

Dancing Again As An Ex-Dancer

Reading time: ~ 9 minutes

A long time ago, back when I was three and a half years old, I spent half of my time at Goh Ballet Academy until I was thirteen and a half. I still remember one of my first, if not the first ballet class I took. Some of our parents were watching us in our little leotards, skirts, and pink ballet slippers. The exercise was pretending to put makeup on our face; my guess, to train our bodies to move gracefully as ballet dancers do. Maybe it was always being the shortest, therefore always being placed first, front row, and center of every class and group performance or maybe I was born with it, but I have always loved performing and being on stage. I enjoyed showing my family all the hard work that was being put into rehearsals. I loved performance days; marking rehearsals followed by one without costume but dancing full out, and then a dress rehearsal, which is essentially like the real performance without an audience. In between rehearsals, I'd hang out with my friends and eventually snack on a Chinese bun and juice box before the big performance *with an audience* while my mom or a friend's mom would do my makeup.

Ballet taught me discipline. It taught me to respect authority figures and that feedback and being put on the spot was practiced to showcase what needs to improve. Even if at the time, when I was ten or eleven years old, I felt called out one class when I wasn't holding my arm up properly. I was put on the spot as an example of how *not* to hold up your arm. When I went back to sit on the floor with my other classmates, my lips were trembling as I held back my tears. I later noticed that crying seemed to be

a regular event in ballet classes when I saw the same thing happen to my classmates. Ballet also taught me how to manage my time as a kid (because time management as an adult is a whole other skill). I couldn't slack off in school - though I did enjoy it so I also didn't *want* to slack off, and I still had to make time for swimming lessons, a few skating lessons, and of course, watching Family channel.

As the years went on, I grew older and things started changing, as they do. Ballet started to feel less about having fun, hard work and performing, but more of a chore. New students came into my classes, my body was going through puberty, and I started questioning whether I belonged at ballet school when I noticed how serious others took it, or for a more accurate perspective, that I was not taking it as seriously as my peers.

When high school was approaching, I had several serious conversations with my mom about whether I would quit dancing or continue. If I continue, I had the option of participating in a half-day program where part of my day would be dedicated to professional training at ballet school, and the other part of it, I would take regular academic classes in high school. What I was feeling was a mix of feeling inadequate, my body developing in ways I didn't see happening in other girls, as well as my mom and family reminding me that ballet is an 'expensive hobby,' an 'activity for rich people,' and that there was no money in becoming a professional dancer. Most of my closest friends ended up participating in the half-day program and I continued along the regular high school route.

In one way or another, my seventh-grade self did feel like it was maybe time for a new chapter. I gave a bittersweet goodbye to the school where I

spent half of my life, including my friends I've made over the years, classes, rehearsals, performing. On the other hand, this goodbye also meant I'd enter a life where I'd have more time; time to hang out with friends, time for more hobbies and school. I no longer had to change into my ballet clothes on the backseat of our car after school when I got picked up late and be driven to Burnaby, Surrey, and other places in the lower mainland for performances and competitions. It also meant an end to McDonald's visits for a small treat on the way home from those performances and competitions, a little moment I'd look forward to - just my mom and I *sans* my siblings. Admittedly, it also meant an end to a big expense for my parents.

A few months after the door closed for my ballerina life, a new high school friend encouraged me to audition for the school dance team once I expressed to her how I used to dance and missed it a lot. This time, the dance style was hip hop. My only experience with that genre of dance was when we had a choreographer from a local hip hop school come into my sixth-grade gym class to teach us some moves to perform in a few weeks. I went ahead to the drama studio after school and auditioned anyway. Following the group audition, I met three other Filipina girls who I'd see after school for rehearsals and practice a few times a week until I was sixteen. I only mention their ethnicity because being one of the only Filipinas at my ballet school for ten years is a whole other experience within itself. Other than having to put my hair into a bun, wear tights and a leotard, and having strict instructors, it felt good to be back on my dance-after-school grind, competitions, and performances - maybe even more so, because I was now around people who simply viewed dance as something fun and not their whole identity.

After three years, the group no longer prioritizing practice caused the dance team to fall apart. I wanted to continue dancing with the team but felt the overall collective energy wasn't at the same level of passion. There was also the problem of not having someone to take the lead as a choreographer for the team, as the seniors who taught us were graduating and moving on with their lives. Similar to why I left ballet school, I didn't find myself on the same page as my environment. Dance competitions no longer felt about community building and fun as well. Rather, most performances felt like advertisements for dance studios around the city and looked more professional only because they were most likely choreographed by a professional. Last time I checked, dance competitions hosted by high schools existed to engage in friendly competitions between dance teams choreographed by the students themselves. Unfortunately, my few years of hip hop dancing came to a close after grade ten. Approaching senior year and also planning to start singing lessons at a music school twice a week the following year, again, I accepted that a new chapter would begin after another bittersweet ending.

What I didn't expect was a growing desire for dancing regularly. Whenever a friend would ask me if I still danced, I'd say "Yeah, in my room!" and I really have been! But there isn't anything like the feeling of sweat falling down your face in a dance class full of other dancers and performing on stage, doing what you love. I could have taken classes at a local dance studio, but I didn't make the time with my full school schedule, music lessons, social life, and the normal worries of a teenager. By the time I graduated high school, I had University, clubs, a part-time job, and new worries taking over my life - more reasons for me not to take a dance class. As the years passed by, I lost my flexibility, my strength, my stamina, and my skills, even though I still had a dream that I'd one day find a way to incorporate dance more into my life again. It wasn't until

Saturday, April 20th, 2018 when I finally stepped foot into a hip hop class. I was visiting my friend in Toronto and browsed through classes at a studio downtown. I wasn't sure if I should've considered myself at the 'beginner' or 'intermediate' level, given I haven't taken a dance class for five years, but I liked challenges and technically did have at least two years of experience, as what the 'intermediate' level called for, so I choose that class. Fast forward, not only did I end up being sore for days after that class, I was falling behind in class.

Yes, I was enjoying myself, but I couldn't help but see that I was probably the only one not getting the choreography at the same speed as everyone else. To top it off, before I left the class and said my thanks to the instructor, she replied 'mhm,' accompanied by an unassuming look on her face. I tried not to let it bother me and instead focused on being proud and happy for myself taking a dance class again, but it ended up affecting me in the long-run. She shouldn't have given me that attitude, especially if she could see that I was slow at catching the choreography and lacking some skills, but unfortunately, it enforced my insecurities of not being as good as I know I could be. A few days later, when I was visiting New York City, I took a beginner's popping class with a friend. I had a much better experience, especially because the class ended up being just us two and the choreographer. I walked out of the class content that she treated us with respect that we were just there to have some fun, but I still couldn't get myself to take a dance class back home.

Earlier this year, I took another hip hop class meant for beginners in New York. I was enjoying myself until I noticed the choreographers looking at me while the whole group was dancing to pick people who "stood out." Becoming self-conscious, I lost my groove in the choreography. At that

moment, I heard one of them say “Ah, so close.” I wasn’t trying to be chosen, but I couldn’t help but be bothered that she let out that comment when I wanted to focus on just enjoying myself. Most of the experiences that I’ve had in dance classes made it difficult for me to not be anxious about being in the studio. I spent so many years putting off incorporating dance regularly into my life because when I was finally ready to seriously consider that again, I got stuck in fear. I didn’t want to run into people I knew at dance studios in fear that I could be seen not as good as I was or I know I am. I didn’t want the looks, the comments, and the energy of others to strengthen the fear of failure and insecurities that I already carried.

On a deeper level, maybe it’s the way I was conditioned from when I was a kid that I have such a tumultuous relationship with failure or just seeing things black and white. Half of my life, I had gotten used to being first place at dance competitions within my ballet groups and going to arguably the best pre-professional/professional ballet school in Vancouver. I worked hard and could see that with practice, regardless of competing, my skills were improving. I got used to anticipating success because I would eventually obtain some material form of success - whether that was a compliment from an instructor or a trophy. Years fly by and my body has obviously changed and so has my ability to dance the way I know it still can. It can be depressing to see a disconnect between my passion, my mind, and my memories holding all the training, practice, and performing I have done to look at myself in the mirror and see that I don’t have the same body and muscles and talent as I once saw in myself. The body dysmorphia that I still face from being an “ex-dancer” is something that I still deal with to this day, but as I’ve said a lot of this year, *thank goodness* for this crazy year. If I hadn’t had worked on my energy - albeit, I really had no choice considering my circumstances - and asked myself *why*

beyond a lot of my fears, I wouldn't have had the courage to step foot into an 'intro to hip hop' class at a local dance studio on Monday, November 11th. This time, my intention wasn't to see if I could still dance like I used to. I intended to have fun and to enjoy myself. Sweat dripping down my face, I went up to the instructor after class and said "Thank you, I had so much fun!" and he said, "Yeah! Did you sweat?" Yes, lots. And I've missed it so much.