

After The Music Stops

How does a young dancer who's spent an entire life training to dance and performed hundreds of times, step away from the choreography, music, and bright lights? Most do not make that transition easily.

Dancers live in a world where every working day, every move is choreographed by a dance mistress or an artistic director. "Stand here, turn to the diagonal, move your hand up six inches." Most other professions are not that tightly regimented, but then, most professions do not require exacting movements. Ballet does.

For a ballet performance to appear flawless, dancer precision and unison movements are necessary. The music and the individual steps must match. If the company uses a famous ballet choreography, created decades or hundreds of years ago, each movement is prescribed. Of course companies are allowed to *adapt* choreography, allowing them to adjust or reconfigure individual steps, but often their viewing public expects, even demands, the traditional choreography as created by a famous choreographer or as performed by a famous dancer.

When dancers retire at a young age because of injury, burnout or personal reasons, they are often not prepared to step into a world filled with choices. If they've grown up in a dance academy they're accustomed to being told what to do as well as when and where to do it. In some instances their development is stunted because of the regimen they've lived under. Plus, being referred to as "boys and girls" doesn't help.

For many dancers, the obvious transition is a tweak, a shift. They remain within the dance world by teaching or working for a ballet company. For us, that is a distinct value; they keep the world of ballet supplied with new directors and assistants who perpetuate the art of dance by continuing to share their skills with future generations.

But what about dancers seeking a complete change of career? What obstacles do they face that other young, career-minded people are more skilled in avoiding?

Most dancers enter the dance profession well before the age of seventeen. Many forfeit high school graduation and give up their social lives to pursue their future as dancers. That often places them behind academically as well as socially unless they are able to juggle so many demands. The natural development of a teen into an adult may be delayed or arrested, requiring a huge catch-up period that may be overwhelming.

Young protégés, young musicians as well as young athletes: skaters, gymnasts, hockey players and Olympians face similar issues. Many find it hard to keep their focus intact as they attempt to balance their career, academic goals, and social life beyond the end of the week in front of them. When they leave their career, many slip off the deep end. Some try to retrieve their teen years and pick up what they lost, but their friends have moved on. Others attempt to become adults without adequate socialization building blocks; the ones they missed while they pursued an early career. They step into adult dating and social situations but are not equipped for the accompanying serious relationships, drugs and alcohol and managing their own lives and finances.

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In the mid-twentieth century the answer to how dancers adjusted to life after the music stopped depended on the support and guidance their family and friends provided. Over recent decades, many ballet companies assist retiring dancers by providing workshops on employment alternatives and completion or extend of their education. In some instances dancers set aside their careers while they pursue a college degree. Many who've taken the break to go to college report the decision provides them with extra time to engage with a broader group of people and pursue various interests before they decide if a lifetime of dance is their highest calling.

About the author

Paddy Eger is the author of the award-winning YA novel *84 Ribbons*, a novel that follows the turbulent first year of a young professional ballet dancer. The second book in the trilogy, *When the Music Stops*, continues Marta's story. You will find both books through your favorite local bookseller, online and from the author at paddyeger.com.

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