

The following is the excerpted preface from Dennon's upcoming book, (thesis really) entitled:

" If You Don't Love this, You Just Plain Don't Love Dancing".

Setting the Stage -- What makes me tick!

A Preface

The year was 1974 and I was in great need of a job - a real honest to goodness money paying job. At the time I had been training and dancing with the Los Angeles based Steven Peck Jazz Co. doing some pretty demanding concert work. Being it was a concert company the pay was nil. What money I did make was primarily from teaching. At the time I thought I should have been paid better for all the grueling, demanding, downright painful late night hours we were putting in. As the years passed by though, I realized I was paid. The marvelous training I received during my tenure there has paid dividends many times over. You see, I've since learned everyone needs to pay their "dues". My dues were paid over a five year period dancing for a dance master who related as much to his Sicilian heritage as he did to the art, craft and discipline of dancing. Boy did I learn a lot in those days. But still, I found myself increasingly in need of money. No doubt about it, it was time to take that training, experience and knowledge I gained and put it to the test.

The audition was for the Academy Awards Show. Now, in recent years the Oscars do little to lessen the unemployment rate of dancers, but back then it was one of the most coveted "commercial" dance jobs of the year. It was through this experience I learned a very important distinction. Whereas "concert" most often means technically challenging, artistically and creatively fulfilling dance work, "commercial" means - it means - well let's face it, it means money. Don't get me wrong, commercial work can at times be technically challenging and artistically and creatively fulfilling, but it's just; well it can also be mundane and at times just plain silly. So what are the choices? Artistically fulfilling work or . . . money? I wanted, no I needed to pay my rent and eat regular so I decided to try "commercial".

Let me set the scene. The audition was to be held at the old, and I do mean old, Falcon Studios in Hollywood. This was a historic fencing and dancing studio named after a fencing master named Falconer who taught and coached actors for the movies. The atmosphere of this dusty, musty studio was eerie to say the least. There were these ancient photos lining the musty long hallway walls boasting of its famed patrons. There were Errol Flynn, Douglas Fairbanks, Tyrone Power, Basil Rathbone and a bunch of others from that time period thrusting and parrying their little swashbuckling hearts out. In the back of the main multi-roomed studio, separated by a rather charming, albeit unkempt garden area was a large barn shaped studio, about the size of an airplane hanger. You could smell, feel and if you squinted hard enough see the ghosts of dancers and fencers past.

The choreographer was two times Tony Award winning choreographer, Ron Field - a rather scary fellow known for his intimidating manner - at least to this very green beginner. He was a former Jack Cole dancer who had choreographed and directed such Broadway shows as *Cabaret* and *Applause*.

I didn't really know all that much about him at the time. I just knew he was a well established Broadway guy, which was pretty impressive to this young, very green young man. Now Liza Minnelli was going to be the star performer. Wow, Liza Minnelli! She was at the top of her game. She was a Tony winner for *Flora, the Red Menace*, an Oscar winner for the film *Cabaret* and to top it off her recent T.V. Special *Liza with a Z* was awarded an Emmy. So, I was excited to say the least. Who wouldn't be? It was sure to be a good paying job with superstar Liza Minelli, all choreographed by "Broadway guy" Ron Field.

There must have been close to a hundred and fifty guys there, maybe more. (I could be exaggerating, but it sure seemed that way at the time) Now, as new at this game as I was, and I was, even I knew they didn't need that many for the show. I felt, I'm sure we all felt the pressure to do our best. The assistant choreographers began teaching us the audition combination. We were all working extremely hard on a very crowded floor, all jockeying for the best positions to be noticed. It all seems so silly to me now that whether it be an audition or in everyday dance class "Being noticed" seems to be of major concern. I've learned since it is a misguided notion one has to be right up front and in the face of those in charge in order to be noticed. Oh it's good to be noticed, especially at auditions, but here's the thing -

THING # 1 - If you're good, interesting and exciting and dynamic and sometimes just as important, but not always, a tad on the cute side, YOU WILL BE NOTICED! There's an old saying I just made up not too long ago: **"The good (talented, well trained, experienced, exciting, dynamic, charismatic) dancer cannot be hidden no matter where he/she is positioned on the floor - The bad (poorly trained, inexperienced, no talent, uninteresting) dancer also cannot hide no matter where he/she stands - The mediocre dancer on the other hand can't be found"** Listen up, if you are ready and have what the choreographer needs, wants, and deems important for what he/she intends, do not worry about pushing your way to the front - you will be spotted.

Now, back to the story . . . There I am at my very first television audition, nervous as can be, dancing my little heart out in desperate hope of landing a very lucrative, actual money paying job. I'm doing everything I can to be noticed. (I hadn't yet learned the lesson articulated in **THING # 1**) I'm amazingly intent and equally intense. My throttle is out all the way, I'm in high gear and my peddle is definitely to the metal. Now understand, Broadway guy Ron Field's style was totally foreign to me. I was intimidated just to be there anyway, but with this unusual style facing me, I was outright scared.

So, there I was - on the one hand very nervous, on the other I was hanging onto the knowledge I somehow possessed this superior gift and amazing training. On still another hand I was totally new at this commercial audition stuff, and even on another (I know, way too many hands) the choreographer was bound to be impressed with my vibrant performance skills . . . wasn't he? Well, since I had already run out of hands, I took a deep breath and put on my confident, "look out baby here I come" attitude and proceeded.

As we broke up into groups to perform the dance, I was able to size up the competition. To my relief, watching each group that preceded me left me more and more confident. (Pretty cocky,

wasn't I) My thoughts went something like this: "Who's that clown, he can't even do a decent pirouette, wait till Mr. Field sees my four or five turns" - "That guy's as exciting as my grandmother watering her pathetic potted plants, wait till Ron (I was starting to feel closer to the choreographer) sees me hit those accents" - "Ha, that guy belongs in the old folks home, he's got to be at least 30, boy will Ronny (He's my buddy now) be impressed when he sees me take the floor". Now in reality, there were plenty of really good dancers there. There were many seasoned professionals I eventually had the good fortune of knowing, working with and learning from. But still, on another one of my many hands, I could see there were also some pretty mediocre dancers who probably shouldn't have been there. Funny how at the time I only seemed to noticed them.

My turn finally came. After one time through, I felt pretty good. We were asked to go again. Okay, one more time. I can do it. I'm ready, I'm pumped, and I'm totally psyched. It was then I saw Broadway guy Ron looking my way. That's gotta be good, right? The music started, the assistant counted us in and we were off. I put everything I had into it. He was looking at me so this was my chance - go Dennon, GO! . I used everything I ever learned and began hitting those accents like I was knocking balls out of the park. I was explosive, cutting, dynamic and razor sharp, if I do say myself (and believe me I was probably the only one saying so). I had created a combination of an exploding firework spectacular with a tsunami chaser kicking up everything in my pathway. Whew, when I finished, I was totally spent. I had nothing left. I just couldn't have done any better.

At that moment I saw the Broadway guy walking toward me. "Okay, Okay, be calm, be cool - pretend not to notice". I wasn't exactly cool - more like the deer caught by headlights standing frozen in the middle of the road. He came right up to me. "Be cool" I told myself. I assumed he'd probably compliment me on my insightful interpretation of his choreography. Or he'd ask my name in order to remember me for later. He started to speak - Here it comes. He pointed to his assistant, looked somewhat annoyed at me and said, "Now, do it like him", then walked away. Huh? What'd he say? Is that it? Do it like him? Ugh! Where was the "Great job kid" or the "Where have you been all these years". Good golly, my first commercial audition and the choreographer's response to my best, gut wrenching effort was "**NOW DO IT LIKE HIM**". I was no longer the deer standing frozen in the middle of the road. I was the victim of a drive by hit and run from my buddy, Broadway Guy, Ron Field. I had been side swiped right in the middle of my well developed ego and cruelly reduced to nothing more than "road kill" I was sure everyone in the place could hear the hissing sound of air leaking from my severely crushed self-esteem.

Now the purpose of my recounting this most inauspicious beginning to a professional career that has spanned some 30 years is to get to that simple, piercing moment that cut so deep, yet proved to be so profound it continually resonates in my brain, like the bells of Notre Dam at the hands of Quasimodo, every dancing day of my life.

"NOW DO IT LIKE HIM!"

Now, to set the record straight, I did get the job. It was the first of many times I danced for Ron Field, but that day began the process of my understanding the monumental importance

and implications of what he said. Throughout my performing career as I worked for different director/choreographers, all with their own distinct styles, techniques, methods, personalities and peculiarities - what became clearer and clearer to me was something I had never heard mentioned in any of my dance classes. It's a principle that sounds simple on the surface, but oh so very important to understand in order to sustain a successful career. Here's the thing . . .

THING # 2 - It is simply not good enough to be good. In some respects it doesn't matter how many pirouettes you can do or how high you can jump. What???? In the professional world, **if you don't appreciate, understand, assimilate and digest the particular technique, style and intent of the teacher/director/choreographer and perform the steps, movement patterns or combinations the way he/she wants it . . . you are essentially useless.**

If I was going to be a successful working dancer I needed to "smarten up." My job *was and is not* (listen close for this is a mighty big *WAS AND IS NOT*) just to show off what I believed were my superior dance skills while doing my own personal interpretation of the given combination, thereby ignoring the intent, purpose and/or the desires of the choreographer. Conversely, my job *was and is* (listen again, this is an even bigger *WAS AND IS*) to take the training, skills and talent I've worked so hard to cultivate over years of enduring difficult and painful technique classes and *serve* (you heard me correct, I said *SERVE*) the choreographer's intent, purpose and desires for his/her piece. Let me state it this way: I needed understand the choreographer's concept, ideas and objectives, not mine, for a given piece and do my very best to immerse myself in and utilize his/her style to bring it to fruition. It's simply not good enough to be good. You need to be smart. As I say often to my more advanced classes - the dancer's job is to make the choreographers work. . . work. Here's the thing.

Thing # 3 - YOU NEED TO BE SMART!

You see, at a certain level in the professional world of dance, a decent; preferably good, even more preferably excellent technique is expected. The first part of any audition usually is to eliminate those who just plain don't belong there. **Then once you narrow it down to the dancers that possess a decent, workable technique, you move on to finding out which of those dancers left are smart.** So the question is, what makes one a smart dancer? What are the qualities that separate the "good" dancers from the "smart" ones? I'll get to that in a later chapter. If I forget, remind me.

Now to address directly the question of why this book (thesis really) After 30 years (quite a fete, considering how young I am) of teaching technique classes in jazz, ballet, tap, musical theater, adagio, ballroom and Latin to all levels and all ages - giving master classes and doing lecture demonstrations at professional studios, public schools, private schools, colleges and universities, I **just could not stand it any longer.** You'd think a dance teacher's job would be relatively easy. You explain and demonstrate how the various positions, steps and movements were executed, and then the eager students would dive in, and bingo, they're dancing. Well, not so fast. It became increasingly evident to me that before the process as I described could work, I first had teach students a very important lesson. Something many, not all, students seemed to have little or no clue about. Ready? The lesson

was in how to take class. You heard me, I said "how." Believe me, most students, even students who've been taking classes for years and years, do not fully understand how to take a class. I mean truly and fully get the most of their class training. A great part of what I must do in all my classes is to teach students what it means to prepare both mentally and physically for class. What it means to study versus just taking class. In short, what their job as a student in the classroom is. In even shorter - what the process of training -- to become all you can be -- is.

"IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PROCESS"

I've used my own classes as a kind of laboratory to develop the concepts, methods and techniques I write about in the following pages. I've come to these ideas, which I fully acknowledge I may be alone in holding, about the process of dance training referenced to in the title of this book (thesis really) over the course of many years and have seen great results come of them.

So what does the "**this**" in the title of this manuscript (thesis really) actually mean? It refers to any part of the training process in any part of the class, rehearsal or performance phase. That very first audition experience of mine forever changed me. It set the stage for a lifelong pursuit of better understanding and wisdom that would improve my own classroom, auditioning and work process. I've endeavored to develop what I believe are effective, workable methods and techniques to pass those lessons on to my students.

For those of you who teach, I lay out in this book (thesis really) certain practical ideas that greatly enhanced the teaching and learning process in my classes. I don't mind telling you, many of these ideas and concepts were born out of sheer frustration and agony.

For you students, I endeavor to give you a better, more complete understanding of what the teaching/learning/training process is and what your part, your job actually, is in that process. Think you already know these things? Well, read on. You may be surprised by what you learn.

Please know, I'm addressing this book (thesis really) to those who are truly serious about the arts and serious about dance. Actually, if you're involved in any of the arts you'll find this book informative and helpful. I believe the ideas, concepts and principles I share in the following pages transcend dance and the arts. The concepts can be applied to the study of any venture, artistic or otherwise. That's my belief and I'm sticking to it, but you be the judge. If you're strictly a casual class taker with no real ambition or desire to continually grow as an artist or improve in any way, then read this book anyway. If nothing else, it'll help you understand what makes the fully committed dancer/artist tick . . . or you could go have a pizza, it's your call.

So, here it is, my book, my manuscript, my argument, theory, notion (thesis really) gathered from 30 years of on the job training on how to better the teaching/learning/training process. As you read, remember this . . . **IF YOU DON'T LIKE THIS, YOU JUST PLAIN DON'T LIKE DANCING!**

Coming . . . Sooner or later . . . another excerpt from Dennon's book.