

CalArts' Andre Tyson teaching a contemporary class that includes freshmen.

College Dance = New Directions

What to expect during your freshman year. **BY ROGER LEE**

I will never forget my first day as a college dance major. I arrived at the studio expecting to perfect the technical skills I'd rehearsed for years at local studios where I took hip-hop, African, jazz, and commercial dance classes. Much to my surprise, the professor started the class by having each of us improvise. I anxiously launched into a combination of showy steps to demonstrate my capabilities. But it soon became clear that technical stunts weren't really what she was interested in. The professor smiled at me and said, "Great, now where is the dancing?" I learned right then that college dance is not about tricks. Instead it delves into a sincere investigation of movement and artistic expression.

Like me, many college freshmen are taken by surprise when they begin their dance degrees. But though the new approach may feel odd at first, it opens up new, exciting dance worlds. To help ease your transition, I asked dance faculty and students to talk about challenges freshmen face and to offer advice.

Easing In

You may have decades of studio training and even a dance company summer intensive or two under your belt. But in college, dance is different. Some of the pressure new students experience is self-imposed. Many want to be perfect even before they understand what's expected in this new environment. "Incoming dance majors demand a lot from themselves academically, physically, socially, and artistically," says Elizabeth Gillaspay, associate professor of ballet at the School for Classical & Contemporary Dance at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. "But they have to figure out ways to make all this work in the college setting." Being receptive and patient can help. "Bring an open mind and a healthy curiosity about your chosen art form," says Gillaspay. And though freshmen may want to excel at everything early on, it can be more productive to adopt a less vigorous pace. "Sleep is sometimes undermined in the lives of freshmen dancers," she says. "But a healthy sleep cycle can be key to success."

Technical Difficulties

Even technique class with its familiar structure and rules can present challenges for freshman dancers. New students are often faced with tackling new styles, breaking old habits, and figuring out their own answers to movement questions. "One thing I had to learn was to just sit back and watch sometimes," says Gina Masciarelli, a sophomore dance major at Ursinus College in Collegeville, PA. "When I was younger I would ask a million questions to make sure I was doing something correctly. When I got to college I realized it was beneficial to just listen, watch, and explore new material."

Freshman dancers—especially those who have grown up striving to perfect one style like ballet—often struggle with the concept that there are many valid and exciting techniques. "In a liberal arts education we are trying to get students to be receptive and porous to multiple modalities of movement," says Andre Tyson, assistant dean of the Sharon Disney Lund School of Dance at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).

Instead of trying to dance just like American Ballet Theatre's Gillian Murphy or Chelsie Hightower on "Dancing with the Stars," dance majors explore different dance styles and strive to understand movement in ways that allow them to enter any dance class or audition and make sense of it.

College programs are also very exacting when it comes to anatomically healthy technique. Rather than just striving to achieve a 90-degree *développé* by any means necessary, college dancers are asked to understand what muscles should engage when they perform such a move. Just ask Kristyn Archibald, a CalArts dance

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major who came to college from the competition world. In competition dancing, "most of the choreography had an attack approach that required a lot of tricks and physicality," she says. "Training with the idea of perfecting the tricks caused me to develop my quadriceps." Archibald is now learning to use her inner thighs and rotation instead of gripping her quads. "Now I am more conscious of my breath and releasing tension in the body to produce a different quality of movement," she says.

Many college dancers fear that retraining the body requires letting go of a part of themselves. But Cathy Young, who was chair of the theater and dance department at Ursinus College before becoming director of the dance division at The Boston Conservatory, encourages students to think of retraining as expanding their movement vocabulary, not to mention their options. "The majority of studio dancers must be retrained in college if they are to have any hopes of a concert dance career," she says.

Beyond Technique

The other big switch in college is that incoming dance majors are no longer looked at as mere entertainers. Nor can they simply be strong technicians. They are expected to become dance artists who forge unique paths and develop individual voices. When reviewing potential dance major candidates for CalArts, Zari Wigfall,

dance admissions counselor, says, "I look for students who are hungry for a successful career in the contemporary world of dance, who have a skill set that will allow us to help them become professional artists." To expand your skills and get a taste of styles you'll encounter in college before you go (or apply), she suggests attending summer dance festivals like Bates, Jacob's Pillow, or the American Dance Festival and college-preparatory summer intensives offered by schools like Syracuse University, New York University, and Philadelphia's University of the Arts.

Tyson points out that in college dance is concerned with "investigation of process." How students go about developing their own choreography, collaborating with peers in the studio, or contributing movement during a guest choreographer's residency is as important as the end result. Everything leading up to the performance is just as important as nailing it.

So once in college, your dance courses will include many that don't focus on technique. You can expect to study improvisation, composition, dance history, theory, kinesiology, stage production and design, costuming, music theory, acting, perhaps dance criticism. You will be asked to create, analyze, write, teach, and discuss dance instead of just doing it. Your investi-

gation of dance will be both broad and in-depth. It will introduce you to many aspects of the dance field and prepare you for a sustainable career.

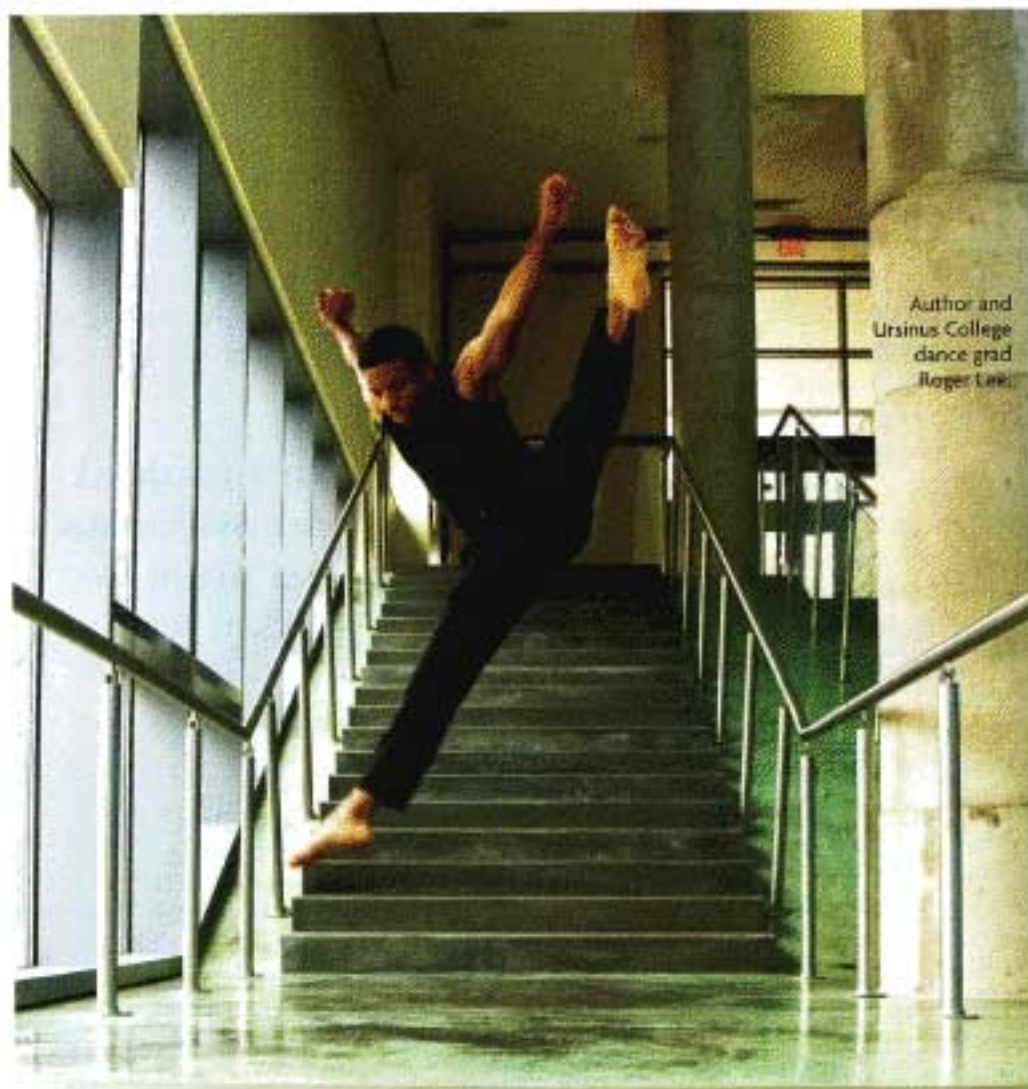
The idea of dancer as creative artist is new for many incoming dance students. But developing your voice is rewarding. "It is wonderful to witness dancers realizing what a rich landscape of research, academics, and performance surround the dance world," says Gillaspy.

Go Out on That Limb

As a new dance major, a positive attitude and an open mind can take you far. "Be really open about styles that might be completely different from your own," says Masciarelli. But also be ready to investigate and develop your own individualism as a mover. "You're here because you love to express yourself through your body," says Archibald. Remembering that, she says, will keep you motivated even during the toughest, most challenging days.

And don't worry if things don't always go right. Wigfall says the most successful dance students at CalArts are those "who are not afraid to fall or fail and continue to work hard to reach their goals."

Roger Lee is a professional dancer, writer, visual artist, a Drexel University graduate student, and Ursinus College alum.



Author and Ursinus College dance grad Roger Lee.