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The Mentor / Mentee Relationship:

Significance in the Arts

When you think of the people who have influenced who you are, who you have become, your experiences, difficult choices you have had to make, your future, and your past, who do you think of? The first people who come to mind are probably your family, but the next most influential adult figures I think of are my teachers and mentors. I have chosen to pursue a career as a professional dancer, in which I have had a lot of teachers, mentors, and peers who have helped and guided me to get where I am now. *The Elements of Mentoring: 75 Practices of Master Mentors*, written by Johnson, W. Brad, & Ridley, Charles R. A, offers insight on how to facilitate a successful mentor relationship. Johnson is a professor of psychology in the Department of Leadership, Ethics, and Law at the United States Naval Academy, and Ridley is a professor of Counseling Psychology at Texas A & M University and Co-Director, Research Core of the university's Center for the Study of Health Disparities. The mentor relationship is defined as a, "... dynamic, reciprocal, personal relationships in which a more experienced person acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced person" (15), lending itself to having positives and negatives. Moreover, since most dance knowledge and movement are commonly communicated orally to aspiring young artists through human interaction, relationships, and mentorship, correspondences are inevitable. By analyzing the mentor, mentee relationship pros and cons, historical significance in circulating dance knowledge, and how this affects the individual, one can not only gain insight into how the dance community interacts, but how those interactions can affect other aspects of a dancer's life outside of the studio, stage, company, etc., positively or negatively.

What is mentorship, and what makes a good mentor? Mentorship, as defined in the Oxford Dictionary, is, "the guidance provided by a mentor, especially an experienced person in a

company or educational institution.” Both Oxford Dictionary and Johnson and Ridley’s definition of a mentor are valid and overlap regarding a more experienced person guiding and offering insight. The definition I will be working with, primarily, is Johnson and Ridley’s because it goes beyond a company or educational institution and provides more specifics on the relationship. Teachers, peers, experts in the field, people who you admire, counselors, people who are present in your everyday life, can be considered mentors. They guide, advise, offer opportunities, protect, sponsor, teach, coach, nurture, and much more. In the dance community, I have had many mentors who have helped me become who I am today and guided me through the arduous career path I have chosen. Success in dance, for me, is based a lot on personal growth and achievement, so not everyone’s path in this career will be the same. Good mentors, according to Johnson and Ridley, will exhibit and practice certain behaviors, which will help them not only enrich their experience in the relationship, but, additionally, it ensures the mentee’s growth and success; these behaviors include exuding warmth, listening actively, dependability, showing unconditional regard, respecting and safeguarding privacy, tolerating idealization, embracing humor, gently confronting perfectionism, attending to interpersonal cues, display trustworthiness, respecting diverse values, and not to appear jealous. These behaviors can be applied to any career and walk of life. With dance being such a collaborative and creative career, communication, networking, and mentorship relationships are inevitable. After analysis of good mentoring behavior, one can infer the benefits and drawbacks of the mentor relationship. Every relationship is different and has its own dynamic.

What are the pros and cons of entering into a mentor/mentee relationship? Benefits of the mentor/mentee relationship include sponsorship, friendship, leadership, community, trust, and inspiration to name a few. In Kevin Kane’s research, *Transformative Performing Arts and Mentorship Pedagogy: Nurturing Developmental Relationships in a Multidisciplinary Dance*

Theatre Program for Youth, Kane investigates the mentorship relationship that forms when there is a commonality, like dance, between youth and college-aged professionals.

“The mutually beneficial relationships that develop in such a program – both peer-to-peer alliances and, importantly, the step-ahead mentoring relationships that bring high school youth and college-aged counselors into committed alliances with each other – can become influential developmental relationships, founded upon a mutually transformative event in the arts.” (231)

A personal example of this, is my experience working at the American Ballet Theatre Summer Intensive as a Residential Mentor. I created a working professional relationship with the students at the intensive, and through this relationship, I grew as a leader.

Negatives of the mentor/mentee relationship include wrong pairings, increased feelings of resentment, exploitation, or emotional and physical abuse. If the negatives are not talked about, that can create a negative, cycle of abuse and malicious environment. In Robin Lake’s “The Messages behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals,” Lake investigates the dangerous, dark side of mentorship.

“Among my earliest memories of Anna Sokolow is that she threw a chair at me. Well, toward me. And others, I still feel the shock in the pit of my stomach... She wanted us to rush toward the front of the stage and stop at the very edge... We couldn’t get it right... so she yelled ‘GO!’ and, as we tore forward she hurled the chair at us... The chair didn’t actually touch anyone, but it hit all of us, I think, in a very deep place...” (6) Deborah Jowitt accounts.

The emotional and physical response felt will not be forgotten, and this can create a cycle of abuse and negative dependability on feedback, positive or negative.

Some techniques of teaching and curriculum development can assist in preventing an authoritarian pedagogical legacy in Western concert dance. Education on mental, physical, and spiritual health, curriculum development, diversity and inclusion, and history can help in breaking the authoritarian pedagogical legacy in Western concert dance. When a teacher is developing curriculum and considering what they want to teach in class, there are a few questions to consider. Dance is equivocally an intellectual endeavor as well as physical endeavor. In an article published by Dance Magazine, written by Kathleen McGuire, gave advice to dance teachers regarding mental health, including, “Teach your dancers to treat their mental wellness with the same care that they do their physical wellness.” Mental health is a serious concern and an issue which starts with how aspiring young artists are taught and trained. Susan W. Stinson, Ed.D. posed a few thought-provoking questions in her journal, “What dance content should be taught... Whose dance / what dance kind of dance should be taught... What is the primary purpose... Who should dance education be for.... How should it be assessed?” (139) Moreover, inviting students to participate in the collaborative teaching process can nurture creativity as well as prevent internal conflict in result of fear or belittlement. Diversity and inclusion can bring different perspectives into the learning environment, which advances cultural, personal, and experiential knowledge.

Throughout my life, I have had both positive and negative experiences as a mentor and mentee. When I seriously started dancing, I had teachers who were emotionally abusive. My self-esteem was affected and speaking truth to power was difficult. Speaking truth to power is a phrase that refers to confronting someone who holds an important or influential position (Gramarist). Something that held me back was thinking there was something wrong with me. If I just fixed an aspect of myself, I would get noticed or earn respect. Moreover, I believed in the negative consequences if I spoke up. I have since realized no one can have power over me unless

I give them power. Advocating for myself and seeking to be treated fairly should not be something I should have to apologize for. Throughout my life, I have tried to help empower others through mentorship just as other people have empowered me. I hope to make a positive impact on this world and the dance community. Continuing the conversation about mental health, change the authoritarian pedagogical legacy in western concert dance, teaching the next generation of aspiring artists, and being a voice who can speak truth to power is an important legacy I want to leave and keep my personal growth ever evolving enacting positive change.

Mentorship in the arts, dance specifically, is an influential and integral part in circulating dance knowledge in the community and to aspiring young artists. Speaking truth to power alludes to the strength and courage it takes to confront those who hold power over oneself. This can include students or even working, seasoned professionals. Aspects of dance history manifest the complexity of this idea through what styles of dance are practiced today, how dance is taught today, who gets the job, etc. A mentor is a person who guides, protects, nurture, supports, encourages, and much more. They can be teachers, peers, friends, supervisors, or someone you admire. There are many positives and negatives to the mentor / mentee relationship. Successful pairings and experiences are dependent on the personalities of the individuals involved. Education on mental, physical, and spiritual health, curriculum development, diversity and inclusion, and history can help in breaking the authoritarian pedagogical legacy in Western concert dance. By discussing and researching this topic / presenting to people not in the arts community, I am bringing a much-needed awareness and insight to the idea of speaking truth to power in relations to dance and the arts.

Works Referenced

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