

Apprenticeship Agonistes

*It's a time to hear music, see the
lights and grow, a time to make
mistakes you will never make again.*

Teresina Goheen, dancer, Tulsa Ballet

Ah ha, the mind whirls...I'm an APPRENTICE, finally, the years of work, Mom and Dad are so proud! I won't have to worry about school, I'll have a career, I'll dance with famous people. I'm an APPRENTICE! I wonder how the famous primas felt at a time like this...

I'm so scared. Apprentice...Company... Do they really think I'm good enough?

Such is the suffering flip-flop a young ballet company apprentice goes through. There is unbounded thrill- I made it! Hard work and years of trying and I made it!

There is that nagging terror- I'm not strong enough, look at the extension on those company dancers! They are so beautiful!

The truth is, if you've been offered an apprenticeship contract by a good pre-professional company, it's not because they have warm milk flowing through their veins, nor is it because they flipped a coin and you came up heads.

They want you because you're good and because you will fit ballet-wise with the other dancers. Simple as that...Though young dancers sometimes have trouble believing it.

An apprenticeship is a pre-professional contract in every sense of the word. You will be dancing, but at the same time you will also be learning to improve your skills. In short, an apprenticeship contract is actually two separate arrangements: on the surface it is exactly what it purports to be- a contract between you and the company which will give you the opportunity to dance and perform. But there is also a second understanding: while you agree to fill out the roles the company assigns to you, the company also promises to teach you the finer, more subtle points of classical ballet, to provide you with a training opportunity so your ballet talent can grow and develop.

As an apprentice you will be learning, and you will be doing it under the watchful eyes of experienced, highly trained professionals.

That is what apprenticeship means, and that is what apprenticeship can provide.

But the experience, for all its obvious benefits, is never easy. You will be at the bottom of the skill ladder in the company; you will be younger than anyone else; you will be given roles that no one else may want. But you will be dancing everyday in a pre-professional company, learning new roles, performing occasionally. A dream come true!

“Where shall I stand at the barre?” (At Canton Ballet, apprentices usually have a class with the understudies, but there are times when they do take class with full company members, especially in the theatre.) There is the traditional “pecking order,” and it comes out most vividly when you face the choice of where to stand at the barre. What it really means is “Where do I fit in?” and every young dancer must resolve it somehow. Where dancers stand at the barre is not only a territorial right but the product of seniority and long tradition. Places at the barre are chosen in order of the dancer's importance in the company-principals, soloists, corps members, and finally apprentices. You, the apprentice, get last choice; there's no appeal, no negotiation. You wait until you see where the other dancers stand- or if you are new, you ask another dancer about who stands where- or you wait to be placed by the ballet master.

What you do is observe the manners, courtesy, and traditions of classical ballet...as you have been taught to do.

“ I don’t see why I should learn parts I have no chance of ever dancing!” Ah ha, the apprentice pitfall. Seems to make sense, doesn’t it? Why learn something you’ll never need? The problem is you never know when never can change. Never is just a word, but circumstances fit an infinite variety of events, and what could be “never” today might be “likely” tomorrow. When you first join the company, the ballet master or artistic director will tell you which parts to learn in which ballets, and from this you may get the impression that you have been “routed” into certain dance format.

True enough, perhaps, as far as that company is concerned. As a smart apprentice you will spend your spare time watching on video the ballets you’ve been preparing for or learning the nuances of the parts from another dancer. In short, you will be doing your homework.

Why then would you want to learn any other parts- especially parts you don’t think you’ll ever dance? The point is... you never know! Never. Obviously, this doesn’t mean you should try to learn every part available. Show some intelligence. But as a learning process, go beyond the parts officially assigned to you, learn those that you might fit, even if the ballet master hasn’t assigned them to you. Try to perfect roles that seem logical for you, even if they haven’t yet occurred to the creative dance minds that run the company. Apprenticeship is a learning process, and sometimes the best learning you do can be on your own.

“I never get to dance enough!” One of your most difficult times comes when the company is preparing for a repertory program. Usually these programs include pas de deux and smaller ensemble works, and apprentices are rarely used except as understudies. It doesn’t mean, however, that your ballet skills aren’t appreciated by the company or that your ballet education should stop. You can use this time effectively and perhaps make an additional impression on company management.

Remember: apprenticeship is a time to learn. Those who have come before you understand this: those who stand beside you will help share the experience.

The Young Professional’s Book of Ballet, Angela Whitehill, William Noble; Dance Horizons, Princeton Book Company, Princeton, NJ, 1990.