SENIOR THESIS

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Thesis Title
The True Artist

Thesis Sub-Title
Actualizing One’s True Artist through the Pursuit of Good Character

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Year
2014
-INTRODUCTION-

It appears that in this generation, there is a general misconception of what artists are and what fuels their artistic inspirations. More specifically, many artists (particularly dancers) experience an insufferable amount of pressure to explore “experiential knowledge” of life in things such as sex, drugs, and alcohol for many reasons including a drive to keep up with the rigorously chaotic lifestyle and as a chance to explore their “artistic spirit.” Some actually go even further to say that those who are conservative with giving into their passions and who genuinely strive to maintain a good, wholesome, and healthy lifestyle are actually holding themselves back and are, therefore, somehow less of a dancer/artist.

As a dancer that was raised in a Catholic family and is still avidly pursuing goodness as a Salesian student of DeSales University, I would like to expand on what ill behavior these dancers get into, what pushes them to do so, and what the outcome of that behavior could potentially be. Moreover, I will be arguing why this idea that a dancer should suppress their moral compass in order to become a “better artist” is harmful to the new generation of artists, is incredibly toxic to the nature of their art and the future of art in general, and is ultimately wrong.
A SUBLIMINAL PRESSURE

It may seem like a large blanket statement to assume that many young artists experience this pressure to explore and succumb to their passions. I admit that it is difficult to actually prove that this is the case other than speaking from my own personal experience within the arts world. However, there are multiple breeding grounds for these kinds of influences. The first of these is something that both those that have experienced the world of arts and those that are unacquainted with it can relate to because it resides within the midst of our media. The most blatant of these examples can be seen in that of the Oscar-winning movie by Darren Aronofsky called, Black Swan.

“That was me seducing you. It needs to be the other way around…Perfection is not just about control. It is also about letting go” (Black Swan). This quote is made by character, Thomas Leroy, playing a ballet master, to character, Nina Sayers, playing an ambitious professional ballerina. In this scene, Thomas proceeds to seduce Nina in order to communicate the point that her “perfectionist mentality” was not sufficient in her attempt to embody the character of the “Black Swan” as opposed to the “White Swan”. Thomas convinces Nina that she must gain some “experiential knowledge” of what it means to give in to her passions in order that she can achieve the truest manifestation of the black swan’s lustful character. Ultimately, he insinuates that Nina must go home and “please herself” in order that she can understand what he means. Nina, being a dedicated dancer, does just that.

In analysis of the ballet master’s words, “Perfection is not just about control, it is also about letting go,” it is clear that his words themselves are not intrinsically evil by any means. The idea
of “Letting go” is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, “Letting go” can actually have a good connotation, such as practicing the virtue of “Detachment.” Saint John of the Cross says, “Love consists not in feeling great things but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved” (Catholictradition.org). However, within the context of the movie, the message that the ballet master was trying to communicate was all too clear: it was imperative to Nina’s career that she starts leading an immoral lifestyle.

It is clear from this scene that this movie, with all of its cunning characters, dynamic plot twists and convincing acting, is entertaining by “shock value”, to say the least. But despite it’s entertainment value, there are many problems associated with the message of this movie. First of all, the notion that professional dancers of prestigious schools and companies can fool around as they did in this movie is simply incorrect. My father, Jeffrey Rubin, attended the Juilliard Conservatory of the Arts with a major in Acting. Due to the relatively small student body of this prestigious school, he and his male actor friends were exceedingly interested in getting to know the beautiful ballet dancers for obvious reasons. In an interview with him he was asked to elaborate on his thoughts on the portrayal of ballerinas in this movie. He stated that, “as someone who interacted with the dancers on a daily basis, I came to realize that the only reason that any of the dancers achieved this pinnacle of success was through sheer and utter discipline. They would never have frivolously experimented with drugs and/or alcohol as they did in this movie” (Rubin, Interview).

As this interview shows, the idea that professional dancers who succeed in their craft can dabble in tomfoolery in the midst of pursuing the height of physical perfection is preposterous. More importantly though, a scene that uses cheap shock appeal to encourage a flawed view such
as this can be incredibly misleading to the many young, aspiring artists that are most likely watching. Imagine what it is like for a teenage girl who aspires to be a professional ballerina. What would the above quote communicate to her as a naive child who will do almost anything to achieve her goals? How would she respond to the prestigious ballet master’s “words of wisdom”? It is not difficult to conjure up some of the many lengths a young, innocent girl with an ambitious dream would go to after hearing a bold statement such as that.

-PURSUING THE DREAM AT ALL COSTS-

Having been a dancer since I was fourteen years old, I have experienced and witnessed first-hand what young girls do in order to pursue a dream that is so dear to them and yet so unattainable. It is all too common that a sensitive, young dancer sees a professional ballerina with a gaunt face and lanky legs and, noticing the obvious difference between her own normal body and that of the professional dancer’s, decides that she must starve herself in order to have any chance at pursuing her dreams, thus taking the first step toward an eating disorder.

Think about it. Everything about the physiology of the body works to get more sustenance through consuming food and water, breathing air, etc; it is one of the body’s primary instincts. If girls are actually willing to ignore every pang of hunger they experience due to habitually suppressing their body’s natural instincts to consume food just so that they can draw the tiniest bit closer to achieving their dreams, then what are they willing to stop at? Moreover, if one picture of a skinny ballerina who they don’t even know can hurl them into the world of eating disorders then what can the words of a ballet master do?

Connections like this may seem to be trivial assumptions that melodramatic parents come
to. But they are not; they are all too real and they do indeed exist in our culture. This consistent veiling of the modern day, prestigious artists who involve themselves in corrupt behavior can not only cause their own fatal outcomes but it can also lead the younger generation down a path of destruction to outcomes of addiction and even death. What should be advertised is how tragic the situations can get; those stories of the dancers who have gone down that path to their tragic death should be shared with the younger generation to serve as a warning tale.

Zachary Whittenburg writes in his article, “Dancing with Danger” that “Cocaine has a long history in the ballet world that started in the drug’s heyday in the 1980s” (Whittenburg 1). He then goes on to explain that taking up a life involved with cocaine can have brutally detrimental long term effects on one’s health including heart and respiratory problems, headaches, irritability, and even paranoid psychosis. Additionally, it is not cheap to say the least; at $100 per gram, it can rob a dancer’s already low means of income completely dry.

Patrick Bussell, a principle dancer of the American Ballet Theatre who overdosed in 1987, is a primary example of this lifestyle’s tragic ending. But despite the merciless effects of cocaine and the many examples of what tragedy it can lead to, there is still some impetus that leads dancers into this kind of lifestyle. Whittenburg elaborates on this saying, “cocaine remains a chronic problem, a seemingly easy “solution” to many of the pressures dancers face” (Whittenburg 1).

The pressures that Whittenburg refers to are not fabricated; they are all too real. It is not hard to grasp the fact that the toils of a professional dancer’s life completely surpass the stress of a regular 9 to 5 job. The most infamous cause of this stress is the constant pressure to be
abnormally thin. Due to this impossible standard, dancers cannot find any other means of achieving it other than by simply cutting their calorie intake more and more with each day, eventually leading them to eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Binge Eating disorder, and EDNOS (Eating Disorder Otherwise Not Specified). For those who are unfamiliar with eating disorders and the effects that they can have on a person, an eating disorder can actually be incredibly detrimental to the entirety of the body. A few of the symptoms that are almost always associated with the most popular of the eating disorders, Anorexia Nervosa, include having an abnormally slow heart rate and low blood pressure, which mean that the heart muscle is suffering damage and atrophy, an increase in the risk for heart failure, Osteoporosis (the loss of bone density), muscle loss and weakness, kidney failure resulting from severe dehydration, dry skin and loss of hair, an overall weakness of the body, and even a growth of “lanugo” which is a type of hair that covers the whole body in an attempt to keep it warm (Neda 1).

As one can see, eating disorders affect the whole body. Not surprisingly, they are highest among white middle and upper class females under the age of 25. On average, eating disorders in the white middle-class population average one in a hundred. As one could imagine, this number increases significantly in ballet to a ratio of one in five (Anshel 2). It is not difficult to believe that the multiple physiological effects that Anorexia has on the body can negatively influence one’s mood and one’s decision making, hence making them even more susceptible to the words of the “ballet master” referenced in the first section. It is at this point that some dancers resort to things like drugs and alcohol as a means of facilitating their eating disorder; in other words, they use drugs like cocaine to replace meals. Whittenburg mentioned an example of a dancer who had
been told her whole life that she needed to lose weight and, after having used cocaine as a staple for her diet, she received a very positive response from all of her teachers (Whittenburg 4).

In addition to the issue of malnutrition, dancers also experience an insufferable amount of stress from the rigorous schedule of the job. It is rare that a dancer, especially those that are involved in smaller companies, have a night off from a performance in order that they can rejuvenate. This combination of brute forces creates a relentlessly stressful workload for dancers. In consideration of all these pressures, Whittenburg notes that it is all too common for dancers to be pushed to the point where in they start using the maximal level of stress as an excuse to “party hard” and end up finding themselves doing illegal, unhealthy things (Whittenburg 2).

-GELSEY KIRKLAND: A LESSON TO LEARN FROM-

Gelsey Kirkland, a famous ballerina who suffered from a cocaine addiction, is a perfect example of how this quick dive can occur to almost anyone, no matter where they come from. Gelsey did not have the distraught childhood that one would imagine a typical “crack-head” would have had. She had two loving parents and much support throughout her whole life. She was a hard worker and did a lot to achieve her goal of being a professional ballerina. In her autobiography, “Dancing on My Grave” she explains that “the transition from dreamer to artist involved years of intensive study and passionate struggle, difficult lessons which had to be learned before I could accept my legacy” (Kirkland 14). She was not lazy or entitled, and she was most definitely not a spoiled brat. In fact, according to Dane Youssef, she was not born with the natural physical affinity for dance that her sister had been blessed with. But she refused to be discouraged by that; she put everything she had into dance and soon became a favorite of the
famous George Balanchine at the School of American Ballet (Youssef 1).

As a professional dancer, she thrived for years performing famous works choreographed and danced by George Balanchine himself. She was happy with her successful career; however, after heartbreak she experienced with a man named Misha, things started to go downhill. At first she resorted to alcohol, a seemingly harmless influence; she described this period saying,

“I began drinking wine in the evening as a balm for my jangled nerves. The loneliness was unbearable. I usually dined by myself in a local restaurant, then retreated into oblivion. I was just another tipsy sleepwalker” (Kirklan 221).

Although alcohol seems so harmless in comparison to what other dancers were drawn into, this habit was just the beginning of her steady decline. Eventually she started to associate with the formerly mentioned Patrick Bussel and, due to his influence, began to use cocaine as an “escape”. In her first encounter with this drug she stayed with Patrick for a weekend during which they snorted almost all of Patrick’s stash and slept together, despite the fact that he had a girlfriend at the time. Gelsey reflected on this weekend saying,

“I had at long last liberated my primal and animal instincts. Sigmund Freud, who was no stranger to cocaine, would have been proud of me. I was a purely libidinal being. I was polymorphously perverse. I was the ultimate hedonist. I thought of the friendly advice that Peter Martins had given to me years before, that sex should be purely physical. I was surely nothing but physical” (Kirkland 226).

This drug and sex escapade between the two of them continued for a few months. At first she would only use it when Patrick provided it for her; but eventually she sought to get her own
supply. As she continued with the drug use, she started using it throughout her rehearsal processes too. Her excuses for this included using it as a “dietary aid” (due to the fact that it was an appetite suppressant) and using it to help her dancing. She described this “dancing aid” saying that it was,

“fantastic. I was struck by one extraordinary fact, an unprecedented occurrence: I had not stopped. I had not paused to analyze my work even once. It was painless for the first time. I felt no need for refinement, for perfecting each moment, for tedious argument. I did not have to think about the dance. I did not have to think about my partner, about the drama, about the steps. I simply relied on the twenty years of knowledge and experience that I had to fall back on. All of the sudden, after all those long years, Balanchine’s advice not think made sense” (Kirkland 230).

As one can see from Gelsey’s story, the stress of a dancer’s life can push them to do things that are completely insane and unhealthy. According to Dr. Andrew Saxon, “About 70 to 80 percent of people who have a serious problem start using cocaine in their teenage years” (Whittenburg 3). While there are probably multiple reasons for why this occurs and, while I can’t exactly pin-point a specific cause of the ill choices dancers make, I think that I can point to an idea that would act as a means of preventing dancers from going down this path.

-THE BEAUTY OF DANCE -

In order to analyze how a dancer reasons herself into this kind of frenzy, one must examine what a typical dancer’s priorities are and why they’re dancing. Let us first ask the question: why
do people like dancing in general? Unfortunately, this question is quite difficult to answer because there are a plentitude of reasons that dance is enjoyable.

People have enjoyed dancing since ancient times for a gamut of different reasons. Perhaps one of the most outdated of these reasons to dance (in America, that is) is the “ritualistic aspect” of dancing where in one dances in order that they may worship God/their perspective gods. A second, slightly less than dignified impetus for dancing that proceeds to, unfortunately, reign within uninhibited societies in modern times is that of the entertainment/sex appeal. As early as 1400 BC, Egyptian paintings on the walls of tombs displayed girls wearing scanty clothing dancing next to musicians. Apparently these girls were intended to “entertain” the dead within their tomb (Gascoigne 2). Lastly, a reason that is all too familiar to the raging club members of this generation is that of simply having fun and channeling one’s animalistic tendencies. Bamber Gascoigne commented on this trend in his article on the history of dance saying,

“All sufficiently uninhibited society knows that frantic dancing, in a mood heightened by pounding rhythm and flowing alcohol, will set the pulse racing and induce a mood of frenzied exhilaration” (Gascoigne1).

Gascoigne’s description of this societal tendency to “get lost in the dance (and sometimes the alcohol)” has clearly been around for eons. It is one of the fundamental ways of stress relief and “escape” from the world.

But please do not misunderstand me; in utilizing dancing for recreational reasons, one certainly does not sin. Recreation is a necessary means of fueling efficient work and keeping a person sane; there is a certain subconscious healing that can take place in the midst of dancing.
Radhakamal Mukerjee elaborates on the psychological influence of dancing in his article, “The Meaning and Evolution of Art in Society” saying,

“Thus the social psychology of art, bringing to light the various dynamisms such as myth-making, sublimation and symbolization that bring about the fusion of the unconscious and the conscious in art, helps us in understanding man's emotional misfits and adjustments in a given social and economic milieu or those generic art forms that represent mankind's expressions of, as well as escapes and compensations for, living in society. Such universal expressions of types and symbols are reached in art through an effective social disguise that relieves man's heartache with-out letting him know what the ache is…” (Mukergee496).

There is thus a variety of different reasons that dancing is an enjoyable means of recreation and art; however, as stated before, when people use it as a means of escape it can reach a hazy line that is tricky to maneuver around.

-THE HAZY LINE-

From Mukergee’s eloquent passage one can see that it is truly a gift from God to be able to partake in synchronized, rhythmic dancing. However, there are two ways in which this “recreation” can turn into a corrupt activity. The first of these is if one is using it as a way of ignoring their problems. For, it is one thing to use recreation such as this as a means of fueling our future work, but it is a completely different thing to use a gift like this to become numb to the pain of the world.

The problem is not that the initial “high” that one gets from dancing is intrinsically evil; nor is it that the alcohol one consumes is somehow inherently evil. In fact, both dancing and
alcohol can have beneficial physiological effects in the initial stages. This is due to the release of chemicals we call “endorphins” that produce feelings of pleasure and are associated with the process of numbing physical pain; they are truly a gift from God. Although we may not realize it, these chemicals are actually released during many activities including exercise, basking in the sun, consuming alcohol, and many other activities.

However, in the words of G.K. Chesterton, “No animal invented anything so bad as drunkenness-or so good as drink” (Chesterton 234). This quote is the emblem of that “hazy line” that we have been discussing. For, alcohol, which is generally the first on the list of abuses of “chemically beneficial” recreation, is exemplary of the gray area that we must be aware of whenever we enjoy something so influential. Despite its initial benefits, alcohol can quickly steer one into oblivion. The National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism elaborates on this saying,

“Alcohol can produce detectable impairments in memory after only a few drinks and, as the amount of alcohol increases, so does the degree of impairment. Large quantities of alcohol, especially when consumed quickly and on an empty stomach, can produce a blackout, or an interval of time for which the intoxicated person cannot recall key details of events, or even entire events” (Alcohol Alert 1).

Even from looking at the basic physiological effects one can see that alcohol is a prime example of the fact that too much of a good thing is never a good thing. But what is even worse than the physiological effects of drinking too much is the psychological danger of becoming dependent on the numbing effect that alcohol has on one’s nerves. It is all too common that
someone who struggles to find ways of coping with stress starts using alcohol as self-medication, not even realizing that the slippery slope that they stand upon could take them downward into a lifestyle like that of Gelsey Kirkland’s. Obviously the problem that comes from these gifts of alcohol and dance is not inherent to them. It is rather the abuse of these good things with the intention of numbing oneself to one’s pain that causes a problem to arise.

Although it may seem slightly puritanical to compare the “high” of dancing to that of alcohol, it is necessary to note that the escape one achieves from the world through dancing may perpetuate the undesirable and treacherous mentality of “numbing” oneself from the world. It is even more critical to stress the perfidious nature of this hazy line in the current generation because, due to the all too common modern trend of desiring immediate gratification and practicing excessive laziness, this generation is much more susceptible to its toxic nature.

The examples of this pressure are innumerable; but, by far, the greatest pressure is that of collegiate life or life after high school. As a senior in college, it has become unendingly apparent that the pressure to binge drink is greater than any other pressure I have ever experienced. As a Salesian student who tries to pursue moderation in all things, I have suffered through so many nights wherein my peers scream at me to “take shots” of hard liquor, to chug beer, or do a “keg stand”. It is everywhere. The National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism elaborated on this pressure saying, “Drinkers who experience blackouts typically drink too much and too quickly, which causes their blood alcohol levels to rise very rapidly. College students may be at particular risk for experiencing a blackout, as an alarming number of college students engage in binge drinking. Binge drinking, for a typical adult, is defined as consuming five or more drinks in about 2 hours for men, or four or more drinks for women” (Alcohol Alert 2).
Unfortunately, as children of God, we are not called to participate in activities like “binge drinking” in order that we may become numb to the gift of life that God has bestowed upon us. Rather, we are called to embrace our suffering and to offer it up for the greater glory of God. Moreover, we are called to offer up our joys as well. The famous “Morning Offering” prayer begins by saying, “Oh, Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, we offer You our prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day” (Zamek 1). This prayer is the perfect manifestation of what the daily Christian call is. It allows us to form the habit of waking up every day with recognition of the fact that our lives do not belong to us but, rather, to God, who ultimately knows what is best for us.

This doctrine that we belong to God is one of the fundamental Christian beliefs. After all, Corinthians One, Chapter 3, Verse 23 says, “You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.” In recognizing this notion we can come to the realization that all of the petty things that we obsess about and, more specifically, the incredibly trivial things that dancers obsess over, are completely arbitrary and do not matter. Matthew writes in the Bible,

“Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow:
they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matthew 6:25-34).

As one can see, fulfilling the Christian call doesn’t just prevent us from getting involved in inappropriate and toxic behaviors. It also allows us to affiliate ourselves with the things in life that truly matter. Furthermore, we can live life to the fullest because we can recognize that even the typically more important things in life are in the hands of God and that there is a providential plan for each one of us. Even the gravest matters such as the loss of our loved ones become less stressful and emotionally taxing because we can have faith in the fact that everything happens for a reason and that those we have lost are living in eternal happiness with the Father in Heaven.

The concept of the Christian call may seem overly sentimental and banal; and of course, it is definitely something that is easier said than done. However, if we do strive to live this life, there are an innumerable amount of benefits that are both physically and mentally achieved. For example, Steven Adams says in his article, “Faith ‘good for your health’” expands on these potential physical benefits saying,

“Based on evidence from over 1,200 studies and 400 reviews, they say: ‘The overwhelming majority of scientific studies highlight the positive health benefits of faith, including protection from illness, coping with illness, and faster recovery from it.’

They highlighted one study which showed regular churchgoers had life expectancy up to 14 years longer than those who did not attend services…Health benefits include an increased sense of well-being, hope and optimism; lower rates of depression and suicide; less loneliness and less alcohol and drug abuse” (Adams 1).

It is plain to see that the benefits that come with faith are undeniably good and especially
pertinent to the stressful world that we live in today. As referenced earlier, Gelsey Kirkland, much like many other dancers, suffered an insufferable amount of stress within her career. But in modern times this stress is of an even greater amount for dancers due to the declining culture of art, the economy’s recession, and the lack of pension a professional dancer receives. Thus, it is even more important for this kind of influence to be implemented into the lives of dancers because of their incessantly stressful workload.

-THE DANCER’S BRAIN-

From a young age, dancers are engineered to think in an obsessive-compulsive way about themselves. They are trained to fix every fixable flaw and conceal those that cannot be fixed (Whittenburg 3). With every look in the mirror they must be constantly examining their bodies with hypercritical eyes; with every pirouette they must be concocting ways in which they could achieve just one more; with every bite that they eat they must be denying themselves the next one in order to lose one more pound; and with every conversation they hold they must somehow put themselves down. This is their way of life; this is how they achieve such heights of perfection.

In some ways, this is logical for them to be doing this because in the art of dance, their bodies are their instruments. Thus, by continually perfecting their bodies and the way that they execute movement, they are also perfecting the aesthetic components of the art of dance. Constantly putting themselves down will keep them motivated to keep improving and, as most people know, improving is inherently a good thing.

However, despite the supposed “logical argument” for this, one must beckon themselves to
look further than logic. One must recognize when logic merely wraps itself around an argument in a conceited and arrogant way in order to prove one’s point and when it is genuinely used to find the truth. If one merely uses it for personal gain then it is being misused.

Aristotle says, “The virtue of justice consists in moderation, as regulated by wisdom.” What this means is that it is crucial for all good things to be held in moderation, as noted previously by G.K. Chesterton. Thus, this self-criticism that is so heavily utilized in the dance world should be moderated and implemented with recognition of the greater good. By this, I mean that a dancer should desire to improve her instrument not for her own motives but because she desires to more beautifully express the art of dance for the glory of God. But oftentimes, in fact most times, dancers do not perfect their bodies and their technique in order to glorify the art and, ultimately, to glorify God. Rather, they do it for their own self-aggrandizement and vanity. This mentality of doing things for one’s own personal gain, although highly encouraged in modern society, is dangerous for two reasons.

The first is that any sort of art that is only done for the sake of the artist’s own ego is automatically belittled. Think about it; if you were to enter an art gallery and notice a beautiful painting that really spoke to you, would you not be completely disappointed if, in asking the artist what his impetus was, he told you that he painted it only because he wanted fame and glory for his own personal gain? It is clear that in witnessing a work of art, no matter what kind of art it is, one also witnesses a part of the artist; thus, an artist cannot help but implement a part of himself into his work. However, if the artist is a narcissist and is incapable of recognizing the good in the world outside of his own selfish microcosm, then what will he communicate to his spectators other than his own insatiable ego? This obligation to express what is good, noble, and
true in their work is one of the reasons that artists should first strive to be good people in order that their art can be truly beneficial to the lives (and more importantly, souls) of their spectators. Pope John Paul II nails it on the head in his “Letter to Artists”,

“The distinction between the moral and artistic aspects is fundamental, but no less important is the connection between them. Each conditions the other in a profound way. In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of what they are and of how they are what they are. And there are endless examples of this in human history. In shaping a masterpiece, the artist not only summons his work into being, but also in some way reveals his own personality by means of it. For him art offers both a new dimension and an exceptional mode of expression for his spiritual growth. Through his works, the artist speaks to others and communicates with them. The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced but also a story of men and women. Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution, which artists offer to the history of culture” (JPII, “Letter of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, To Artists).

The second reason for why it is dangerous to lead a life of selfishness is that an obsession with one’s vanity can lead one to being wildly depressed. If we are constantly working to enhance how we look, we will never be satisfied because, as most people know, there will always be someone better than you. But, more importantly, being obsessed with oneself in general can be incredibly toxic. C.S. Lewis says in his book, “Mere Christianity”,}
“Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in” (Lewis 131).

Additionally, if we are only striving to improve our external bodily features but we do not strive to improve the internal aspects of our personhood like the mind and a soul, then we are ultimately selling ourselves short. With the lack of recognition of all that we are, we shall never be satisfied with ourselves and, ultimately, we will grow to despise our own being. Due to the fact that we have a body, a soul, and a free will, we will always have an inherent sense that we are more than just our physical bodies. We will always know on some small level that, because we are more than our external appearance, we must love ourselves and be loved for more than what lies on the surface.

It has become exceedingly clear that there is something wrong with what is typically encouraged in and out of the dance world within the current generation. But the question is, what do we do about it? What should be done to repel this steady decline in our culture and, ultimately, the artistic nature of dance? We do not have the power to change the fact that people will abuse the gifts that God has given us. However, we do have the power to raise our children, and ultimately our future artists, to be good people who will be able to achieve true art. This is my main point: that in order to be a true artist, one must be a good person.
THE TRUE ARTIST-

The fact that one must be a good person in order to achieve true art is perfectly manifested in the words of Thomas Aquinas,

"In order that man may make good use of the art he has, he needs a good will, which is perfected by moral virtue; and for this reason the Philosopher says that there is a virtue of art; namely, a moral virtue, in so far as the good use of art requires a moral virtue. For it is evident that a craftsman is inclined by justice, which rectifies his will, to do his work faithfully" (Summa Theologiae, First Part of the Second Part, Question 57, Article 2, Reply to Objection 2).

This quote basically states that you can have artistic skill without being a good person, but, in order to use your skill in a good way, you need to be a good person. Obviously one can be a good dancer/artist (as in a good “technician” of dance/have developed the skill of dancing) without being a good person. But, in order to make the best use of that skill, you need to be a good person. The reason for this is that dance is essentially the expression of spiritual realities through bodily movements. Aristotle says in his Poetics that, "in dancing, imitation of character, emotional experiences, and action are achieved through rhythm accompanied by gestures"(Aristotle233). Now, if dance is an expression, then it always involves something that you are expressing (the meaning), and someone to whom you are expressing it (the audience); hence, the best and most beautiful use of dance happens when you are using it to express something truly good and worth expressing, and you are doing so in a way that truly benefits the people to whom you are expressing it.

Both of these require being at least somewhat of a good person for multiple reasons. The
first of these is that you can only have something good to express to the degree that you're a good person, since good people experience feeling good emotions and doing good things, while bad people experience feeling bad emotions and doing bad things. Even if a bad person tries to express a good thing, he will have difficulty doing so, since, to the degree that he is a bad person, he won't have any experience of what he is trying to express: e.g. loving someone for their own sake, rather than for selfish reasons.

Furthermore, the will of the artist is an even more obvious reason that one cannot benefit people with your art. It is clear that a bad person won't want to express good things—he will most likely only want to express bad things, even things that are harmful to the souls of his audience, so long as it serves his own selfish ends. Obviously, it goes without saying that dance should not express things that are evil and harmful—one should not, for example, create a dance that presents racism as something good, and thus encourages racism in its audience. Hence, one must be good in order to use your art in a way that helps others, rather than harming them.

Another reason you need to be a good person in order to benefit your audience is that you can only get your audience to understand what you are saying if you have an empathy for and understanding of how other people think—things that a bad person lacks, because he only cares about and thinks about himself. An example of this is the fact that many dancers don't realize that immodesty prevents audience members from truly appreciating their dancing for its own sake, rather than for the sake of lusting after the dancer's body.

Immodesty is another raving topic of this generation and is especially prevalent in the world of dance. There are many dancers (and dance teachers) who justify a lack of modesty on stage by claiming that the dancers cannot “execute their movement” as well if they are inhibited
by clothes that are too cumbersome. However, while this is true, the extent to which dancers
(and other sports) take this is clearly too far. Girls are consistently expected to wear what we call
“spandex” on stage that barely covers their rear. Some claim that this makes it so that their lines
are “nicer” and “longer”. However, my question for them is: how will that benefit one’s lines
insofar as benefiting the overall production and communication of the art if the only thought that
the audience member can think about is how scantily clad the dancer is?

This issue is even graver when that audience member happens to be a man because, as all
adults should be aware of, men are much more visually stimulated by immodesty than women
are. This is not a stereotype but, rather, a biological fact; men have an intense steroid pulsing
through their bodies called testosterone that causes them to be much more easily aroused than
women (Fisch 1). Thus, when they pay to enjoy a piece of choreography, they are incapable of
doing so because they are not only being distracted by the lack of modesty but they are also
probably being pushed into sinful thoughts about the dancers on the stage. So, all things
considered, these men are not only being prevented from being able to enjoy and understand the
artistry of the dance piece but they are also being pushed to jeopardize the state of their soul and,
ultimately, their eternity.

This habit of girls using their bodies to push someone else to commit one of the deadliest
sins called “Lust” is not a trivial problem. St. Augustine, a doctor of the Church, says,

"Whoever uses outward things in such a way as to exceed the bounds observed by the
good people among whom he dwells, either signifies something by so doing, or is guilty
of sin, inasmuch as he uses these things for sensual pleasure or ostentation" (De Doctr.
Christ. iii. 12).
As one can see, the frivolous use of our external gifts from God is a grave matter and becomes even more serious when it jeopardizes the state of grace of another person. Immodesty is one of the paramount problems of our generation because it shows two things: one, that the girl does not respect the boy whom she’s pushing to sin, and two, that she does not respect herself. Many people convince themselves that they are not at fault for the sin of the person who is lusting after them; but they are all too mistaken. It is our responsibility to respect our bodies as the gifts that were given to us by God and, moreover, to respect people surrounding us.

In addition to this desire to help prevent people from sinning, young artists should also consider Thomas Aquinas’ words on the importance of being good. They should strive to express and communicate to their audience all that is good in order that they can further them on their path to Heaven.

-CONCLUSION-

As one can see from the referenced examples of dancers who have gone down the wrong path, the pressures that reside both in and out of the dance world to give in to bad habits, and the morally jeopardizing habits of our generation, it is imperative that we raise our children to be good people. If we want the world of art to continue to be the saving grace within our culture where in one can enjoy art that is inherently substantial and good for their soul, we must teach our children how important it is to strive for goodness in everything they do and to help others to achieve that goodness as well. Without this change, the world of art will continue down a narcissistic path into a pit of egocentrism that it will never be able to escape from and, ultimately, the true beauty of dance will be lost forever.
Works Cited


Works Cited


