

I started dancing when I was 16 years old which is pretty late considering the general average, and I stopped as soon as I turned 30, which is instead pretty early. Let's say that it has been a 15 years intense journey that has shaped the way I move, think, reflect and approach things in life. I feel blessed to have worked with the best choreographers in The Netherlands and I feel even more blessed to have made all my dreams come true. When I stopped dancing there was nothing left on my wish lists and this is a privilege I will always be thankful for. I am here today to give you some insights about how dancers feel and my wish is that you will treasure my words and use them to make something great for our profession.

It doesn't matter at what age you started dreaming of becoming a dancer, your fantasy will always take you to an ideal world in which you live the artist life, you travel the world, you work with incredible personalities and you make a living out of your passion. This is a big part of it, but unfortunately, the dance world and the life of a dancer has many different aspects which you become aware of only once you are knee deep in this inspiring but tiring profession.

Let's be honest, to be a dancer is challenging, but dancers love a good challenge and that's why there is always an eternal love-hate relationship between us and our job.

One of the first mountains that a dancer needs to climb is money. Yes, dancers need an income just like anybody else in the world and one too many times during my career I had the feeling that some people out there forgot about this little but essential detail. It is unfair to ask for a full commitment and exclusivity to a dancer if you can't offer them the same in return. Since the cuts in the arts that the Dutch government did a few years ago, The Netherlands has slowly lost half of its dance companies. There are only a few dancers that are lucky enough to work in a company that offers a full time contract, and the rest has to struggle, constantly, with a never ending job hunt. It is exhausting to live a life in which you never know what you are going to do next, or if you will have money enough to go visit your home country. When you are 21 and you get your first salary you feel like the richest man on earth, but dancers grow up, and our needs change. We want to buy a house, we want to marry, have kids, buy a car, have a dog and whatever else you can desire when you start your adult life. All of these things, unfortunately, require money. It is sad but money does rule the world and we are a part of it whether we like it or not. Let's not forget that out there, there are still too many dancers that work for free with the hope that one day they will be called again for a paid job. I have committed this mistake myself a couple of times, but my suggestion is to never accept a non-paid job and therefor promote this unhealthy work pattern. Dancing requires full commitment, both physically and mentally, and to work for free will eventually create unhealthy expectations, and will make you bitter no matter how much you love to perform. Dancing is a job like all the others and it should be treated as such. I hope that the entire industry will understand that with no dancers there is no dance world, they are the core of this profession and they should be treated as such. They are most of the times the most creative people during the making of a piece, they create steps, give suggestions and solve problems. I think it is time to make sure that their wellbeing becomes priority number one before anything else.

Now please allow me to brag about my personal life for a second - I promise it will serve the purpose to introduce my next challenge in the life of a dancer.

When I joined Miami ad School I knew nothing about advertising. I found myself surrounded by people that had bachelors in design, marketing, fine arts and I didn't even know how to open Photoshop. After 10 weeks of classes we had our final exams and I got the highest grades of the entire class. I am not telling you this to simply show off my achievements but to make you understand that dancers are the best thing out there. We can do it all, and not because we are smarter or have super powers, but because we know what dedication and hard work means. We never stop, we go on, and on, and on until we reach that goal that we set for ourselves. We push, and work hard, and give it all because that's just the way we are. We are not quitters, and pain doesn't scare us. I wish that all the dancers out there would become aware of how amazing they are, but most of all I want the choreographers to realise how lucky they are to work with such amazing people. Dancers give their soul in everything that they do, and the sooner choreographers will realise this, the healthier this field will become. We are way too often treated like children and we become programmed machines that are afraid to speak up because of the fear of losing a job or the next project. We'd rather be treated unfairly instead of standing up and fight for ourselves.

Speak up dancers, you are the only ones that can change things and you will see that eventually the entire industry will benefit from it. Happy, satisfied dancers that are treated like adults will also generate a better work environment that will allow the makers to create better pieces that will finally bring back audience to our theatres. Isn't this what we all want? This is for sure what I wanted when I was still a dancer and I hope that the future generations will work in a much better atmosphere in which trust and respect are its fundamental values.

Last but not least I want to talk about something that is more targeted to older dancers but that each one of us will eventually have to face. We grow old, our bodies have more and more pain, we feel the need to settle down to be able to start a family, we become expensive and we can be easily replaced by younger kids. All of this and much more will slowly push us to a transition from the dance world to our next career path, and believe me this is one of the most painful processes I had to go through in my life. Any other job out there can't compare to dance. The hard work, the joy, the art, the passion, the artists you are around, the sweat, the injuries, the fights, the struggles, the adrenaline shocks, the constant work on yourself, the huge egos you have to deal with, the international tours, the love and the hate. Where the hell are we going to find something that can compare to all of this?

It took me three years to admit to myself that it was time for me to let go, it was time to accept that I had done it all, from stupid ugly shows to amazing productions. But now what? All I could do was to count until 8, move my bones and create weird steps. Our world is so small that we don't know anything else besides the things that we are directly exposed to. A career switch can be frustrating, heart-breaking and it requires a lot of soul searching. I am very grateful to have found in the Omscholingsregeling an incredible guidance that has helped me find my new path. I sat with them for hours and hours trying to figure out what I was good at and what I needed in my life. Dancers out there that just started working have no idea of what's coming next but one day they will be thankful to have such organisations that will help them in their transition. Therefore I want to stress the importance that anybody who is a part of the dance world should make sure that young and older dancers know about the existence of the Omscholingsregeling, and most of all that companies ensure that organisations of this kind will always be there because dancers need them, badly, even if they are not yet aware of it. Dancers will find themselves on a cross road with many difficult choices to make and the least this community can do is to make sure that they won't be left alone when that time will come. We as artists give to this field everything that we have even knowing that one day we will have to move on and we will be replaced, and that's ok, but let's make at least sure that we are not left alone in such a fragile moment of our lives.

The life of a dancer is an incredible journey and only dancers know what I am talking about. You have to live it to understand it. It can't be explained, you need to feel it on your own skin. I have learned so much from it and even when I hated my job I could still see how lucky I was to be living my dream.

The life of a dancer is full of struggles that aren't easy to overcome but I hope and I am sure that new exciting things are yet to come.

My advice is to stay humble, to stay open to the world and to be kind to each other. It sounds like a terrible cliché but the most successful pieces I have danced in my life were based on cheesy clichés even though choreographers will never admit it.

Dear dancers stay strong, speak up, don't let the struggles turn you into bitter artists, give all you have because our careers finish in a blink of an eye, stay strong and demand respect, be honest with your needs and never allow yourself to work in an unhealthy environment. When your time will come and you will feel the need to stop dancing, don't be afraid, ask for help to the people around you and organisations that can help, embrace the change and just know that dancers are winners. I want to finish this letter thanking everybody that has made my life of a dancer a very special experience and my successes of today are also thanks to your lessons. My copywriting teacher always tells me: stay simple, stay clear, people can smell your emotions through your words. I hope my words have reached some of you and you will take them with the intention to improve this world we all so deeply love.

Thank you so much.
Davide Cocchiara