

Secrets of a Thriving Adult Dance Fitness Program

Part 3 – The Safe Zone



“You got any deodorant around here?” Patricia was still rumbling around in the back dressing room. “I think there’s a can of Secret under the sink in the bathroom,” I yell back. I always thought Patricia was a little on the nervous side. I remember walking into the bathroom during Nutcracker dress rehearsal, when we were about 15, and finding her kind-of panicking because she couldn’t find her deodorant. I just remember how frantically she was going through her dance bag, trying to find it. What were we rehearsing for... the party scene? Was that it? Yes! That was it! We had those big long-sleeved dresses on, and she wanted her deodorant. “Did you find it?” I call out.

“Oh yeah. It was there – thanks!” As she comes back into the studio I say, “It’s so good to see you again, Patty. It’s been way too long...” “I know...,” she agrees and then laughs, “Hey, do you remember that time we were on the bus at Thruway Shopping Center and you left your jacket at the store?”

“Oh, I do! I’d left it at the bakery!!! And I had to run get it! And the whole bus was waiting for me!” I was so embarrassed because I was supposed to be dieting, and I had snuck and eaten some donuts there, and I’d almost gotten away with it... but then I left my stupid jacket so everybody on the bus knew I’d been to the bakery... I was mortified!”

“Ha ha ha... Wendy was trying to cover for you. She was saying something about you having to do a science experiment for Ms. Davis and needing to buy some frosting... and then Nelson said he was in your science class and didn’t know anything about any science experiment that involved frosting... Ha ha ha!”

“Oh man... Yeah that bus driver was mad at me for making us all late... That’s funny you remembered that...”

Patricia and I were now sitting on the studio floor again, feeling warmer in dry clothes.

That reminds me. “Do you remember when we were in Duncan Noble’s class, and... I’ll never forget it... we had our leg on the barre in 2nd position, and he came up to me, in front of everyone, and said, “You know the movement that goes like this?” and he made this gesture like he was scooping food toward his mouth... and then he said, “you need to learn to go like this!” and he acted like he was pushing food away! Do you remember that!?! That was so embarrassing...”

“And you were tiny!” she says sweetly.

“I always felt fat there.... But I know one thing, for sure, I was damn-sure smaller than I am now!” I say, and we burst into laughter.

“Oh you look great, Jules...” “Awww, thanks,” I interrupt. “But you know I don’t know if I’ll ever get over wanting to be thin. It’s an obsession... but you know what? I have to say, these classes have really helped me. In so many ways! They’ve helped me finally learn to dance without worrying about being perfect. I mean, make no mistake, I’m still trying to dance like I’m 17, but I can’t. My hip hurts me. I can’t do a split like I used to...”

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“Oh you had the best extension!!! I remember that!” she says. “You were like a rubber band!”

“That’s gone. That’s definitely gone,” I say and instinctively move toward a left split. “No cartilage in my right hip anymore, and that baby does not want to do an arabesque anymore!” I say, patting my right hip. “But you know what? I finally realized it’s okay not to be perfect in here, in there,” I say pointing to the mirror. “It’s good enough that I’m still dancing at my age; and I have to be honest, I just love the music and how good my body feels when I teach these classes, and that’s the best I can do.”

“That’s probably good enough,” Patricia says. “I need to.... get there... emotionally. I need to be okay with... being older and less... everything. Less everything...”

“Yeah it’s hard, but it’s been amazing to drop the expectations, Patty, to just ACCEPT that I’m older; and I don’t care if I’m not perfect anymore, that’s not going to keep me from dancing.”

Right split for me now. She’s lying on her stomach with her feet in the air.

“And Patty, that’s why my dancers love coming here too. You know, we just don’t worry about being perfect anymore. We just come to dance! You probably noticed, we have people of all shapes and sizes in here, and some are really good and some are really not; and it just doesn’t matter.”

“I felt that today! It was like it really didn’t matter what I looked like or what I was wearing.”

“Yeah this has to be a safe zone. This has to be a place where we can dance our hearts out and not worry about being judged or talked about or worry about how good we look.”

“A safe zone...” she repeats.

“Yeah, I love it, and I think that’s a big part of why so many former dancers come to my classes and start dancing again here. Patty, I have like 250 dancers, all adults, who come regularly! And my classes are seriously hard! They burn like 700 calories in one hour and they have tons of ballet, jazz, and contemporary choreography – they’re seriously hard!” I exclaim. “What I’ve learned over the years is that adult dancers don’t mind trying something that is really hard, technically and cardiovascularly; they just don’t want to be judged. It’s amazing how hard my dancers will work because they feel safe in here... safe to try something they’ve never done... safe to look silly or look bad even. We’re all in here dancing our faces off and you know what? So what if our legs are low, and so what if our turn-out isn’t perfect, and so what if we don’t have banana feet? It’s fine! We’re doing ballet and jazz and contemporary and some silly, playful beginner’s hip-hop, and our spirits are soaring!”

“I think you’re onto something... wow. Just trying to figure out how to bring that attitude into my adult ballet class...”

“Speaking of banana feet, OMG, do you remember Sherry’s banana feet??? I was so jealous! She could stand on pointe in her tennis shoes!” “Now that’s some serious talent,” we laugh..



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