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One Step Ahead

Cuban-born, gold medal ballet dancer Fernando Bujones stood at the front of the ballet studio as a guest choreographer, and he was not pleased. The dance he had been commissioned to teach my ballet company was extremely difficult to learn. Even the most senior members of the company were struggling both physically and technically. “Who can know zee steps? I need me a dancer to come up and show!” he cried to excruciating silence in his thick Cuban accent. Who would risk the embarrassment of demonstrating in front of Mr. Bujones? Suddenly, confidence swelled inside me as I remembered my training under Charlton O’Neal. Even though I was the youngest and smallest dancer in the company, I went to the front of the room and successfully demonstrated the steps to the senior soloists, the director of my company, as well as the most celebrated male dancer of my time. Reflecting back on my spontaneous decision, I realize that it wasn’t confidence in my own talent that led me to demonstrate the steps, but pure faith in the excellent training I received from my ballet teacher at the time, Charlton O’Neal. Charlton was an exceptional ballet teacher, who through his method of teaching helped his dancers excel as confident artists. Although I no longer have Charlton for a teacher, I still attribute my success in ballet and to his innovative, challenging, and personal teaching style.

From the moment Charlton walked into the ballet studio, he helped me improve my classical ballet technique by correcting the fundamentals before moving on and through

demanding results and holding us all to a professional standard. When Charlton first arrived to Connally's Dance Studio, for instance, he observed ballet class for at least a week, not saying one word in order to carefully observe each dancer's technique. He began his instruction by placing each dancer in the appropriate level based on her ability, a radical concept at the time. Before Charlton, dancers were ranked based on age and seniority. When I was moved down from level three to level one, I wasn't happy— it felt like utter failure. However, what I could not yet appreciate was that reviewing the basics thoroughly allowed me to fix many bad habits. As a result, I quickly advanced back to level of my age group, and eventually passed them up.

Another way Charlton helped me improve my ballet technique was through the professional environment he created. For instance, Charlton modeled the dress code after that of the School of American Ballet, the most prestigious dance school in the U.S., which at the time required white leotards and pink tights. Girls who arrived at class without the proper dress, or who appeared late for class, were asked to leave. At first, the strict dress code seemed unfair and trivial. However, in the end, the uniform environment created an atmosphere of seriousness and unity, which promoted improvement in work ethic. It served as a signal to the dancers that Charlton would help those dancers who exhibited a desire to learn and established a teacher-student relationship based on respect. As a student, having this respect for Charlton from the beginning was crucial in order for Charlton to take his corrections into consideration.

Charlton, however, exhibited more than mere strictness in his demeanor, but a dynamic teaching style as well. When Charlton demanded results in class, he made sure his corrections were clear and realistic. He did this by catering to each dancer's individual learning style and, as a result, sped up the learning process. Once, when Charlton wanted to help the class understand how bending our knees before a turn could maximize the force, he brought an old-fashioned

spinning top to visually illustrate his point. As Charlton pushed down on the knob of the top, he also explained how we should bend our knees. By incorporating use of this vivid visual image, he made a lasting impression. On another occasion, Charlton stopped the class to show me the correct way to hold my fingers. He wanted them to appear delicate and relaxed rather than splayed out and separated from one another, which he said suggested tension. Since it was a bad habit I had developed over years of training, Charlton didn't expect my hands to be fixed right away- that wouldn't be realistic. Instead, he would constantly remind me during class with a simple flicker of his index finger in my direction- his personalized signal we developed to communicate a much needed fix. Since Charlton would never swamp me with corrections, it was easy to know what to correct. And when reminders weren't enough, Charlton would invent an alternate and method to fix the problem. After a week of little improvement in my finger placement, for instance, Charlton wrapped my hands with scotch tape during the several classes that followed, forcing my fingers together. When he finally removed the tape, I found myself feeling as though it was still stuck around my fingers and, consequently, kept them perfectly together.

Once he was sure that his dancers had clean technique, Charlton then focused on making us well-rounded performers with marketable skills. He accomplished this by introducing us to a variety of dance styles. When Charlton choreographed *Two Ragas*, an Indian inspired dance, for instance, he completely immersed us in authentic Indian culture. For an entire week, Charlton made us take Indian dance classes in addition to his own challenging ballet class. We wore red dots, or Bhindi, on our foreheads, and ate Indian food for lunch. During ballet class, Charlton would first make us review the nine different emotions around which all Indian dances are centered, and taught us corresponding eye and hand motions. Although the whole process was

extremely tedious, in retrospect, the exposure widened my dance repertoire immensely and has proven to be unique and marketable. And of course, the immersion also made the final product of *Two Ragas* rich, authentic, and memorable.

But Charlton's lesson with *Two Ragas* didn't end there. In taking the dance to the Regional Dance America (RDA) Festival, he exposed his dancers to competition outside our home studio and helped us develop a healthy reality about our ability. Festival, a three day event for all non-profit ballet companies in a five-state region, featured master classes for all dancers, scholarship auditions, and ended with performance by featured companies. At Festival, then, Charlton made sure I was placed in an appropriate level with dancers at my ability level. I noticed that while I was far ahead of my age group back at Connally's, at Festival, dancers my age were at my level and above. I learned from this experience that while it was good to be confident about my ability, I should never stop trying my hardest to improve, just because I am above my age level at my home studio. In addition, Charlton promoted healthy competition by encouraging me to audition for a \$1000 scholarship prize along with other dancers at Festival. It was a long shot, as hundreds of dancers my age and older were competing, though the experience proved to be a positive one as it taught me how I needed to stand out from the other dancers in a positive way.

But perhaps the reason I respected Charlton's artistic advice to such an extent was the fact that Charlton made sure to establish himself as more than just a ballet teacher. Too often ballet teachers work to promote their dancers to better their own reputations. Charlton, however, demonstrated genuine concern for our lives outside the ballet studio by showing concern for my family, my troubles, and my other interests. When I was cast in my school's production of *Oklahoma*, for instance, I saw that rehearsals conflicted with Charlton's ballet class. When I

came to him with the news that I would be missing class, Charlton, to my surprise, wasn't angry at all. Instead, he took genuine interest in my role and asked where he could purchase a ticket to the performance. "I didn't know you liked to sing and act, Michelle," he said in a warm tone as we were both leaving class, "I'll have to keep that in mind the next time casting goes up." In the end, Charlton attended my school's production of *Oklahoma*. In addition, he took the initiative to contact my parents, who were also attending, so that he could sit with them and get to know them. After the show, Charlton presented me with a bouquet of flowers with a note that read, "Michelle, I'm so pleased to see your work ethic extend beyond the realms of the ballet studio. You are an exceptionally talented dancer and performer, and a fine young lady." The next day in class, Charlton asked how my dad was doing in reference to the conversation he had had with him the night before about his recent diagnosis with colon cancer. In showing an interest for my interest in musical theatre, as well as concern for my father, Charlton created a special teacher-student bond that made me realize that he really did have my interests at heart in the ballet studio and beyond.

When Fernando Bujones asked for volunteers to demonstrate the steps, I had only just begun my training with Charlton. Before Charlton came, I would have never had the confidence or ability to rise to the challenge. But even in those early days, his training had given me the self-assurance and poise needed to do so. Evidently, Charlton was an excellent ballet teacher, well beyond anything I could recognize at the time. His demands for professionalism in the dance studio, along with his dynamic teaching style, and concern for our lives, combined to establish Charlton as the best ballet teacher I can imagine. His lessons are ones that will be apparent not only in my classical technique, but in my work ethic in ballet and beyond. Because of Charlton, I am one step ahead.