

Confessions of a Dance Mom

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 20 November 2012 09:52 - Last Updated Wednesday, 21 November 2012 09:03



Well, I've just had an adventure. This past weekend, while the rest of you were speculating on the future of the GOP, shaking your heads over the David Petraeus scandal, watching college football, and doing your best to avoid Christmas music before Thanksgiving, I was being initiated into a somewhat notorious sisterhood.

It's official. You may now call me Dance Mom.

It was not exactly a title I wanted. I'd seen the show. Only once, it's true – but once was enough. (Too much, really.) The *AV Club* describes a typical episode of "Dance Moms" like this: "Brash dance coach Abby Lee Miller yells at a bunch of teary-eyed preteen and teenage girls; the girls' parents snipe and gossip behind each other's backs; the dance routines border on the inappropriate; and the audience gets the sense that all of these people's priorities are out of whack."

Sounds charming, doesn't it? You can see why I was eager to sign on! Heh.

But here's what I learned over the weekend: Like so much of "reality television," this program bears only a superficial resemblance to reality. "Dance Moms" isn't really a show about Dance Moms. It just plays one on TV.

Let me back up. I have been a (lower case) dance mom for ages. My 11-year-old has been

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taking dance since she was four. It was just something she did for fun. One afternoon a week for 45 minutes. A sweet little hobby.

Until last year, when that sweet little hobby blossomed into a full-blown obsession.

Amelia is now a member of Company B, the competitive dance arm of Studio B Dance Centre, which means she's dancing about 10 hours a week. And that's just dance class! When she's not in the studio, she's leaping and lunging and pirouetting through our house. She breaks only for meals and homework, and even then it's under duress. I am not exaggerating. In the famed words of Don Henley, all she wants to do is dance.

I love dance, but I am not a dancer. I have never been a dancer. I confess it's been unsettling – even a little frightening – to feel my daughter moving away from me with such force, in a direction that's unfamiliar to me . . . on a path I've never trod, where I can neither lead nor advise. But when a child finds her passion – when something grabs her with such intensity, lighting a fire like you've never seen in her before – what choice does a parent have, really, but to fan the flames?

And so it was – with a certain amount of trepidation – that I found myself in Orlando last weekend, with my husband, our daughter, and a host of Dance Parents from around the southeast, at a weekend-long dance convention/competition called Tremaine. Apparently, Tremaine is a very big deal in competitive dance circles throughout the country – something I didn't know until recently (along with everything else about competitive dance).

The weekend was fantastic for the young dancers. By day, they took classes from nationally-acclaimed choreographers; by night, they performed before a panel of judges and a wildly enthusiastic audience. We parents were really just along for the ride. Other than paying the exorbitant fees, transporting our children to Orlando, schlepping costumes, make-up and hair supplies, and sitting in the nightly audience... nothing much was required of us. Jeff and I kept telling Amelia we planned to visit the Wizarding World of Harry Potter while she took classes Saturday, just to get her goat. (It did!) In reality, we took a short, leisurely drive to Winter Park and enjoyed a screening of "Cloud Atlas" in an almost deserted theatre. (Who can afford Harry Potter World when your kid's a competitive dancer?! Oy.)

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Company B suffered some drama the first night when one of our star dancers fell and injured her knee early in her solo dance. (Actually, she injured her knee then fell, to be specific.) Caroline is a senior in her final year of competition, a beautiful dancer who had been working on her solo for months. I'd seen her perform it a week earlier in rehearsal, a gorgeous lyrical piece set to "Killing Me Softly." I would guess those words perfectly describe the way she felt over the rest of the weekend, as she watched her fellow dancers shine on stage . . . from the audience, in a wheelchair. (It killed me softly just to watch her watching.) But it was lovely to see the way her company rallied around her – especially the younger dancers in Amelia's "teen" group, who so look up to the "seniors." They dedicated the whole competition to Caroline, and danced their hearts out in her name.

In fact, the weekend was full of such touching examples of friendship and solidarity. The credit for that, I think, goes to the force of nature behind Studio B – owner/teacher Erin Demers. Erin is one of those truly great teachers who loves her subject and loves her students even more. And because they know she loves them – because she is demanding, but never demeaning – they give her their very best. I really can't say enough about this young woman, her values, and the astonishing level of commitment she brings to her work. I hope to keep Amelia under her influence for a very, very long time.

So, maybe there were teachers like Abby Lee Miller at Tremeaine, brow-beating their dancers into frightened, tearful "perfection," but that's not been my experience. And what of the real life Dance Moms – those petty, back-stabbing, high-heeled horrors? Well, I didn't run into any of those, either. Oh, they may have been there, but I hung out with the moms of Company B. I'm happy to report that they are funny, generous, down-to-earth, not remotely prissy, and just as worried about paying for their children's "passion" as I am. (We reminded each other that it could be worse. Our kids could be into horseback riding.)

Here's a thought experiment: What would happen to a show like "Dance Moms" if it focused on mothers like these, and a teacher like Erin Demers, and a group of bright young competitors who care more about dancing than winning . . . and more about each other than dancing? A group of young competitors radiating joy and good will, whose only tears are shed over the fate of an injured teammate?

Would people stop watching? Are Americans so addicted to feeling superior to the dysfunctional that we're no longer entertained by the inspiring? Toddlers & Tiaras? Honey Boo Boo? Real Housewives of . . . Wherever? Is this really what the people want? According to the ratings, the answer is a resounding – if depressing – yes.

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Since that's the case, I think I'm glad I won't have much time for TV anymore. Company B just qualified for nationals, and I've got a lot on my plate.

We Dance Moms always do.

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