it must be fine—even though it doesn't feel right. Sexualizing kids as young as five-years-old onstage through song, choreography, and costume teaches kids that they will only be valued for their body and sex appeal, which can shatter any sort of growth in their self-confidence and identity. Not only does it impact them internally, but it can also impact them externally and "children will understand it is normal for them to be sexually objectified, and grooming will be much harder for them detect" (Morgan).

In the commercial competition dance world, the cycle of abuse is still being perpetuated—teachers putting their dancers in sexualized routines, kids lacking the understanding and bodily autonomy to know they might be compromising their safety, external educators and adults taking advantage of their naivety, and repeat. As adults who can perceive right from wrong, it's up to us to prepare the next generation of competition educators and dancers for their future by teaching them how to identify potentially dangerous situations in competition settings. By learning from their own negative experiences, young dancers can learn to break the cycle of abuse. It's never worth the risk for the sake of a first-place award.

In short, it is time for the competitive dance industry to take greater action to protect the next generation. This includes teachers, studio directors, and any adult involved with competitions that may have an impact on a young dancer's life. None of this is to say that dance competition and convention circuits are always a bad thing, as these types of events provide many benefits for an attendee's career and community building. I wouldn't be where I am if not for my experiences dancing for my life in hotel ballrooms during my free weekends as a kid. But now that I'm on the flipside and have the opportunity to make a small difference in a dancer's journey, I am more hopeful that progress can be made in the dance competition world—especially with the establishment of associations like the Youth Protection Association in Dance (YPAD) and the Dance Education Equity Association (DEEA) to make dance education spaces a safer, more inclusive space for all.

The dance competition world is a community where I grew up. It helped me fall in love with dance, and showed me what an educator that cares for the right reasons looks like. But for those who aren't so lucky, there must be change within the system, so that minors are not endangered.

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