

THE FREELANCE

Dancer's

ROADMAP



**4 STEPS TO
GETTING WORK AND
STAYING INSPIRED AS
YOU CREATE THE
CAREER OF YOUR
DREAMS**

SHATE' L. EDWARDS

The Freelance Dancer's Roadmap:

4 Steps to Getting Work and Staying Inspired As You Create the Career of Your Dreams

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<http://www.theworkingdancer.com/AfterTheMap>

Author Photo by Tonya Dailey

This book is dedicated to dancers everywhere. Here's to taking our careers by the reigns, to announcing our presence and greatness to the world, and to dancing circles around anything or anyone who tries to get in our way.

“Dancers don’t need wings to fly.”

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The Freelance Dancer's Roadmap



Introduction

Welcome my fellow dancers. Congratulations on taking the first step towards creating the dance career of your dreams. Because you picked up this book, there are at least three things I already know about you:

- (1) You obviously have a passion for dance. Why else would you decide to make it your profession?
- (2) I can tell that you're smart and driven. By reading this book, you're taking the time to find ways to increase your chances of becoming a successful dancer by learning from someone who's already done it.
- (3) I believe you're ahead of the game. Because you've done your homework by purchasing this book, you're starting out with an advantage, an advantage I wish I had when I first started.

Knowing these things about you means that we're kindred spirits! I too have a passion for dance, and I also did some research before I began my career pursuit. Although access to this guidance gives you the head start I didn't have, nonetheless, my passion, wisdom, and drive have definitely served me throughout my career. Those qualities have helped me to create a dance career that I'm proud of and love dearly.

Have you ever heard the saying, “Give a man a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime?” Well, that’s exactly what I hope to accomplish through this book. I used to be hung up on finding ways to create jobs for professional dancers. While I still have a heart to do that in some ways, I’ve come to realize that hiring dancers for a short period of time only partly solves the problem. *On the other hand, teaching dancers how to get work over and over again on their own terms helps everyone in the long run.* Dancers, their families, college dance programs, and the dance industry as a whole benefit from successful working dancers.

So now I’ve set out to do just that, to empower dancers to create the career of their dreams. In this book, I’ve written out the simple 4-step process that has helped me get work time and time again, and I’ve also shared stories of how each step has played out in my personal life. This process has helped me secure a wide range of projects in several different capacities. I’ve booked a 3-month performance contract in Shanghai, I’ve performed in countless industrials (company sponsored shows used to launch or sale a product or service), I’ve choreographed and performed for local artists across the U.S., I’ve choreographed over a dozen musicals, and the list goes on and on.

With perseverance and repetition, you too can create a career that you love using the steps highlighted in this roadmap. So pay close attention. The knowledge offered within the pages of this book

will give you the insight and confidence you'll need to navigate the road ahead.

Preparing for the Road Ahead



So where do we start? Short answer: At the beginning. Long answer: Everyone's beginning may be different.

We may not all embark upon our dance career journeys from the same point. Some dancers start getting professional work at a young age. Just take a look around dance studios, and notice the commercials and music videos. Fortunately for these youngsters, they've found their passion early on and have already begun navigating their own course. Other dancers relocate right out of high school to Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, or Atlanta, the major entertainment cities in America. And the rest of us?

If you're anything like me, you've always had a passion for dance, but you went the traditional route of attending college after high school. Let's take it one step further and say that like me, you would love to spend all your days dancing, but you're not quite sure what that means or how that looks as a career. Or maybe you do have a dance career goal in mind, but you're still left thinking, "Okay. So now what?"

If any of that sounds like you, then you're in the right place my friend. Pay close attention to this next statement: *My experience has taught me that the best place to start is exactly where you are with what you already have.* So profound, yet incredibly simple. You can, in fact, start navigating your way towards your dance career at this very moment right where you are.

The common misconception is that you must move to one of the major U.S. cities that I mentioned above to have any chance of becoming a professional dancer. But the truth of the matter is dance is everywhere. That's part of the beauty of it in the first place. Dance is just as inspiring, healing, and entertaining in Wyoming as it is in California. No matter where you are, you can work towards fulfilling your dreams of becoming a dance professional.

Before we jump into the specifics of getting work, let's take a quick moment to address one more thing. In order to know where to direct your job search, it's important to ask yourself what type of dance career you'd like to have. Would you like to be a primary or secondary school dance teacher? Dance commercially for artists, industrials, and more? Land a contract with a professional concert dance company?

Contrary to popular belief, the list of possible jobs within the dance industry is pretty long. You just have to be willing to do some digging or even create your ideal job if it doesn't already exist. If you're already sure about the type of work in which you're interested, then you're ready to move on. If you're still uncertain, that's okay too. I wasn't sure what type of career I was going after when I moved to LA, but what's important is that I took action anyways and figured it out along the way.

For instance, no one told me I could start my career pursuit at home when I was first starting out. I was under the assumption that

the only way I could pursue my dance career was to leave my hometown of Houston, Texas. So after college, I saved money and trained locally for six months, then packed up and headed west. In May of 2004, I arrived in LA with just a little bit of savings, no job lined up, only a few familiar faces from college, and one big dream.

When I got there, I had absolutely no clue on what to do first. So I did one of the things I do best, research. I didn't have a laptop, so I spent a few hours each day in the local library. I searched and submitted for jobs, and I would also search for auditions and classes. I didn't have any guidance along the way. I just started putting one foot in front of the other. I used my intuition, faith, and courage to get started on my journey towards creating the career I have today.

Over the course of the next few chapters, I share with you my personal stories of how I built a successful dance career. The steps I took make up the markers in our dance career roadmap. These steps can and should be repeated over and over again to help you create the career of your dreams.

Getting Work



Now it's time to get down to the nitty-gritty. The steps I'm about to reveal aren't a secret. They aren't handed down through some secret professional dancer rite of passage. They aren't even shared from dancer to dancer in studios or college classrooms as they probably should be. I figured them out on my own. These steps are common practice for working dancers everywhere, and I had to learn them the old fashioned way...through trial and error.

I'm a firm believer of working smart, and I'm here to help you do just that. Grab your highlighter or pen, and get ready to really engage with and apply the insight you're about to gain. Refer to this information as often as you need as you build your dance career, and be sure to pass this info along to the generation of dancers who will follow you. Let's continue to grow the movement of helping aspiring dancers become *working* dancers.

Step 1: Develop Professional Marketing Materials

Many dancers aren't aware that building a dance career requires a bit of business savvy in addition to talent. Yes, it is a creative career, but business skills are necessary if you want to go the distance. Let's face it, as a freelancer, *you are a business*. With that, you will need to manage your finances for taxes, network to build relationships within the industry, and market yourself to maintain a working presence.

You don't necessarily need to learn all of those skill sets, at least not at once. You can learn the "must knows", and hire professionals to do the rest. For instance, I'm no where close to being a tax expert, nor do I have an interest in becoming one. But I do know that I must keep an organized record of my earnings and collect my receipts throughout the year to ensure that my tax specialist can file my taxes accurately and efficiently.

With that being said, I'd like to encourage you to start your journey with developing your professional marketing materials. Your headshot, resume, website, reel, and/or Youtube channel are all tools used to market yourself as a professional dancer. You do not need to have all of these resources right away. I personally use each of these materials in one way or another, but I developed them over the course of a few years.

The two most important materials you'll need to develop when starting out are your headshot and resume. Whether you're

auditioning or submitting yourself online, every company, casting director, artistic director – basically anyone involved in hiring or casting – will ask to see your headshot and resume.

Headshot

When I started putting my plan to move to LA in motion, I began looking for a photographer to shoot my headshots. I knew I would need them to submit for jobs, but I wasn't sure what they needed to look like. I didn't know what I should wear, how much makeup to apply, how much of the body should be in the frame... nothing. I just knew to get some pictures made.

So I found a photographer, and he shot three different looks for less than \$200. Because I didn't know what professional dance shots should look like, I allowed the photographer to take shots that were more in line with model shots. At his suggestion, I even got comp cards made! (Comp cards are several looks of one model collected on one card.) While the shots were nicely done, I wasn't able to use them much because they didn't market me correctly. Since I'd already spent the money, I used them for a while with little success. I eventually got new headshots once I understood the types of shots professional dancers need.

Instead of model shots and a comp card, I should have gotten a couple of styles of headshots and an optional body shot. A headshot is the same across the board for all talent. It captures about

the chest or shoulders up and can be a serious or joyful look. The body shot captures most or all of the body to show your body type. Out of all the shots I took for my second photo shoot, my agent chose two headshots: a commercial look with a big smile and as well as an edgier look.

NEWS FLASH: You will need to get new headshots regularly throughout your career. They need to be updated every time your look changes. That means as you mature or as you change your overall style, you'll need to get new shots to accurately portray your current look. Including my first "model" shots, I've had five to six different shoots for headshots.

I've heard agents speak about the importance of maintaining current shots. Not having a headshot that matches your current look could potentially cause you to lose a job. Casting directors may be reviewing hundreds of headshots at a time. If your shot doesn't match their memory of you from the audition, that's work you've lost simply because you presented of out-of-date materials. Of all the random reasons you could miss out on a project, don't let something as preventable as updating a headshot be one of them.

Since we're on the subject, let's talk about the ongoing expense required for such a task. Getting great headshots could cost you an arm and a leg, but it doesn't have to. Take it from me, I'm the self-proclaimed queen of the bargain hunt. I'm as resourceful as they come when getting things done on a budget. The general rule is

that you get what you pay for, but that doesn't always have to be the case.

If you're willing to do a bit of research ahead of time, you can potentially get amazing headshots for a fraction of the cost. Check out art schools in your area to see if there are any photography students who'd be interested in shooting your pics. They may even offer to do them just for the exposure. Just be sure to see their work beforehand, which shouldn't be difficult with platforms like social media and free DIY websites. Don't blindly hire a photographer without seeing their portfolio, which is exactly what I did for my first set of headshots.

If you're more comfortable hiring a professional, ask around for references for good photographers. Agents and other artists always have great photographer referrals. Just be smart on the package you purchase. You don't need 6 different looks on your first shoot. Start with 1-3 looks, and you can build to more in the future if you'd like. After my first shoot, each photographer I used was referred by an industry contact or artist friend, and we only did 2-3 looks for each shoot. A couple were done pro bono, but for most I paid \$200 or less. And to be honest, the shots that lasted the longest and marketed me the best were the ones I paid for. However, if you don't have that type of cash on hand, you can save up, or research to get started with the resources you have available to you now. Bottom line: get started on those headshots asap.

Resume

We've just spent some time discussing the types of shots you'll need for your career pursuit as well as ways to go about getting them. Now let's talk a bit about the role your resume plays and how you can start building one.

I honestly don't remember how my first professional dance resume looked. What I do remember is researching what it should include and how it should be formatted. My work as a choreographer and dance professor has allowed me to see quite a few dance resumes, and I'm often surprised by some of the things I see. There are three common mistakes aspiring dancers make when crafting their first resume.

First, resumes for professional dancers don't need to include non-related jobs you've worked. For instance, there's no need to include your retail, restaurant, or theme park job on your dance resume. You're submitting yourself to be casted for your performance skills, not for your product knowledge or customer service experience. What's even more key to realize is that you're being considered for hire as an independent contractor, the sole proprietor of your own dance business. You're not being hired as an employee. Taking that into account should help you create your resume more effectively.

Secondly, many dancers make the mistake of building a resume that's too long. In most cases, your resume should only be

one-page long, which makes including it on the back of your headshot easier and more convenient. This means that you don't need to include every single performance you've ever had, and you definitely don't need to include every single master class, workshop, or instructor who's trained you. Allow your resume to be a simple and clear depiction of your training and experience. Remember that quantity does not always equal quality. Make it as concise as possible while still showing your value.

The third mistake I see most often is formatting errors. Your dance resume, as with all resumes, is an important tool that will potentially lead to you acquiring work. With that, how it looks is just as important as what it says. I've seen several resumes where dancers used a very small font in an effort to fit all their work onto one page, or I've seen several different font styles within the same page. I've also seen grammatical and spelling errors.

One of the first impressions you make will be based on your resume. What does it say about you if you don't spend the few moments it takes to check the spelling or grammar before you submit it? Or how much time do you think a casting director will spend trying to read incredibly small font? If you're in a group of hundreds of dancers being considered for a project, those tiny mistakes could cost you a job.

A professional presentation has always been a strong suit of mine. It actually helped me get an invitation-only audition with a

high profile choreographer. The story goes that a friend of a friend was connected to this person, and she offered to pass along my materials. Of course I jumped at the offer, and very quickly put together a great cover letter along with my headshot and resume in a nice looking portfolio. Soon after the “drop” was made, I received a call from my agent with an invitation to the choreographer’s next audition.

Talk about a surreal moment, especially for someone like me who greatly respects and admires this person’s work. Imagine how elated I was to walk into an audition where there are usually at least a hundred dancers, to be one of only about twelve dancers being seen. Total ‘cloud 9’ experience. Did I book the job? No. But I was in the building, and that was all that mattered to me that day.

When it comes to creating your own resume, take your time, and make it as professional as possible. Build a list of performances and training experiences that are to the point and that will shed the best light on your abilities. Make sure the font is professional looking and readable, and take a few extra moments to run spell check before you print or submit. Doing these simple things will go a long way in marketing yourself effectively, and it could be the key to getting your foot in the door on some great opportunities.

Step 2: Get an Agent or Be Your Own Agent

Once you've developed your headshot and resume, you can begin submitting yourself for professional dance jobs. However, actually finding professional jobs can be a bit tricky if you don't know where to look.

One of the most common questions aspiring dancers ask is “do I need an agent?” The short answer is yes and no, depending on the type of work you'd like to do. Remember the brief discussion we had about figuring out what type of dance career you'd like to have? Here's where that comes into play.

If you'd like to teach in a school system on any level, then you obviously won't need an agent. You'll need a college degree of some sort, – BFA for primary and secondary school, and MFA for higher education – and you could possibly need a teaching certification as well. To get started on that track, you'll earn your required qualifications and begin applying for jobs within your preferred school systems.

If you decide that concert dance is the route you'd like to take, fortunately for you, you won't be needing an agent either. Those opportunities are generally posted on the company's website or studio, or announced in the classes where members or company choreographers teach. The key to getting into that type of work is to stay connected to the community where your desired company is located.

If you'd like to dance commercially with recording artists, in corporate industrials, perhaps even in musicals, and other similar projects, then you will likely need to get an agent. And why is my response "likely yes" instead of a definite "yes?" Although there are exceptions to every rule, I'd say a general rule of thumb when it comes to agents is: *the higher the profile of the project, then the more likely it is that you'll need an agent to be considered for it.* For example, unless it's for publicity, major artists like Usher and Beyonce' won't be posting a casting call for dancers on public job boards or via the internet. Those types of projects contact agents first, and then agents send their dancers to those auditions.

So now that we're clear on who needs an agent and who doesn't, let's talk about how to get work either way.

Getting an Agent

I sort of brushed through how the agent-talent relationship works in the previous section. For those of us who need a bit more clarity, let's discuss it further.

If you and a dance agency find that you'll be a good fit for one another, you'll sign a contract for representation. The agent's job is then to notify and send you on auditions for which your type matches. Meaning, if a project calls for five Latina ladies who are under 5'4", then your agent won't send you on that audition if you're not Latina, not a female, or not under 5'4". But let's say you do fit a

certain description, you audition, and you're even casted for the project, then both you and your agent get paid. The company producing the project will pay your fee as well as your agent's referral fee, which is usually 10% - 20% per booking.

Speaking of agent fees, don't get swindled in an agency scheme. A reputable and professional talent agency will not require you to pay them for their services. There are many situations where talent walks into an agency for representation and are sold training classes instead. If an agency is selling you classes in exchange for an opportunity for "possible" representation, then the agent is likely not interested in what you have to offer. If this happens to you, don't buy in (unless you really want to), and don't get discouraged. Just keep developing your craft, and you'll eventually find an agent that's a great match for your career goals.

Now we're clear on how the agent "thing" works. Let's move on to figuring out how to get one. In terms of my own journey, it took me a couple of years after I moved to LA to actually get an agent. That's partly because it took me a while to find the right dance community, and partly because I completely choked in auditions when I was first starting out (more on that later). When I finally did sign that contract with MSA, one of the top dance agencies, it was one of the proudest moments of my dance career at the time.

As a matter of fact, I didn't even audition to get representation with MSA. I sent an email to one of the agents with my headshot, resume, performance links, and an invitation to one of my upcoming shows. I believe a combination of my professional presentation, the talent showcased in my videos, and the fact that I was currently performing that prompted that agent to call me in for a meeting. And wouldn't you know, I was signed on the spot at that meeting. Not only was I signed, but I shared my submission strategy with a few of my dance friends, and two of them were signed based on their submissions too!

However, the days of getting an agent that way are long gone, unless you have a referral from someone who has a relationship with that particular agency. Again, there are exceptions to every rule, but there are two main ways to get an agent nowadays. You can either (1) attend one of their auditions, or (2) they can observe you in one of the classes where they regularly scout for talent. To find out when an agency is holding auditions or what classes they observe, simply visit their website. If that information is not yet posted on their site, then submit your materials via their online form, and someone from the agency will contact you with information on when auditions are held. Check Appendix A for a list of some great talent agencies for dancers.

Bonus: Audition Tips

Before we move on to learning how to get work on your own, let's back up a bit. Remember how I mentioned that it took me a while to get an agent because I would always choke in auditions when I was first starting out? I was the worst. I mean, I'd be out for the count before it even started. I've had several pretty bad auditions, but there is one in particular that takes the cake. Here goes...cue the violins.

I was new to LA. I'm not even sure how I found out about this audition, but I arrived with all the proper materials in tow. I even dressed the part, in a cute and edgy outfit. The thing is that I'm naturally introverted, and I can be a bit reserved. It takes me a little longer than others to warm up to new people and situations. Little did I know, my audition was headed south the moment I stepped through the studio doors.

I never shall forget (as my grandmother says), the studio was at the corner of Sunset and Highland in Hollywood. There was a glass door that opened right up to the dance floor; no lobby, no walls, no separation between the dancers and onlookers. As far as I was concerned, the whole city could catch a glimpse of my audition if they were stopped at the red light. I clearly remember sitting in my car before I walked in. I said a quick prayer, took a few deep breaths, then headed up the stairs to the studio.

Needless to say, I was in my head the moment I walked in and saw how exposed I was going to be. There were all of these unfamiliar faces, stretching and already dancing about. I knew absolutely no one, which made me shrink even further into my shell. Fortunately, the audition began not too long after I arrived. Learning and executing choreography is one of my strengths so I nailed that portion of the evening. Oh, but my victory was short lived.

Like in all auditions, dancers were divided into groups according to when they signed in. I walked onto the dance floor when my group was called, the music started, and **I performed as if I had never danced a day in my life.** Literally, I looked like I had two left feet, no coordination, no rhythm, no presence, and no business trying to pursue a professional dance career. I was so completely in my head that I could not get into the movement or the moment. I crashed and burned. Epic fail. Up in smoke. (There aren't enough sayings that could clearly depict how awful that audition was.) And then I walked to my car and cried a river.

Thank heaven I eventually got over myself and learned how to audition. That's right. I had to *learn* how to audition effectively. And how do you suppose I did that? By auditioning. I learned how to audition like a professional by going to more and more auditions. Based on my own experiences, along with information given to me from former my agent, I have some tips to offer that will hopefully prevent you from having an audition like the one I just shared.

My first few tips are about general audition etiquette.

- **You always want to arrive early, and have all of your materials prepared.** Go ahead and staple your resume to the back of your headshot before you arrive as you never know if there will be a stapler at your audition location.
- **You also need to dress the part.** If the audition is for a *Nare* commercial, then you'd probably want to wear something that shows off your legs. Don't wear a costume, but dress nicely and according to the project for which the audition is casting.
- **Next, it's also important to know that the production team is likely looking at more than just how well you dance.** The audition starts the moment you walk through the door. They may be watching how well you interact with others or how well you take direction. So be sure to switch lines if they make that request, and be respectful to the dancers with whom you're sharing the space.
- **Lastly on etiquette, always thank the choreographer before you leave, if possible.** Give a firm hand shake, remind them of your name, and thank them for the opportunity.

Now that we've gotten that out of the way, let's address the meat and potatoes of auditioning well. Etiquette is important, but that's not what gets the job, ***you are!*** That's the thing to remember as you're auditioning. It's about you and the value you'll add to the project.

Your value is your total package: your unique look, your quality of movement, your personality, and your inner spirit. No other dancer has the package you have, and no one can deliver its contents the way you can. When you're in your head the way I was in those early auditions, you're interfering with the delivery of your package. When you're in your head, you're the guy who tosses the parcel marked "Fragile" and "Handle with Care" over the fence because the gate is locked (which has happened to me, by the way). You damage the package and taint its delivery. Being in your head causes you to miss out on the magic of the present moment, and missing those moments in an audition will cost you a job.

Do us both a favor, and stay out of your head. Just be where you are in each moment even if it's uncomfortable. What does that mean, and how do you do that? That means you're not consumed by your thoughts at any given moment. Instead, you're fully aware of every aspect of your current experience. If you're nervous, be nervous, but stay present. Take a few deep breaths, and work through the nerves. If you're scared, be scared. If you're excited, be excited. Whatever it is, *just be*. I still experience nervousness

before an audition or performance. In those moments, I breathe deeply, say a prayer, say an affirmation, and then give it all I've got. I've learned to be great in spite of how I'm feeling or what I'm thinking.

You don't have to do exactly what I do, but I encourage you to find what works for you. **You can't control the outcome of your audition, but you can control your experience of it.** Don't let auditioning or any other aspect of pursuing your career get the best of you. Apply these tips, and take your career pursuit by the reins.

Being Your Own Agent

Until you get one, you can be your own agent. By that, I mean search and submit to jobs on your own. You may not find auditions for high profile projects, or maybe you will, who knows, but at least you'll be on your way to getting work.

Like I mentioned before, it took me a few years into my career pursuit to get an agent, but that didn't stop me from looking for work on my own before then. I constantly scoured the internet and studio call boards for different opportunities and with a good amount of success too. My research and connections within the dance community allowed me the opportunity to work on a number of projects well before I ever got an agent.

As far as researching for auditions and jobs goes, there are a number resources to help with that. For performance opportunities, I

used resources like Answers4Dancers.com, in addition to doing tons of Google searches. I even checked Craigslist quite often back then; although I definitely wouldn't suggest you do that now, unless you want an unpaid gig or are looking for work as an exotic dancer. If that's you, more power to you my friend. Dance on in the direction of your dreams. But if you're looking for something else, keep reading.

There are several other dance job boards available now that I wasn't familiar with when I was getting started. For instance, sites like DanceUSA.org posts audition and internship opportunities with dance companies and festivals. I would have taken full advantage of those postings had I known about them in my beginnings. Lucky for you, you've invested in this roadmap where I've laid all that out for you. Check Appendix B for a list of performance job boards.

The sites included within the appendix are a great starting point and should help you in your search for potential performance opportunities. When researching alone isn't enough, establishing connections will pick up the slack. When it came to pursuing my career, my hustle was always at 100%, and it still is to this day. So while I worked my full time jobs to pay the bills, I would also teach, rehearse, audition (basically whatever I had to do) during evenings and weekends to work towards becoming a full-time professional dancer. From that hustle, I would venture to say that at least 60-75%

of projects I've worked, maybe even more, have been the result of connections I've made in the community.

It was my connection with a local dance studio that opened the door for me to choreograph an industrial for Magic Johnson's former athletic line, *Magic 32*. The chain of connections went a little something like this. I found out about a performance opportunity with a jazz/hip-hop performance company. I began rehearsing and performing with the company regularly. As we settled into a new studio space, I began teaching classes and working the front desk for the new studio. It was the studio manager who approached me with this awesome opportunity through a contact she had with the design company.

From the outside looking in, being afforded that opportunity to choreograph an industrial for that clothing line may seem like pure luck, but I see it quite differently. I credit that opportunity to the fact that I was plugged into a dance community and was giving my best exactly where I was. In fact, being connected to your local dance and arts community is essential to getting work, especially when you don't have an agent.

Securing work as a professional dancer is a multi-faceted undertaking. At times you will audition. Other times you will send a submission, and there will also be times when the work comes to you through the smiling faces of colleagues, acquaintances, or friends. Then there are those exciting times when the work comes

from a choreographer whose class you've been diligently attending on a regular basis, which brings us to our next step. Get your bum in class!

Step 3: Take Class Regularly

When it comes to developing your talent, training is essential. When it comes to developing contacts within a given field, networking is essential. When it comes to building a professional dance career, *training is networking*, and both are essential.

Taking classes regularly is a main component of developing a successful performance career. I would even go so far as to call taking class one of your job duties. Not only are you learning to catch on to choreography quickly, or learning someone's specific style, or possibly working a number of other things, but you are also connecting to the dance community, which can benefit your career in a variety of ways.

In LA, when I finally got the memo that training was part of the job, I began taking classes regularly at The Edge, Millennium Dance Complex, and Debbie Reynolds Dance Studio. I attended a few classes at Debbie Reynolds weekly and soon came to know the students and choreographers there quite well. There were times we'd even stop for froyo after class. The time I spent developing those connections were so valuable during my last few years in the game there.

Not only did I gain some great friendships, but I found those relationships to be beneficial to my career as well. I once attended an audition for one of Beyonce's projects, and one of the

choreographers whose class I'd been taking weekly happened to be choreographing the audition and the project. I can't say for certain that my connection with the choreographer alone was the reason I got two call backs for that project, but I can definitely say that it helped.

Developing relationships with choreographers in class also does more than just help in auditions. Your relationship with a choreographer could allow you to skip the audition altogether and book the project directly. In my own work as a choreographer, I always call first dancers who I've moved with in class or on previous projects. I do this because I already know how they move, whether or not they can deliver my style, and what type of attitude and work ethic they have. Even though I don't teach ongoing classes at a studio, I still keep an eye out for dancers I know well before opening the opportunity up to the general dance community.

So there are instances when the choreographer can offer a project to you directly, and there are also times when a third party observes a class because of their own relationship with the choreographer. I've heard stories of artists such as Justin Timberlake sitting in on a class to watch the dancers. That's one of the reasons dancers not only attend a particular choreographer's class regularly, but they also style up their dance wear just in case a celebrity decides to pop in for a visit.

That's actually happened to me on a number of occasions. Although they weren't celebrities, I've booked work with local artists based on my performance in class. During my early days in LA with the company I mentioned earlier, one of my fellow company members was also a choreographer for a variety of projects. One of the artists he worked for attended one of our classes to scout for dancers for her upcoming showcase. I, in my stylish "cool girl" gear, was one of the dancers she asked the choreographer to hire for her show. There you have it. A paid gig just from attending class.

And this doesn't just happen in LA studios either. I've booked opportunities by being connected to my local dance community in other cities too. Soon after I moved back to Houston, I began teaching at a studio, and I also joined the studio's hip-hop company. My connection to this company led to a nice range of work for me. Based off those connections, I eventually moved on to perform with a samba company for a while, and I had the opportunity to work in Shanghai for three months as well.

All in all, the professional benefits of attending class are completely worth the investment. In class, you have the opportunity to hone your craft and to grow your network of relationships within the dance community. Those relationships can be personally and professionally fulfilling, leading to both great friendships and potential job opportunities.

Taking class regularly also has other benefits aside from booking jobs. It personally helped me become more confident with auditioning and performing in front of my peers. Because the dancers in my auditions were the same ones who were in my classes, auditions became a little less stressful for me. Performing well in class allowed me to trust in my ability to perform just as well in auditions, and the familiar faces helped auditions feel more like a learning experience instead of judging experience.

Say it with me again: ***training is networking***. From building friendships, to booking jobs, to gaining confidence, there are plenty of reasons why you should get your bum in class pronto. Find classes taught by choreographers whose style you enjoy or whose work you respect, and commit to attending his or her class every week for a period of time. Although you'll have your regulars, take a variety of classes as often as you can. Be fully engaged in the class, and be sure to introduce yourself, and thank the choreographer after each class. Get to know the other dancers in your classes too. You'll be surprised by the momentum your career will gain when you invest in it in that way.

Each step we've discussed thus far works together to yield results towards building your dance career, but this step in particular is crucial to establishing yourself in the community and to building your network. Once you start getting work through your

connections, you'll need to develop a strong work ethic and professional traits to keep you in the game.

Step 4: Develop Professionalism and a Great Work Ethic

I think it's good to know how to keep a job before you actually get one. Kind of like pre-marriage counseling is supposed to help folks prepare for marriage before they say "I do." What I've learned through my work as a dance professor, is that not everyone knows what it means to be professional, at least not a professional dancer. I found that, more often than not, I've had to teach students how to be professional as I've worked with them.

There are three professional traits I speak of often with my students, but because you're a dancer after my own heart, I'll add two bonus traits for good measure. I suggest all professional dancers be punctual, have good communications skills, be well-rehearsed, have a positive attitude, and be gracious.

You'd be surprised that something as obvious as punctuality has to be taught. I've always valued being on time (credit that to my slight type-A personality), and I've learned that not everyone is that way. In college, one of the mantras they instilled in us is "To be early is to be on time. To be on time is to be late. To be late is unacceptable." And in the real world, being late could cost you a job. As a professional dancer, it's not enough to show up to rehearsal on time. You can't roll into a 10am rehearsal at 10am. Instead, you need to arrive a minimum of 15 minutes early. Arrive early to begin stretching and reviewing on your own before rehearsal begins. That

way, you'll be warmed and ready to go when the choreographer is ready to start.

If you happen to be running late for any reason or have schedule conflicts, be sure to notify your choreographer, rehearsal director, or stage manager (depending on the project) promptly. Do not send word through a friend or cast mate, make the call yourself. This is where those good communication skills I mentioned come into play. The strength of your communications skills will determine the strength of your professional connections. If you aren't prompt and open with your communication, your lack there of could make you seem unreliable. Dance communities are small, and word travels fast. Trust me. Even if you're not fired from one project for your flakiness, you may not get the next one because of it.

So, you're punctual? Check. You're communicating tardiness and conflicts promptly? Check. Next is to make certain you're well-rehearsed. By that, I mean come to rehearsal having already practiced the previously learned material on your own. Years ago, I worked with a choreographer who used to say that "you learn at rehearsal, and practice at home", and I couldn't agree more. Mastering a previous rehearsal's material before the next one just screams professional. It shows that you're serious, dependable, and hard working, which are qualities that keep you working for the long haul.

On to my bonus traits. In addition to arriving early, communicating issues promptly, and mastering rehearsal material on your own, having a positive attitude and being gracious make an already sweet deal even sweeter. To keep a positive attitude, be patient with your choreographer's creative process. Get along well with cast mates and staff, and be flexible with the demands and needs of your project. Production teams are always more interested in hiring talent who are easy to work with. Keeping a positive attitude in this way gives you that stamp of approval.

To put the icing on the cake, top it all off with a gracious demeanor. Express your gratitude for the opportunity. Let the choreographer know you've enjoyed working with them. You could even go so far as to give the choreographer and/or production team a small thank you card when the project ends. Doing small gestures like these goes a long way in leaving lasting positive impressions. Believe me, they work. Just recently, I received a call with an invitation to work on a few projects from a contact I hadn't spoken to in over four years. So go right ahead, and plant those seeds. You never know when you'll reap the reward.

Staying Inspired



While you're trucking along your journey towards becoming a professional dancer, there are a few potential hazards you should be aware of. As you hustle to build your career, try not to allow it to consume you to the point that you're neglecting other areas of your life. This was a big mistake I made early on. The funny thing is that I wasn't neglecting my family or friends. I was neglecting myself.

By my last year in LA, I had figured out a great system that allowed me to both work full time and fully pursue my dance career. I started working overnight on the night audit team at a hotel in Beverly Hills where I was around celebrities almost daily (which I thought would eventually help my career). I would attend auditions during the day, and then go to class in the evenings before work. I'd find time to get in a few hours of sleep between those activities, but I was mostly on the go all the time. On my days off, when I wasn't sleeping here and there, I tried to stay active and connected with my friends and family. I thought I was managing a decent work-life balance, but it didn't take long for me to burn out and start operating from a constant state of negative energy.

If at all possible, I'd like to prevent that from happening to anyone else. Am I trying to prevent you from being disappointed? No. Disappointments are a part of life that build strength and character. What I'm trying to do is prevent is you from causing yourself any unnecessary stress and unhappiness. My tips for

staying stress free and in a Zen place are (1) tend to your total self, (2) exercise patience, and (3) persevere.

Total Self: Body, Mind, and Spirit

When I was pursuing my career in LA, I was in no way, shape, or form tending to my total self. For one, I *never* exercised. I thought dancing was enough and couldn't understand why so many dancers would go to the gym after class. On top of that, my eating habits were garbage. I ate lots of processed foods, drank soda, and consumed a lot of unnecessary junk. I wasn't taking great care of myself at all. And when you're not in good physical condition, it spills over into other areas of your life. No wonder I was so miserable.

Because I was so burnt out and unhappy with the way things were going in LA, I decided to give up on dance and move back to Texas. After I got back home, one of the first things I did (after I slept for about a month) was start an exercise routine. I'd picked up a few pounds that I was determined to shed, and I wanted to see if I could find some clarity regarding my next move. I also wasn't going to be doing much dancing, or so I thought, and I knew I *had* to get moving in some way. So I committed to running a mile at least five days per week, and I also changed my diet a bit. I gave up sodas cold turkey, and slowly began eating more wholesome foods. Before long, I was back in shape and feeling better than I had in a long time.

Guess what happened next? As soon as I began feeling like my old self, I started feeling an itch to get back to dancing. At first, I pretended as if I was looking into dance for the exercise. I give myself a side eye for that because as soon as I stepped foot in a dance studio, my dance career was officially back on and popping. I picked up right where I had left off and began working at my career with a new sense of purpose. Right in Houston, I started getting more work than all of my years in LA combined. Just think. If I hadn't started taking care of my body, which also effects the condition of the mind and spirit, then who knows where I'd be right now.

So do yourself a favor. Don't spend all of your energy on your career or doing things for other people. Make sure you save something for yourself. Use some of that energy investing in your total being. Take a walk in the park, attend a spin class, get a massage or mani-pedi from time to time. Set aside time for recreation, even if you're simply sitting on the couch watching re-runs of your favorite show. Also be aware of the types of foods you're putting into your body. There's no need to make any drastic changes, unless you want to. Small changes done over a period of time tend to stick. Can you cut out soda? Can you cut back on the candy? Can you substitute the juice for a bottle of water? Implementing any of these small adjustments will help you stay refreshed and restored for the long journey ahead of you.

Investing in your physical health will definitely have positive effects on how you feel mentally and spiritually, but there are also other ways you can tend to your mind and spirit. You can try reading one new book per month, or if reading isn't your thing, how about a game of Sudoku or Text Twist? What about one of those group painting classes? No matter what it is, find an activity that both interests you and allows you to take your mind off your hustle for a bit as well.

And while you're at it, take a moment to do some inner work too. For some people, working out is that thing that works their body, mind, and spirit. They leave a work out feeling clear headed, energized, and restored. That's never really been the case for me. Dance is that for me. But when I need a break from dance, especially since it's what I do for a living, I engage in several different activities to keep me feeling spiritually connected. I pray, meditate, and attend church. Some people feel spiritual connections in nature. Others read spiritual books, and still for some, it's as simple as pausing for a few moments of silence on a regular basis to center themselves and find a spiritual awareness. Whatever the case is for you, do those things that will bring you a sense of purpose, healing, and wholeness. Maintaining physical, mental, and spiritual fitness are just as important to your career as anything else we've discussed in this book thus far.

Exercise Patience

My next tip is also a biggie. In fact, let's just venture to say that everything I've said is a biggie. It's all good. Correction. It's not just good, it's all essential to building a successful career that you enjoy and are proud of.

Building a successful career doesn't happen overnight. Nothing great happens over night, and anyone who tells you otherwise is probably pulling your leg. Your big dreams will take some time to come true. Anything that requires time will also require patience, which may be a hard pill to swallow since we're such a microwave generation. All of our technological advancements have been geared towards making things happen faster. But faster isn't always better, right? The finest wines are aged longer, mansions sometimes take years to build, and a home cooked meal made from scratch won't be coming out of a microwave.

You know the saying "easy come, easy go." How many participants of reality shows have gone on to maintain their relevance in any given field? After their fifteen minutes of fame are up, we likely hear of them no more. However, those who have put in the hard work behind the scenes are the ones who build lasting careers. Then ask yourself, do I want fifteen minutes or a lifetime? A brief encounter or a legacy? The choice is yours my friend, and the results will largely depend upon how well you exercise patience.

I sometimes wonder how different my career would be if I had stayed in LA. I question whether that move back to Houston was a lack of patience or if I had simply outgrown my LA experience. I'm wise enough to know that things happen the way they're supposed to happen. In fact, I'm sure that while I may have gone on to do some cool projects if I had stayed in LA, my personal life and confidence in my artistry wouldn't be as rich as it is now. There, just as I wrote that last sentence, I answered that question for myself once and for all. I relocated from LA because I outgrew my experience there. Then if deciding to leave LA wasn't because I lacked patience, then what does lacking patience look like?

It looks like me *before* the move. It's feeling frustrated when you're not as far along as you think you should be. It's getting bitter and resentful when others around you are booking the projects you want to work. It's wanting to completely give up when things aren't going the way you want them to go. Let's be clear here for a moment. The move itself wasn't where I lacked patience. *It was deciding to give up dance all together that showed a lack of patience.* There's no debating that one. The proof is in the pudding. As soon as I started dancing again, (only months after I had "quit") my career began to blossom.

I'll be the poster child for impatience for a moment so you'll have a clear example. My story suggests that you recognize any restlessness and frustration as a sign of impatience. Once you've

acknowledged it, you can work towards getting out of that space. My entire life my mother has told me that you always have a choice, and I've grown to realize the truth in that statement. Regardless of the situation, there is always a choice to be made. When you're in an uncomfortable place, say beaten up by all the rejection you've gotten recently, you have two choices. You can change your situation, or you can change your attitude about the situation.

Changing the situation can mean different things for different people when it comes to career pursuits. It could be a simple relocation for some people like it was for me, or it could be as major as quitting altogether. Although, if you're really in it for the long haul, if without a doubt you answered lifetime and legacy to the questions I asked before, then changing your attitude about your situation is the key to exercising patience.

Changing your attitude is about changing your perspective. Instead of focusing on all the bad, you'll need to focus on the good. One of the best ways to do that is to count your blessings. It's that simple. Just get yourself an attitude of gratitude. Start focusing on all the things you are grateful for, not just in your career pursuit, but in your whole life. Are you healthy? Do you have a roof over your head? Can you get from point A to point B? Do you have great friends? A supportive family? Can you recognize the beauty of a sunrise or the fresh smell of nearby flowers? There is an endless list of things for which any one of us can be grateful if we just took the

time to stop and acknowledge them. They're always there, and most times we take them for granted. Just be mindful of the fact that while we're sulking over how what we're doing or where we are isn't enough, someone else would love to be in our shoes. We have freedoms and luxuries that many people won't ever experience. Let that sink in for a moment. Now appreciate where you are, and carry that with you as you continue your journey. Your attitude of gratitude will karate chop your impatience in the behind, clearing the way for you to forge ahead with power and purpose.

Persevere

As you forge ahead in the direction of your dreams, there will be other obstacles you'll face. The going *will* get tough, and your passion for dance will be tested repeatedly. There will be rejection you'll experience, sacrifices you'll make, finances you'll have to figure out, not to mention the great task of finding yourself as you mature into the adult you're becoming. Building a career, and just doing life in general, can be a lot to handle. Trust me, I know. As a kid I used to wonder why people would say life is hard. Of course it wasn't hard then. I had no bills to pay or any real decisions to make. Oh, but once I left the nest and headed towards adulthood, I understood that saying very clearly honey.

Just the career pursuit alone. How in the heck do you build something without a manual? Where do you start? Who do you ask

for help? How do you know if you're on the right track? I had question after question after question when I first started. Fortunately, there is more than one way to become a professional dancer. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: no two dancers' careers will look the same. What is the same, however, are the general steps we take for our careers to start taking shape. We all start by putting one foot in front of the other, and we go the distance by doing that very thing over and over again. We start, and then we keep going. We take action, and then we persevere.

Perseverance is the reason I've been able to sustain a professional dance career for as long as I have. Sure, I quit for a second, if you can even call it quitting. My ego quit for certain, but my spirit never let go. Through all the rejection, failures, and disappointments, I've always found a way to keep going. And when it happens to you, you'll have to find it within yourself to do the same. To help you with that, I'd like to offer two approaches to perseverance. You can set clear, attainable goals, or you can evolve into different aspects of your career over time. Both methods keep you focused and motivated as you move along towards developing your career.

Goal setting. It's not a new concept, but you'd be surprised how many people don't practice it. Most people have general ideas of the direction they'd like to go, and then they just do different things in hopes of getting there. Here's the thing. When you haven't

laid out clear steps to help you get to your destination, it's like taking shots in the dark without knowing whether or not you'll hit your target. While that may work, it leaves you susceptible to all types of distractions, the biggest of which is comparing yourself to other people.

I am the self-proclaimed queen of making comparisons and the undefeated champ of my very own “Dare-to-Compare” game. Don't know why, but I've compared myself to other people my whole life. You can imagine how it has effected my career pursuit, especially since I didn't have any clear goals when I was first starting out. I would research choreographers and see clear examples of the type of work I wanted to do, but I didn't have any models on how to get there. So as I went along with my trial and error approach, it was easy for me to notice other people seemingly making more progress than I was making, which always left me frustrated. You already know where my frustration got me, right? It got me a ticket to “Bitter-town” and “Resentful-ville.” However, once I figured out the process to getting work, the very process that I've shared with you here, my goals somehow seemed more attainable. After that, it was all a matter of repetition, patience, and perseverance.

You build a career the same way you build anything else: one step at a time. You can essentially go through each step of this book and set goals towards practicing each of them. For example, if you

want an agent, set a goal towards getting one. Your goals could look something like this:

1. Submit to agency website.
2. Prepare for audition by attending three classes per week.
3. Attend agency audition.

Depending on the results of that audition, you can repeat those steps until you reach your goal of getting an agent. As you continue your process, you may even be able to alter your steps a bit. Maybe it becomes something like this:

1. Attend five classes per week for three months.
2. Develop relationships with choreographers and dancers in class.
3. Ask a choreographer or dancer friend for a referral to their agency.
4. Submit to agency.

Remember, there is more than one way to develop your career. Write your goals, and say them out loud to give them more permanency. Set deadlines to give yourself more accountability. Then create smaller steps to help you achieve those goals. In fact, the smaller steps are goals in and of themselves. As you complete a step, you are also reaching a goal. Keep your eye on the prize by posting your goals somewhere you look daily. When you stay focused on where you're headed, you won't easily be distracted by

what others are doing around you, and you'll be better equipped to endure the road ahead.

Goal setting is a pretty straight forward way to persevere in any task, but it may not be as easy to see how evolving can be a means to perseverance. Let's talk about that for a second. How have artists like Madonna or Will Smith been able to sustain their careers for decades? They've done it by evolving over time. Madonna continues to reinvent herself in her music, and Will Smith continues to move through a variety of performance roles. He started as a Grammy award winning rapper, then he became the star of his own TV series, and now he's a film star who also has producer credits under his belt. It's evolution. Anything that isn't growing is dying. If you're not growing in some way in your career, chances are that it's becoming stale, or you're losing interest and possibly considering moving on to something else.

I'm constantly evolving into different areas of my career. My pursuit began in LA where I was mostly engaged in commercial hip-hop and jazz work. Then I moved to Houston where along with my hip-hop, I started performing with a samba company and Latin band, and I also began choreographing musical theater productions. Then I went to grad school where I was fully immersed in concert styles (modern and ballet) for a period of time, which led me to my work as a dance professor. Now, I still work with musical productions, I teach on a college level, I recently spent a few weeks

training with some amazing house dancers, and I've also just started a business in which I educate dancers about creating their careers on their own terms. So you see, I've evolved into different areas several times over, but each change was still dance related.

Although I've grown into different areas over the years, I still have big dreams involving commercial work that I'm working towards. I don't feel like I've abandoned my initial goals with all the evolving I've done. Instead, I believe I've picked up valuable experience and tools that I'll be able to contribute to my big dreams once they're realized.

You choose which method works for you. Maybe goal setting is enough, maybe evolving is your thing, or maybe it's a combination of both like it is for me. Regardless of how you choose to persevere, the important thing is that you press on. Keep your goals in front you, and be open to change. As you carry on, you'll look up one day and realize that you've become a working dancer!

Create the Career of Your Dreams



Our time together is coming to an end young grasshopper. I've given you everything you need to embark upon the pursuit of your professional dance career in a way that is smart and effective. The rest is up to you.

Before we part ways, I'd like to leave you with these final thoughts.

- **The system revealed within this book is not a “one and done” type process.** You will need to repeat it over and over until your career takes form. Even after you start getting work, you'll need to continue moving through these steps to keep the momentum going in your career. Pretty soon, you'll have a unique version of this process that works best for you and your journey.
- **You will not build your career overnight as developing a successful and lasting career takes time.** Not to worry. Remember that building a career is like building anything else. Just take one step at a time, and you'll be on your way.
- **While you're working hard at creating the career of your dreams, don't neglect other areas of your life.** More importantly, don't neglect yourself. Tend to your total self by devoting time to invest in your body, mind, and spirit.

- **Speaking of your spirit, be sure to exercise patience and perseverance.** Get rid of impatience by engaging an attitude of gratitude, and persevere by setting goals and evolving throughout your career.

Lastly, be open to the journey you're about to experience. Be flexible, resilient, and resourceful, but most of all, just **BE**.

- **Believe** in yourself, and know that you have what it takes to make your dreams come true.
- **Be taught** what you need to know. Grow into your best self by learning from others as well as from the lessons life always teaches.
- **Begin.** Put one foot in front of the other, and continue taking action until your dreams become your reality.

This is where I'll leave you: *at the start line*. You have everything you need for the road ahead. I've been in your shoes with far less of an advantage, and I still found my way to a professional dance career. I know in my heart of hearts that if I can do it with little to no direction, then you surely can too. Refer to this book as often as you need to throughout your pursuit. Although becoming a professional dancer is the destination, know that there's

magic in the journey too. So give it all you've got, and be sure to enjoy the ride.

Additional Resources



Appendix A: Dance Agents

411 South: ATL

www.411South.com

Bloc Agency: LA, NY

www.BlocAgency.com

Clear Talent Group: LA, NY, South

www.ClearTalentGroup.com

Go 2 Talent Agency: LA

www.GoToTalentAgency.com

McDonald/Selznick Associates (MSA Agency): LA, NY

www.MSAAgency.com

The Movement Talent Agency: LA

www.Movement-Agency.com

Xcel Talent Agency: ATL

www.XcelTalent.com

Appendix B: Dance Job Boards

Actors Equity

www.actorsequity.org

Answers 4 Dancers

www.answers4dancers.com

Backstage

www.backstage.com

Dance Informa

www.danceinforma.us/dance-auditions/

Dance/NYC

www.dance.nyc/listings/auditions

Dance Resource Center

www.danceresourcecenter.org/resources

Dance USA

www.danceusa.org/auditions

Stage Door Connections

www.stagedoorconnections.com

Vegas Auditions

www.vegasauditions.com

About the Author



Shaté L. Edwards is a choreographer and dance professor residing in Dallas, TX. She has a Master of Fine Arts in Dance as well as a dance career that spans over a decade. In addition to choreographing productions and teaching classes both domestically and abroad, she also educates dancers on how to develop sustainable careers.

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