

The Nature of Dance

Navigating Self-Image: Sydney Guine's Journey

Katie Carrigan

Sydney Guine looks at herself in the mirror for at least five hours each day. She's done this nearly every day since she was 11 years old. At 3, Guine recalls, "My mother saw me point my feet in my high chair and said I was destined to dance."

A five foot tall, Black, jewish girl, Guine (Guh-nay) says that since middle school "I knew I was never going to be a ballerina because I didn't look like a ballerina." She went to the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, practicing at a separate studio after school, estimating that she danced 40 hours a week.

She has pursued dance all the way to a college level, where she is in her junior year. She is in a dual degree program at Fordham College Lincoln Center, so she takes classes toward a bachelor of arts in sociology and lives at FCLC, but is also pursuing a bachelor of fine arts in dance at the Ailey School.

Alvin Ailey is a modern dance company that was originally created to be a space for Black dancers; it is still primarily nonwhite, though open to any applicants. Now, it is the largest contemporary and modern dance company in the United States. There are 32 spots, and after she graduates, Guine wants one to be hers. The company often takes graduates of the Ailey School, with 75% of their current dancers having attended.

Guine says she was drawn to the Alvin Ailey school because she was looking for a place she would feel accepted and had been wanting to join Ailey since she was a child. "When I was six years old, I went to see Alvin Ailey at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in LA and I saw "Revelations" for the first time. Immediately I wanted to be the girl in the front because she was the shortest in the cast and she looked like me. I've known since then that I wanted to be in the Ailey company."

After attending the school for three years, she knows that "Ailey has definitely forced a change upon me, and helped me learn to love myself." In high school, she says, "one of my ballet teachers told me and my friend that we needed to skip dinner because our butts were too big to fit into our tutus." Another common phrase she would hear from Madame Giana, her Russian Ballet teacher, was "suck in, I can see your lunch." Now, she still struggles with body image and self esteem.

At a college level, the level of criticism is often no different. She remembers freshman year at Ailey as a draining experience. “I always stood at the barre in the center of the room, so that I didn’t have to look at my side profile in the mirror.”

Freshman year, her self confidence was tested after almost half of her cohort developed disordered eating habits, herself included. She counted her calories, and forced herself to throw up after dancing for six hours, and consciously tried to eat less.

“I think the fact that we were only seeing each other and looking in the mirror all day made us more conscious of how we looked. It felt like we were competing against each other inside and outside of class.” At Ailey, teachers would comment on the dancers’ physiques, which, according to Guine, is common in dance classes.

At the end of her first semester, she recalls, “There was a grade on my evaluation for physique, from unsatisfactory to excellent. I think that really threw us all off, because we thought ‘they’re grading how our bodies look.’” The girls contacted Melanie Person, the Director of The Ailey School since 2010, and were able to remove that section from the evaluation. When contacted, Person did not comment on this conversation.

By the end of the year, she started noticing that some dancers took a Celcius energy drink and coffee to class every day as appetite suppressants. “They said it was all they needed to get them through the day, so I started doing it,” she said.

Guine remembers teachers commenting on leanness and skinniness, which were taken as compliments. “Other girls would see that and think, ‘Oh she’s getting noticed,’” she recalls. Losing weight became a way to gain the teacher’s favor. “I could start to see people’s collar bones and ribs. I could see muscle tone because there was no fat. I could see people’s spines,” she says with eyebrows raised and eyes unblinking, an earnest but troubled tone.

Positive feedback is all a dancer wants to hear, Guine says. “I would have done a lot to please my teachers,” she says. The girls were gaining muscle and losing weight, chasing acknowledgement for their efforts.

When this happened, she and some of her classmates approached Person, the Ailey director, with the problem, concerned for their friends. Guine only says, “all I know is that Ailey requested that four of the dancers in my cohort be blood tested and apparently it was kind of traumatic for them.” When contacted, Person did not comment on Ailey policies regarding dancer’s physical or mental health.

The next year, Guine reconnected with the girls, most of whom had recovered over the summer break. The five of them sat together on the floor, reflecting on what had happened last spring. She remembers, “one of the girls said she lost 40 pounds in 3 months.”

Guine says that, like her, being at home with family and away from the toxicity of the group helped them gain perspective. She also started working with a nutritionist who specializes in helping dancers. “My nutritionist helped me create healthy eating plans and that stuck with me through the next school year.”

The girls were in the same cohort sophomore year, which Guine describes as both good and bad. “We were bonded by the experience, so I knew what they were feeling, but at the same time, if one of us developed unhealthy habits again, it was hard not to do it too.”

Ultimately, Guine feels that she has gained a lot of self love through her time at Ailey. Straightening in her chair with a triumphant smile, Guine says “I have a stronger sense of self now than I did three years ago. It’s easier to love what I see in the mirror.”