

Austin Phillips

Stacy Alley

DN 310

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DN 310 – Fall 2020

This past semester in DN 310 was a completely different experience, one that I could have never imagined happening during my senior year. The pandemic has affected my life and the lives of everyone around me for the worse, as well as the better. I do, however, believe that everything happens for a reason and, through the many obstacles we have had to overcome, I have learned a lot myself; things I may not have otherwise gotten to know.

As limiting as the semester was, I grew so much as a person and a dancer in many ways. This semester, I finally become more comfortable with moving my body and everything started to ‘click’; this pertains specifically to my arms. As we all know, my arms have always been very stiff and not in tune with the rest of my body. However, as the semester progressed, the connection of my arms to my body felt very *simple*, for lack of a better word. For the past three years, I have looked at my arms as my downfall in dance, but this semester it almost seemed like common sense. As I continue to dance and gain more experience, I will become even more comfortable with myself and my body and eliminate as many insecurities and mental blocks as possible.

As I read over the journals that I created during the semester, it is interesting to watch the progression of my thoughts and feelings about school and dance specifically; you will understand later on what I mean but I just thought it was very interesting to see it on paper. I have discovered a new appreciation for dance, one that I knew I was missing out on but did not

know to what extent. Because I came into school with no training, it has always been about learning technique and making sure the placement is correct, but I did not fully understand how to use dance as a coping mechanism, a shoulder to lean on, or a way to celebrate.

In the middle of the semester, I started to experience a burnout, one that was much stronger than any of the ones before. I had to physically drag myself out of bed to make it to class and the absolute last thing I wanted to do was sing, dance, or perform. I tried my best to put on a smile and hide the negative feelings but there were just some days that it was immensely difficult to function. I definitely think part of this was due to the pandemic; it is caused everyone to become much more aware of their thoughts and I was not benefitting from the increased amount of time spent alone at home. I did, however, finally come around to accepting the fact that I have depression. Depression is something I have always had a weird relationship with, for many years I would push any negative feelings aside and try to distract myself from them instead of trying to figure out why they were occurring. During the semester, I started talking to a therapist and taking pills for depression and it has helped a little bit. While depression doesn't have much to do with 310, it has, however, allowed me to become more in-tune with my emotions and feelings. Mostly everyone I meet sees me as the "smiley, outgoing guy" and I have always embraced it but I want to be able to tap into to other feelings that are not necessarily "my brand". For example, in *The Bitch of Living*, I had complete access to let go and release any pent-up emotions I was feeling that day and it was really nice to get them out in a safe environment. I want to continue getting the help I need while also accepting that it is okay to not be this perfect person that I visualize myself as; we are all so far from perfect and we can only do our best every day.

I feel that I grew a lot in this 310, compared to the class last year. Coming into college with practically zero dance training, I have always felt like I have been playing catch up to try to become successful as a singer/dancer in the industry. Because of that, I have always been self-conscious about how I look and was forced to really focus on the basics, such as technique, combo retention, etc. However, this semester, I was able to trust that I have had three years of solid training and shift my attention from technique to artistry and character. I most definitely still have a long way to go as far as continuing to expand my knowledge on technique and become more experienced, but this semester felt easier to focus on becoming the character and putting myself in the atmosphere of the show. While looking back at the journals I wrote throughout the semester, I had completely forgotten that this was one of my main goals that I wanted to get out of the class. Here is a portion of the first journal entry I wrote for this class (August 20<sup>th</sup>):

“Today was the first day of 310! We talked about all of the new changes that are being put in place due to the pandemic, such as limited number of students in class and squares on the floor. It makes me feel safe that the university is taking plenty of precautions to offer students education, but it scares me that college students will take advantage of the uncertainty. Anyways, back to 310. We started learning “I Got Rhythm” from *Crazy for You* today, which is one of my favorite musical theatre numbers of all time. This semester, I really want to hone my artistry. For the past three years, I have done as much as I can to catch up in developing a strong technique; I believe I still have a long way to go but this year I want to solidify creating a character and be presently aware of all of the circumstances that surround each piece. I think I have worked on my arms enough to where I can trust in my placement and not have to worry about them at the forefront. Of

course, however, my arms will still be a huge concern of mine ;). Additionally, paying attention to detail, character, and knowing the steps so well I can do them in my sleep will all play a huge factor in this. I believe that if I can remove as much hesitation about steps or having to worry about anything, the more I can just live in creating the character and telling a story. After all, there is no reason to be dancing without a story and I want to do everything I can to use the movement to take the audience on a journey! Additionally, I want to be sure that I can be as much assistance to anyone in the class as possible. I know I needed a lot of help and reached out to many friends as I could and want to be that for anyone else, rather in the class or in general.”

The combination that felt best in my body was “Turn it Off” from *The Book of Mormon*. *The Book of Mormon* is the show I would best fit into from the selection of musicals we did this semester and the number specifically is very high energy, which I work well with. I was able to let loose and have the most fun and it was the combination I felt the most confident and comfortable with. The combination, however, that felt the least comfortable in my body was “With You” from *Pippin*; Fosse’s choreography is already so awkward (being based off his insecurities) and the movement itself made me feel uncomfortable. The other Fosse combination we did, “Beat Me Daddy”, felt much more comfortable in my body and I enjoyed it a lot more. All of the combinations we did over the semester challenged me in their unique ways and I was able to learn a lot about myself and how I understand choreography. From Susan Stroman, to Bob Fosse, to Casey Nicholaw, we were presented with a wide variety of styles that allowed us to explore characters all across the musical theatre spectrum.

One of my favorite aspects of the semester was the format of the second half; we spent the second half of the semester learning combinations in an audition style format. For me, this was extremely beneficial, for picking up combinations and retaining them is a skill I wish to continue to become much better at. I strive to be known as someone who picks up on the details so it is extremely important that I master the retention skill so that I can shift my focus to building the character and focusing on the details! We learned at least twice as many combinations compared to last year's 310 class and I am extremely thankful to have gotten both experiences. The audition style classes, combined with several masterclass opportunities, truly made it a wonderful semester. Getting to work with Andy Blankenbuehler while at UA was something I could have never thought as possible, but I am so grateful to have had that experience.

As nervous as everyone was coming back to school, I believe that we all made the absolute best out of our situation and kept it as uplifting and positive as possible. Some schools were not even allowed to have in person classes, so I am extremely thankful we were able to meet in a studio at, even if at eight in the morning, and all share something special. Additionally, getting to watch members of my musical theatre class (and Skylar and Katie) grow as dancers and treat everyone with kindness was truly inspiring and I would not give up a second of that for the world. This semester has made me determined to continue striving for my goals as a dancer, both in the studio and at home. I am excited to research more about dance and dance history and apply it to every class/audition when appropriate. This class has taught me to know as much about the show, as well as the creative team, before I step into the audition room. Knowing as much information as possible can only benefit what happens in the room, for every audition is a completely different experience. I feel prepared from this class to enter the industry and cannot

wait to apply everything I have learned! I am extremely grateful for everything I have learned from this university and cannot wait to rep UA in the best way possible!