



ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL

WHAT IT TAKES TO GO PRO

WORDS OF ADVICE, FROM LEANNE BENJAMIN AM OBE, TO THE GRADUATING YEAR OF 2020

I'm thrilled to be here today, to have the opportunity to say a few words, (even virtually) and to be a part of your celebrations.

To graduate from one of the pre-eminent ballet schools in the world is a huge achievement. Congratulations!

None of you ever imagined that your graduation would look like this. It's been a tough few months, but as we all know, life is full of unexpected situations, and this 'bump in the road' on your journey will surely make the class of 2020 more resilient and determined to get to work!

Today is not for worrying about coronavirus, it's about **you**, your future, and how you take that amazing, fateful, scary but exciting step from student life into professional life.

The journey from a classroom to centre-stage can be disconcerting because there is a lot of competition and few jobs to go around. But you do it because you have to, you feel compelled to, and as you know, when you achieve your goals, nothing is better.

Having had a long career in the dance world, I'd like to offer up a few things for you to think about...

Surround yourself with support

Throughout my career I was lucky to have support from my work colleagues, family and friends, and I couldn't have done it without them. They were there for me - whether I was riding high from dancing the greatest ballets or suffering the lows of injuries or insecurities.

When things get tough, remember to seek out the support you need, and be there to support others.

Compete with yourself, not others

It is natural to want to compare ourselves to others. Are my fellow dancers stronger than me? Faster? Can they jump higher? Even the best of us can get caught up in these thoughts and fears.

As an impatient dancer, I had to remind myself of a useful saying - "If you look at the peak you might slip on the pebbles." Focus on being the best you can be and set realistic goals for yourself that you can achieve day by day.

Don't be put off, if things don't go your way

No matter how high up the ladder you go, don't expect things to go your way, all the time, or frankly that often. Even the biggest stars have been rejected far more times than awarded the role they wanted, or given an opening night, or the right partner, or invited on the right tour, or given the right seat on an airplane!

Try not to be defeated over short-term and irrelevant disappointments. Throw yourself into work and continue to learn.

Here's a fun fact: Hollywood's response to Fred Astaire's first screen test was "Can't act. Can't sing. Slightly bald. Can dance a little."

You never know when you may be called on to step in, and when that call could change your life.

Next point:

You learn more from criticism than you do from praise

Let's face it, we all hate criticism but positive correction, particularly in ballet, is necessary. Try not to be discouraged by it, be open minded, stay curious and embrace feedback constructively. And when you get praise – acknowledge it, celebrate and enjoy it!

This one is important going into any job:

Be consistent and reliable

Be the person who always delivers. If you let people down too many times, no matter how talented you are, they will lose faith in you. Work out what it takes to reliably deliver and without losing your individual spark, be consistent in your training, preparation and performance.

This one is particularly important (given everything that is going on today):

Treat people you work with respectfully and expect nothing less in return

In most professions, and dare I say in the arts in particular, there are times when tempers flare or people snap and when that happens, it's almost always a barrier to progress.

Treat everyone you work with, from Stage Door workers to the Artistic Director with respect and with compassion.

Be your peers' number one cheerleader, stand up for those that may not be as confident as you, welcome newcomers, and - why not do the English thing? - be there with a cup of tea when someone is struggling.

And finally:

Remember your passion

It's amazing that we get to do what we love, meet exceptional people, travel the world, create new work and unlike most professions, we are lucky to end our evenings with flowers and applause!

But let's face it, with blisters on our feet, the repetition of daily class, and a bad en Dedans pirouette, we can lose our inspiration.

When this happens, try to remember what made you want to dance in the first place. Hold on to that.

As Martha Graham said, "Great dancers are not great because of their technique; they are great because of their passion."

You have been given all the tools to have the best possible future, and each and every one of you has something very special to offer.

Class of 2020 – Be very proud of your achievements, and I can't wait to see you on stage.

Leanne Benjamin AM OBE

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