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The Washington Ballet School Summer Intensive

**Creative Arts Self-Designed Honors Experience: Reflective Essay**

On July 24, 2015, I finished off my summer experience at the Washington Ballet School with a final performance of Alonzo King’s *Ocean*. It was a bittersweet moment since I didn’t want to say goodbye to my new friends and the choreography we had all worked so hard on, but I was glad to be able to rest. True to its title, the Experience was – for lack of a better word – very intense.

The first day of the program, June 22, housed a nutrition lecture and a placement class. The first in order to ensure that everyone attending the program had a good understanding of how to eat in order to maintain their health throughout the grueling class schedule, and the latter to re-audition all students to determine the best level of instruction for each. I was placed, to my delight and astonishment, in the highest: level nine.

For the remainder of the five weeks, my day began with an hour and a half commute into DC to attend a 9:30 am Ballet Technique class, which would usually last for an hour and forty-five minutes. On Mondays, this schedule was slightly different; an hour long Pilates class was conducted prior to technique. I would then have two additional hour long classes en pointe, including any combination of Pointe, variations, Pas de Deux/partnering, and coaching. Lunch could be anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half, followed by a two hour rehearsal for the level 9 “Workshop” piece. As I have previously mentioned, our workshop piece was *Ocean* a piece originally choreographed by the legendary Alonzo King for his San Francisco-based company, LINES Ballet. The day ended with a final class of a different style, rotating between jazz, modern, and flamenco. Between the long hours of dancing and the extensive commute, my days were tiring and often included an excess of twelve hours away from home.

The most significant part of my experience at The Washington Ballet School was not the classes themselves however, they merely provided the basis for all that I have done and learned this summer. No, the most important aspect of my summer has been the knowledge I’ve gained about myself. I’ve rediscovered how to take care of my body, both with proper nutrition and sufficient rest. I’ve developed a new strategy for tackling stage fright – laughter – and I know a little more about how my body works (and why it sometimes does not.) Most importantly, I have truly realized how pointless it is to compare oneself to others, especially in dance.

Going into this experience, I hoped that I would receive excellent training that would build my resume and expand the way I synthesized and approached different styles of movement. Ultimately, though, my expectations were fairly low; I could not be sure exactly what I would encounter at the program until I actually began it. What I am happy to report is that everything about the experience at the intensive blew my expectations out of the water. Unlike in a previous summer intensive I attended, all the classes were engaging and challenging, the teachers rotated so you could work with more than one person/style of ballet, and the performance opportunities were once-in-a-lifetime. I had anticipated being placed in level eight if I was lucky and level seven if I was not, and so the fact that I had the opportunity to dance in level nine and be seen by the artistic staff of the company itself is something I could not have dared wish for. I hope that the networking opportunities I was able to take advantage of – such as meeting the Artistic Director of The Washington Ballet – will help me to gain employment someday soon.

That is not to say, however, that the only benefits of this experience were measured on paper. My technique, my competency within the creative domain of dance, has improved markedly from the beginning of summer to now. Mostly due to long hours en pointe (averaging four) everyday, my feet and ankles have grown stronger and I now feel comfortable dancing in a new brand of pointe shoes which offers less support, but allow me to articulate and show the arch of my foot better. The many different instructors I was lucky enough to take class from have given me more specific and defined understandings of the different technical styles of ballet. From Vaganova, to Chinese, to American Ballet Theatre, to Balanchine and Bournonville, I have a much greater awareness of the theories and methods of teaching and performing ballet. Also stemming from the variety of teachers at the intensive is my recently increased ability to embrace the contradictions in all these different styles. Each teacher, and some more than others, wanted me to conform to their particular discipline, and each discipline wanted the same step done differently. I received a correction from one teacher of the placement of my arms, and then in the next class, the next teacher would tell me to go back to what I was doing originally. At first, I found this extremely annoying, and I felt like it was holding me back from developing my technical strength. As the experience wore on however, I began to realize that these conflicting viewpoints on the nature of ballet were not only an exercise in adapting to new choreographers, but also a model for my own development as an artist. The growing bank of knowledge regarding these movement styles will allow me to adapt quickly and will eventually help me to an understanding of how I want to dance and present myself.

In order to gain further perspectives on what I stood to learn and gain over the course of this experience, I utilized many of the sources I outlined in my learning proposal, including the Washington Ballet’s website and YouTube account and some extra, strictly informative sources such as online encyclopedias to study the history of the company and its repertoire of ballets. With these resources, I clarifies my understanding of how a professional ballet company operates and performs. For example, all companies with the exception of a few do not keep a standard repertoire of ballets on hand. While many list the pieces that the company has performed in years past, many contemporary companies rely on new choreography to keep audiences engaged, only including a full length ballet occasionally to satisfy those patrons who enjoy the classics. I also learned about the process of copyright on choreography, in part through the workshop piece my level performed. When a new ballet is choreographed and performed by a single company, that choreographer/company then owns the rights to the dance. If another group wishes to perform the piece, they must seek the right to from the original source, and will often pay a performance fee. This is why it is so difficult to perform Balanchine ballets, or even to find them online as videos. This is also the reason I was so excited to Perform *Ocean*, as it is unlikely I will have another opportunity to be a part of a company that secures the rights to do so. With this new understanding, I feel motivated to explore more and to continue my training, as well as more prepared to someday enter this industry as a mature dancer and knowledgeable artist.

As I move forward into my sophomore year at CCM, I will carry with me all the knowledge that I have gained, but more important still, the broader perspective that came along with that gain. Especially after dealing with a back injury which basically took me out of class altogether for the fourth week, I am more aware than ever just how fleeting every moment of my dance career is. Even considering how much more I gained from this summer program than programs in the past makes me realize how lucky I really am. While it is sobering to live with an increased awareness of the fragility of my body, I feel as though it will allow me to appreciate every day I have the privilege of doing what I do. It will allow me to dance with abandon and joy, giving everything to what could always potentially be my last performance.

Another equally significant portion of this experience was its dissemination on my blog. Entitled “The Pointe of Summer,” the biweekly updates I posted there were much more difficult to compose than I ever would have thought, as the commuting time into and out of DC created an approximately 13 hour “work-day.” It was also difficult trying to write something that was simultaneously interesting, relevant, and brief. In spite of these difficulties however, I have been both humbled and delighted by the positive response and far reach of my writings. To date, it has been shared on the Facebook page of the Washington Ballet, as well as on my own social media outlets, and I hope that it will soon be shared by my local ballet studio in Maryland. Over 315 people have logged on to read what I wrote about my experience this summer, as well as how to go about attending any summer intensive as an aspiring ballerina.

Despite the difficulties that went along with this sort of ongoing dissemination, I intend to continue the blog if I ever get the opportunity to attend another intensive, in the hope that I can help any young dancers confused about the process, and also to help reflect on what the experience teaches me. The positive feedback I have received from the blog platform has also been encouraging to me. It is remarkably comforting to know that someone out there care about what you have to say. Honestly, I couldn’t have asked for any more from this experience, and looking back, I wouldn’t change a single thing.