

Taking a Chance on Dance

Professor Anna CY CHAN
Dean, School of Dance

To start, I would like to share a little secret with you. In my over 30 years of professional dance career - first as a professional dancer, studio-based dance teacher, vice-principal of one of the most prominent ballet schools in Hong Kong, then an educator, theatre producer, programmer, arts administrator, and academic leader - until today, I think most of my non-dance/performing arts friends and even some of my family members including my mom, still have no clue how I can have a full-time career in dance, and find it difficult to imagine what this profession does. Many people still have no clue what it takes to build and train a dance artist, what their day-to-day looks like, or whether sustainability is possible. Because of the unknown, there are many misconceptions about dance as a profession.

Misconception #1

When I was a young dancer, people asked me what my full-time job is. I said, "I am a dancer." I would see a puzzle on their faces, and then they would say, "Oh!! Yeah, but what's your real job?" They assumed dance is just a hobby and can't be a profession.

Misconception #2

Just because we spend all day doing physical activities rather than sitting in the office, some misconceptions will presume we are less intellectual or, put it bluntly, "not academically smart." Being a good dancer requires intellectual intelligence as well as physical fitness. For example, learning choreography quickly, reversing a dance sequence, and timing movement to new music take some serious brainpower!

Dancers learn and acquire knowledge differently in comparison to the traditional norm of learning. After our degree programme, many of my students have gone for further study in postgraduate and doctoral degrees.

Misconception #3

"Is the dance profession always a short-lived career?"

Or "You won't be able to make any money as a professional dancer."

"There aren't many jobs. If you don't get into a big dance company, what will you do?"

The actual fact is many of our alumni chose to become independent or have a portfolio career. They work in smaller companies, project-based, and even more commercial jobs.

Misconception #4

Look at this beautiful stage performance photo that the Academy produced. Apart from the "aesthetics" and "dance movements" that we prepare our students to be as a dancer and choreographer through the very nature of this unique training, there is a range of career paths and job opportunities for our dance graduates.

Misconception # 5

This is an image of a dance production. There are many people involved before, during, and after the production to realise this work on stage. This is what I refer to as the “Ecology of Performing Arts Industry.”

Misconception # 6

Many of the jobs and careers inside the two circles I listed here are artists that the Academy focuses on nurturing for the industry. Our graduates will mostly end up having jobs or employment in this area of stage production. However, the whole ecology is bigger than performance and production - for example, working in the community as teachers or instructors or movement therapist; programmer for theatre, venues and festival office; working for funding organisations to support artist and art development. Some may choose to focus on audience development and engagement projects or to be cultural policy researchers. Therefore, all the Dance programmes offered by the School of Dance focus on preparing our students and equipping them with the skills and current knowledge to meet the evolving nature of the dance industry and expanding their horizon of career options within and beyond dance.

While we prepare our dancers to go out into the performance world and be ready to be challenged, the uniqueness of the HKAPA degree programme is the breadth of knowledge we offered to our students that includes Liberal Arts studies, academic studies and other key learning areas in dance; such as Dance pedagogy, Dance creation and Dance science. We also prepare our students with other life skills such as writing, public speaking, problem-solving - all contribute to developing an all-rounded artist. Our dance programme is onward and forward-looking.

Today's world is undeniably digital. See? That's how we meet today and our students are digital age learners. In our Dance programmes, students have plenty of opportunities to learn dance, to create dance, and to analyse movements by incorporating digital technology. Here are some examples how technology integrates with dance.

(Video clip presentation)

We also guide our students to make dance performance beyond the traditional stage performance, for example, choreographing dance on a screen. Here is another example of work choreographed by our alumni.

(Video clip presentation)

In our curriculum, we place a strong emphasis on safe dance practice and wellness. Our programme integrates principles from the dance sciences, including understanding of the body and mind through learning about anatomy, biomechanics, nutrition, exercise physiology, dance psychology, motor learning, conditioning, and body therapy practices. We aim to improve our students' self-awareness and help them develop a healthy and long-living career in dance.

Increasingly, educators like you, employers and even youth themselves are finding that, for young people to succeed in today's rapidly changing and globalised world, they need an educational foundation that includes more than just technical skills.

Do you know many valuable life skills that can be learned from taking dance as a profession?

Valuable Life Skills

1. Resilience
Dance artists are resilient people.
2. Flexibility
This is not just about physically flexible. It is the emotional, social, and cognitive flexibility needed to be a dance artist that is more important than the physical.
3. Decision-making and Problem-solving
Problem-solving and decision making skills require us to react and respond quickly.
4. Perseverance
"Thick skin" and perseverance - We take criticism or rejection personally, but we recover gracefully, challenging ourselves to improve instead.
5. Self-discipline
Dancing is hard. Like many elite sports, you have to work at it, spending hours in the studio perfecting your craft. There are no shortcuts to success. So persistence and self-discipline is the side effect of our training.
6. Concentration
We need to have intense concentration skill and teamwork mentality.
7. Cooperation and Collaboration
It requires everyone to be a valuable player in group performance that nobody looks good unless everyone looks good.
8. Accountability
In training, we learn quickly that others rely on us, and we are accountable to fulfil our role with unwavering dedication. It taught us the value of keeping commitments, for example, showing up on time for rehearsal and performance.
9. Creativity
Dance gives us the ability to innovate, think outside the box and approach problems in creative ways.
10. Attention to details
We are trained to observe with our eyes, ears, and kinesthetic sense.
11. Passion
We learn to devote time, energy, resources to the thing we love. We are inspired, and we strive to inspire others.

I have found that many of my students can transfer these valuable life skills and engage constructively in civic life and any jobs they transfer to.

Thank you for listening. To end, I would like to show a video from the School of Dance.

(Video clip presentation)

Thank you.