

The Dancers Survival Guide to Transition

8 Steps to making your transition a positive experience!

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Introduction

I decided to write this text as a primer for dancers in transition. Whether you are contemplating retirement down the road, are soon facing retirement, or have been in transition for some time, this book is for you. I have been surprised by the continued attitude of many dancers that they simply will not think about transition until “it happens”. As one professional dancer wrote to me last year, “It is like that gun to your head nobody wants to think about”!! The 8 steps included in the booklet are intended to get you started on the road to transition. No book or text will ever take the place of live, one-to-one contact with qualified dance transition professionals but by reading this, I hope to get you started on this journey in a positive way.

The continued development and magnificent work of the Dancer Transition Organizations throughout the world is a welcome change to what was available 25 years ago. However, they are struggling mightily for funds. There simply is not enough money to support everyone who deserves financial and transition assistance. By being better prepared mentally for the transition, dancers can make better use of the meager resources available and make more informed choices about their futures.

My experiences as a dancer in classical ballet companies in the U.S. and Europe naturally informs the tone and thrust of this booklet. I realize there are many other professional dance experiences out there but have tried to speak broadly enough that the booklet will be of use to a wide range of transitioning dance professionals.

In this text, I have mainly dealt with the practical aspects of managing the process of transition. I have included some exercises to help dancers focus on going *forward* and not letting regret at the loss of the career get in the way of creating a bright and exciting future.

The main point of this text however, is to help dancers realize that transition is a multi-faceted *Process*; it does not happen in a day or a week. For many dancers, it is a process that takes months, if not years. But you did not become a dancer overnight and there is a part of you that will not stop being a dancer really ever. Nevertheless, you will become one of the many dance professionals who has taken the chance to develop into something else; something hopefully that is as fulfilling as your dance career!
Carole Augustus

Step 1: An Honest First Self-assessment:

Before we jump into what the transition process means to you, you need to be clear about where you are right now.

Age? If you are over 35 years old, it is fairly clear that you are near the end of your performing career—at least in a company that performs classical repertoire as well. If you have been “retired” by a company because of your age *but you still want to dance*, check out your options. Or, perhaps it is time to go to a smaller company that performs a different kind of repertoire more suited to this stage of your performing life. Musical theater also offers well trained dancers a chance to use their performing knowledge and incredible discipline in a new way. Not dancing in a classical company does not mean other forms are any less legitimate. It is better to be sure you are finished performing than regret later you didn't try something different.

Burnout? Secondly, perhaps you are just burned out and need a break. The constant demands of maintaining a dance career can be exhausting and many dancers have benefited from taking 6 months to a year off. There will be no guarantees of employment after the break, however. But, if you are trying to recover from burn out and/or injuries **and** are still relatively young, this may be a good option for you.

Wrong company? Lastly, perhaps you are in the wrong company. It happens. While it can be very satisfying to do a certain type of technically challenging repertoire in your twenties, often it may not be “enough” when you are in your thirties. For many dancers, technique alone and the stock characters of classical ballet are not satisfying. Do not be afraid to seek out choreographers whose work you admire and investigate where you could do more of it. And, if you are really bold, start your own performing group!

Try to be true to *yourself* when thinking about this. It can be hard to admit that you really *do* want to stop dancing and change your life when your colleagues are still totally committed to the work as dancers. Likewise, you may be wondering if there is something wrong with you if you are in your mid- to late thirties and still want to dance; here you need to be realistic about what kind of work you can still do and tailor your expectations to your current reality.

Being clear about what you really want will help during the transition process because there will be times when you will be in new territory—out of your comfort zone— and you will question your decision to retire.

Step 2: Celebrate your Success

Whether it is now or later, it is important to say a proper goodbye to performing. You need to take the time to honor what you accomplished as a dancer and respect your achievements.

You are to be congratulated on having had a successful professional performing career! The number of people who begin dance classes thinking they will become dancers is huge compared to the ones who actually go the distance and make it.

You are who you are today and where you are today because you persevered, worked like crazy and created this life! The incredibly rich experiences you had as a dancer may not be repeated but you are now available to take advantage of other opportunities you put aside as you dedicated yourself wholeheartedly to dance.

Whether you have planned to retire at this point or have been forced to because of injury, age, or the loss of your job due to budget cuts, there are many practical and emotional dimensions you will encounter in this new territory of transitioning from a performing career.

Before we continue, I would like you take a moment to do one exercise.

Exercise 1: The Love/Hate Exercise

Take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle making 2 columns.

On the left side write, "The Things I love(d) about my Dance Career". Feel free to say anything like:

The ritual of preparation before a show

The applause of the audience

Working on a new piece of choreography, etc.

Get it all down.

Now, on the right side write "The Things I hate(d) about my Dance Career". Hopefully, this list won't be as long as the first list (!) but be honest (nobody else has to see this.) My list would include,

Company class at 10h every day

Cold theaters on tour

7 AM warm-ups before filming

Always having to cut vacations short to be in shape

It is important to begin to see your career in a realistic light; the good, the bad *and* the ugly! In this way, you can avoid the trap of many performers (and professional athletes) of *mythologizing* their careers. That is to say, making them better-more perfect-than they were which can keep you stuck in an unhealthy cycle of self-pity and regret for what you will no longer have.

You can now say to yourself, "Well, thank God I don't have to _____ any more!"

Keep this realistic view of your career in mind and review it from time to time to stay honest with yourself.

Step 3: Know Your Rights

No matter where you are engaged as a dancer (Large/Regional company, Opera house, State supported company, freelance group), you need to inform yourself of your rights.

1. What kind of a **contract** do you have? (If you have been fired, or decided to leave on your own, you must be sure it is done in a proper, legal way.)
2. Will you be able to stay in the city where you currently live? Check out the **Residency Requirements** if you are not a citizen of the country where you last worked and you want to stay there.
3. Do you belong to a **union**? (Who is the union representative for your company or region?)
4. Are you covered by **unemployment insurance**? (Under what conditions can you receive compensation? Do you meet the criteria? How long will you receive benefits? Call the „RAV“ office in your region and ask!)
5. Is there a **dancer's transition organization** that can help you? (What are the requirements for receiving financial assistance from them? How much can you expect to get? Do they offer counseling or coaching services as well?)
6. Where do you go for help **paying your rent or health insurance discount** if you can't get unemployment benefits? (There is usually a social services office that can help.)
7. Do you have a **Pension/Retirement account**? (What happens to it when you finish your current contract? Can you take the money to use for re-training? If so, is there a tax penalty for that?)
8. Do any of the theaters or companies where you worked have a **special fund** for re-training? It's a fairly new development in some places so check it out through the management team.

These issues need to be clear for you. Do not be afraid to call specific offices yourself to get the facts. Often, unions can help with a lot of your questions and get the latest information from the relevant source. Do not rely on "hearsay" from fellow dancers; every case is different and you need to be sure what applies to you specifically. Only when you are clear about your financial and legal situation can you deal with the other aspects of transition in a calm, clear-headed way.

Step 4: Early Planning

This chapter will be of most help to you if you are reading it before you retire, but don't despair if you have waited; better late than never! Dancers tend to live in the “here and now”. This has been a distinct advantage in terms of your dance career success; you needed to be fully present during daily class to warm up properly, continue to improve technically, and engage fully with choreographers and choreography. However, this does not always help dancers in the long run if they haven't ever taken the time to plan their future life *after* dance.

Higher Education: Although it is not for everyone, getting a college or university degree can be a huge advantage in transitioning. However, the steep costs of getting a degree or financing a new education when your income disappears may make that out of reach for many. In addition, many dancers in Europe do not have the requisite level of general education to get into a university. But, progress has been made to create systems where adults who have had a professional career may have some of their degree requirements waived. The latest cooperation of colleges and universities with dance companies that allows dancers to take individual courses while they are in companies is a fantastic development for the profession! Even if you are not sure what you want to do when you retire, working on a Bachelor's Degree can go a long way towards helping you figure that out. For dancers who are not fortunate enough have access to these newer programs, check out “Distance Learning” programs on the Internet. They can be expensive but most any course you successfully complete can benefit you and may be accepted as an elective in a University program if you decide to eventually go for a full degree program.

Living: Dancers tend to be a nomadic bunch. Most dancers work with several companies in their lives. Many have had professional training in cities that were far away from where their families resided. What that means when you retire is that often you may feel at “home” everywhere and nowhere at the same time. The thought of moving back to your original hometown is not always attractive but you need to think about where you want to make your home when you do retire. How will you make a living there? What about your Life Partner if you have one; where does he/she want to live? Be realistic and research your options.

First of all, if you are living in a foreign country and have done your homework on your residency status (Step 2), you know whether or not you have permission to live and work where you are when your contract expires. Secondly, if you are eligible to receive unemployment compensation, you may *have* to remain in or near the city where you had your last contract to receive unemployment benefits. Depending on your personal circumstances, you may decide to “settle down” where you last worked. The advantages of this are you can begin making connections outside of your work while you are still employed. One obvious disadvantage may be that if you live outside your country of origin, it can be very isolating and/or difficult to travel to see relatives if you have young children or if you need to deal with aging parents. There are no easy answers here but try to see the big picture as much as possible when making these choices.

Finances: Develop a budget. What will you spend on essentials like rent, food, electricity, heat, insurances (health, car, life, apartment), plus travel (bus, train, gasoline etc.) and entertainment? Don't forget home office supplies such as computer, printer, ink, envelopes, stamps, paper etc. You will need these things. Think seriously about downsizing now (or when you move to the city of your choice). Learn to pack a lunch. Drink your coffee at home and take a thermos for the two o'clock kick. Resist impulse buying. Move to a cheaper apartment. Save 50-100 Euros/dollars etc. a month. If you don't

have to worry about meeting your monthly bills, you take one whole element of stress right out of your life! Don't think of this as "giving up" something; you are merely creating the financial space to make your transition to a new life possible.

Language: If you are living in a country where you don't speak the language but want to retire there-start learning it. Dancers work so hard that there is very little down time (or energy!) to put into this, but think about starting a conversation group with one of the native speakers in the company. It can be daunting-especially for those of us who never learned a foreign language, but it will help you integrate into the culture and your new home much faster. Begin at the beginning with books to get a sense of the grammar; if you have been in the country awhile you will most likely have some vocabulary but if you don't know the underlying grammar, you will get stuck. If you can't manage to work much on the language while you are working, most unemployment bureaus have a provision that pays for classes in the national language for unemployed/eligible foreigners. Take advantage of this when you retire.

Health: Take care of any health or injury related issues you have before you stop working. Also be sure you have insurance coverage for accidents; in some places in Europe you lose that coverage when you stop working and need to buy extra insurance in addition to regular health insurance for accidents. It is worth it. Check with your union to see if they have a special low-cost health care coverage for you. Plan in advance how you will "stay in shape". It can be very difficult to function well if suddenly your body does not get the daily workout it has become accustomed to for so many years. It does not take a lot of work to stay in shape but plan your program now; it will really help get you through the time ahead. Be aware that as you age, your body reacts more strongly to alcohol. The amount of alcohol you could drink in your 20's without feeling after-effects, will most likely slow you down and give you a hangover in your 30's. Recreational drugs are also best left in the past. If you feel you have any sort of addiction tendencies with either alcohol or drugs, get that sorted out with professional help before you retire and retrain.

Free Time: Lastly, if you are still working as a dancer, choose well what you do when you have that little amount of free time. (I know; it's often taken up with sleeping, going to the physiotherapist, going grocery shopping, doing laundry and cleaning- but your brain stays active; pay attention to it.) Pay attention to what interests you. What workshops would you do if you had the time and money? What books do you read? Do you go to concerts, plays, gallery openings? Who have you met outside of work that seems interesting to you? Who has a job that you find fascinating? What have you seen in the last month that made you say, "Wow! That looks like a fun job!"?

If you can see this transition as being a tremendous opportunity to change your life in a terrifically positive way by doing something else you always wanted to do, your transition will be much more joyful.

Step 5: Perceptions and Attitudes

It is fairly common in our society to identify ourselves by the work we do. In addition, dancers begin serious training very young (like elite athletes) and continue to train intensively throughout the time when psychologists say our “identity” is formed. It is no wonder then, that the transition process for dancers and high achieving athletes is so difficult. Who are we if we are no longer what we have been for the past 20-30 years?

One simple but profound shift in our perceptions of ourselves can be made by learning to call ourselves “Dance Professionals” rather than “Professional Dancers”. Although I would like to take credit for this pithy switch, it actually comes from one of my dear friends, Katie Langan-Santee, the long-time Dean of Dance at Marymount Manhattan College in New York City. As a Dance Professional, you acknowledge that you are a professional person in your own right. Whether you stay within the dance world or not when you stop performing, you have a specific body of knowledge and expertise and have acquired transferable skills in the process of your education and professional life. And just like other professionals, you can take your skills into a new career direction.

To begin the transition process, you will use your current skills but also need to develop new skills. The transferable skills dancers have are many. Discipline, endurance, goal-setting, supreme concentration, ability to work within a group, ability to work under pressure, flexibility, willingness to learn new things- the list is long. The qualities dance professionals possess are valued highly in any and every industry you will choose to work. They will also help you in your transition to a new life.

Leaving your comfort zone: Transitioning to a new life requires doing things that are not comfortable. If you ever worked with a choreographer in a new or stylistically different way, you know what I mean. It took time to get the new movement into your body. It is the same with developing new habits and skills outside of dance. For instance, you may need to learn to do something many dancers hate: Talk to people you don't know. Talking to people is the best way to get information-which is what you need to do when transitioning to a new career. Dancers learn to be very expressive with their bodies but being verbally articulate does not always come so easily. But, it does get easier with practice. Begin to talk to people that you come into contact with at receptions, get to know the technical crew at the theater, talk to anyone and everyone involved with the “Friends of the Ballet” or whatever volunteer organization helps support your company. Talk to former dancers as well. Many of them appreciate your work from an informed perspective and many are very happy with their new careers and willing to talk to you about them. A simple response to an introduction could be; “Nice to meet you. Are you still involved in dance or have you transitioned into something else?” Talk to your physiotherapist, shiatsu practitioner, trainer at the gym etc. We are all happy to talk about ourselves and you can gain valuable information about potential career paths when you get people to talk about themselves. These conversations and connections can also be extremely valuable down the road.

This is just the beginning. Transition is a process; it is a process of who you are becoming now.

Step 6: Dancer Transition Organizations

The hard work of many former dancers and dance enthusiasts has resulted in the Dancer Transition Organizations that exist today. The umbrella organization is called the International Organization for the Transition of Professional Dancers (IOTPD). Their website, www.iotpd.com, has a listing of the many organizations worldwide dedicated to working with dancers in transition. There exists a fairly standard set of regulations for being eligible for help under these organizations, but there are some specifics that vary country-to-country. In Switzerland, there is the SSUDK (Schweizerische Stiftung für die Umschulung von darstellenden Künstlerinnen und Künstler/ website: www.ssudk.ch) for the German and Italian speaking part of the country and Danse Transition website: www.dance-transition.ch) for the French speaking part of the country. Please check the ones that may be able to help you out; they will send you in the right direction.

In addition to offering financial support, many offer skills assessments, financial and resumé writing advice, interview workshops, and ongoing counseling or coaching. There is also a network of volunteers you may contact about your specific area of interest. I urge you to take full advantage of everything available to you for your transition. Please keep in mind that this process takes time and you will most likely need some moral support – in addition to financial support- along the way.

Step 7: Losing Your Tribe

Working in a close-knit group as dance and theater people do, it can be a shock to lose that sense of community in our lives when we retire. Suddenly, our daily concerns become different and those people we had so much in common with when we worked together seem more distant from us.

It can be very lonely. We can be very excited with our “new lives” but if we can't share that with the people we are used to sharing our triumphs with, it is hard. It is also difficult for many dancers to remain in touch with former colleagues because of the sense of loss associated with the loss of the career. It doesn't seem to matter whether we no longer dance because it was our own choice, because of injury, or we were fired; it is always difficult to manage the loss of the career we spent most of our lives with. Like any loss, this does get easier with time though.

One reason I advocate starting a degree program at a college or university, or starting another education is that will immediately put you in touch with a new community. As your comfort level and mastery of new skills grows, so does your confidence in your new identity. This is imperative for a successful transition. Even if you decide to stay within the dance community as a director, choreographer, teacher, or ballet master, you will need a new sense of yourself to avoid the pitfall of somehow feeling in competition with the dancers and not being able to maintain the distance necessary to give your best in that new role.

What if you don't know *what* you want to do? You will need to do some research on yourself!

Step 8: Self-Assessment II

If somehow you don't qualify for help with one of the Dancer Transition Organizations, there are many self assessment tools online. One of the best known is the Myers-Briggs personality test. It's not a bad place to start. Most colleges and universities offer this to students at some point. It is a series of multiple choice questions that measures your personality preferences/type. It can seem a bit removed from your real life so you might want to begin this process alone by answering a few questions here. Please be as honest as you can; resist the impulse to answer as you "think" you should.

1. Do you want to stay within the dance community? Some type of certification is helpful and often required. For teaching in a college or university, you need a Master of Fine Arts or at least a Master of Arts degree in dance. Many former professional dancers choose to do this but it can be expensive and will take time (3-4 year undergraduate degree, 2-3 years for the MFA or MA degree on top of that.) There are some dance degree programs in Germany, England and newly in Switzerland that are all or partially offered in English-do your research to see if one of them fits your needs.
2. If you have the possibility to work as a company teacher or ballet master, that is a great way to stay very involved in the business. You have the advantage of knowing the business already.
3. Do you want to do some type of bodywork such as shiatsu, Alexander Technique, Gyrotonics/Gyrokinesis? This is one area a lot of former professionals go into because you can take a lot of your dance knowledge with you as you segue into a new profession. If you have any old dance injuries you will need to be cognizant about the impact they might have in your new career.
4. Do you need structure to do good work? Most ballet companies are highly structured and we take it for granted but what happens to you without that given structure?
5. Can you work alone, independently? (How are you at managing projects around the house during your free time? Do you like to sit at the computer and write?) Do you prefer to work in groups?
6. Does your self esteem come from your work? (What will happen when you are suddenly "unknown"? This sense of suddenly being "nobody" hits many dancers and former athletes very hard.) You will need to take some time on redefining who you are and what you want from life to manage this.
7. Do you want to work with people, plants, things, animals, books?
8. Are you an "indoors" or "outdoors" person at heart?
9. Where do you feel most at home? In a big city, in the country, with people who are very much like you or people who do very different things?
10. If you could have a "perfect day", what would it look/feel like?

Several classic books for working through Life and Career Transition issues are:

"What Color is Your Parachute"? By Richard Nelson Bolles

"Wishcraft" and "I Could Do Anything If I only Knew What It Was" by Barbara Sher

Barbara Sher (often called the grandmother of coaching) has been working with people for about 30 years on finding their unique calling in life. She developed the concept of “Success teams”. These are informal groups of people who meet on a regular basis to use whatever networking, brainstorming, and cheerleading methods they can to help each other stay on track and achieve their goals. It is basically the same thing a “Life Coach” does. Many Life Coaches work with specific groups to support and help the members set and achieve SMART goals. SMART goals are:

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Realistic
Time oriented

The benefit from being in a group or using a coach is that they will hold you accountable for doing what you say you will do in pursuit of your new goals. It is far too easy to quit when the going gets tough, but if you know you will be supported and held accountable, you are much more likely to hang in there and find your new, fulfilling life.

It can be very discouraging some days to feel as if you are starting again from zero in your professional life. Do not measure yourself against your old friends from grade school who are now hitting their stride and top income brackets in their careers. Your life is different, has always been, and will always be different from those lives lived in the non-dance world. Try to look at where you now are as an opportunity to build on the skills and knowledge you gained in your dance career. Allow yourself time to feel comfortable in your new role as a non- dancing professional.

And take all the great parts of you that made you a successful performer and use them to create an even fuller life!

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Biography Carole Augustus

After training at the North Carolina School of the Arts and on scholarship at the School of American Ballet in New York, Carole Augustus enjoyed many years as a performing arts professional as a Soloist and Principal ballet dancer, musical theater performer/choreographer, ballet master, actor, school founder and director, teacher, and coach. She graduated summa cum laude from Point Park University's Conservatory of Performing Arts and has continued to train and act professionally with improvisation, film roles, and stage work. She also coaches dancers in transition, Public Speaking for Professionals, and English language tutoring for conversation skills.

If you are interested in joining or developing a coaching group for Dancers in Transition, please contact the SSDUK to set up a meeting with Carole Augustus.

Useful links:

<http://www.sbkv.com> "Schweizerischer Bühnenkünstlerverband (SBKV)"

Swiss Stage Artists Association (union for performing artists)

<http://www.ssudk.ch> Career development and transition for dancers (Swiss German- and Italian- part of Switzerland)

<http://www.dance-transition.ch> transition for dancers (French part of Switzerland)

<http://www.dansesuisse.ch> "Berufsverband der Schweizer Tanzschaffenden (DS)" Professional association of dance artists (dance teachers, dancers, choreographers,) Organisation der Arbeitswelt (OdA) Organisation of the working world responsible for the standard of dance education in Switzerland e.g. the LAP.

<http://www.iotpd.org> International organization for dancers in transition of professional dancers

<https://www.berufsberatung.ch> The official Swiss information portal for vocational, study and career guidance

www.reso.ch dance network Switzerland for promotion of dance

<https://fia-actors.com/eurofia-dance-passport/> dance passport

Social Security and work permits:

<https://www.ch.ch/en> in Switzerland

<http://www.bsv.admin.ch/themen/ueberblick/00003/index.html?lang=en> in Switzerland www.issa.int International Social Security Association (go to country profiles)

<https://cast-stiftung.ch> Pension fund for freelancers