

Let Them Eat Cake....and Audition Fees

The high cost of auditioning for dance companies creates a barrier for dancers without sufficient funds, so the field is missing out

by Gabriella Padilla

Dance has never been known as an economical art form. From the age of 5 to 18, my family was paying nearly \$1,000 every month for my dance education, and that was just for a few classes a week. Imagine the cost of a thirty hour-week intensive training program, or the addition of expensive dancewear, and \$120 pointe shoes.

The unfortunate fact of the matter is that this financial stress doesn't end there. When a single audition can cost a dancer up to \$600.00, you begin to ask yourself, how much more must we pay? Dancers start by having to pay a \$25-\$40 audition fee, even if they are cut just after the barre—or, worse, make it to the end and learn there are currently no contracts available. With \$300 round-trip flights, \$200 for food and housing, and the cost of audition materials themselves (i.e., headshots, dance photos, dancewear, etc.), there is a financial barrier to auditions that money-grab audition fees only exacerbate. The impact of this roadblock is even greater for those from a lower socioeconomic background, creating an imbalance in financial demographics of those present at auditions, and ultimately as professionals in the field.

In an article for *Pointe Magazine*, Hanna Chang Foster describes the way the Associate Director of Boston Ballet II, Peter Stark tries to help dancers who want to arrange audition tours: “From a spreadsheet of over 150 companies, he helps Boston Ballet II members highlight 15 to 20 targets,” because, as he says, “The bigger net you cast, the more fish you’ll catch.” This emphasizes the necessity to audition for as many companies as possible to achieve a yield of maybe two or three offers.

As I entered this audition season, I had a discussion with my parents to decide how many auditions they would be able to financially support me through. We landed on two to three, total. This puts me and others in this situation already at a disadvantage, as we are unable to fully pursue this “bigger net” philosophy. I am in a fortunate situation where my family is able to financially support this endeavor. It is important to consider what this venture would look like for dancers who are supporting themselves. While those with more money can finance their own audition tours, those of a lower socioeconomic status must pick and choose what companies they are willing to gamble \$600 on for the chance at a contract.

It is widely understood that even after obtaining a contract with a company, there is not much security for the first several years of your career. It is important for dancers to continue to participate in the audition season until they have a firm understanding that they have found a home with a company. Current professional dancers hoping to move from their current company to a new place of employment must find a way to support this venture while living off their meager dancer wage. This wage, on average, was quoted at \$24.95 an hour in 2023 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This number is even lower for a dancer at the beginning of their career. How can any company expect a dancer living on of this wage to be able to spend more than \$300 in audition fees alone for just a chance in a crowded room of over one-hundred dancers?

The result? Only dancers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds can afford these extensive tours that yield one to two contracts at most. This creates an imbalance in both the demographic of auditioning dancers and those getting hired in the companies holding them. Instead of companies limiting expenses, dancers are being asked to do the heavy lifting to make these audition tours happen. Articles such as Foster's provide dancers with tips on scrimping their way to their own audition tours, encouraging dancers to drive for hours instead of flying, or spend the night on a couch to save money when traveling for auditions. Although cost-effective, hours in the car, creaky hotel beds, and cheap fast food will not be setting dancers up to audition as their best selves. This creates yet another disadvantage for those with an income disparity: dancers who can afford non-stop flights and good hotels are able to set themselves up for a more successful audition than their counterparts who cannot afford such luxuries.

Why should where we come from, and how much money parents have dictate whether or not we have a chance to audition after years of blood sweat and tears, to finally call ourselves professional dancers? In her *Dance Magazine* article, former ballet dancer Candice Thompson notes that if any professional organization in another industry was charging potential employees to attend an interview, it would be considered "unethical." What makes dance any different, especially when these auditions are being held in-house during regular business hours?

At the center of it all, we as dancers have been conditioned to do what is asked of us. When competition is high and a life's worth of dedication is on the line, we will do whatever it takes to get in the room. This mentality is harmful to all but can be especially detrimental to individuals supporting themselves on a low salary, or families of dancers who don't have the money to help their kids the way their higher-social-class counterparts do. We must ask ourselves, what does this mean for the economic diversity of these companies, and further, the art form as a whole?



Gabriella Padilla graduated from the University of California, Irvine Claire Trevor School of the Arts in the Spring of 2025 with a BFA in both Dance Performance and Dance Choreography. She co-chaired Department's Community Student Advising Committee, and worked with the AEA Consulting Firm on the Arts School's strategic plan. She is currently pursuing a career as a contemporary ballet dancer and choreographer. In the future she plans to become a certified Pilates Instructor and Physical Therapist.

Works Cited

Thompson, Candice. "Paying to Play" *Dance Magazine*, vol.91 no.2 pg63.

Lansky, Chava Pearl. "Cost-Effective Planning for Summer Audition Tours" *Dance Magazine*, vol. 98 no.1 pg 82-83

Foster, Hannah Chang. "Auditioning on a Budget" *Pointe Magazine*, Feb. 20, 2019.