

CSUF Dance Alumni Series:

Jonathan Kim

By: Kassandra Vasquez

Jonathan Kim graduated from CSUF in 2017. After graduation, he continued to pursue a career in dance, participating in various projects and working with professional companies. Some of his favorite memories from his time in the dance department include the improvisation jams. During these moments he felt truly in the moment. He said improvisation was always home for him. Kim said his biggest takeaway from his time in the dance department is to “nurture the relationships you have with your peers, your professors, and the community around you.” The department fostered a community that encouraged him to show up for his peers and keep in contact.



Photo credit: Sharon Kain

In an interview with Kim, he answered some of the most pressing questions from current dance department students.

How long was the transition between graduating college and starting your professional career?

During my time at CSUF, I took many outside classes and worked with some pre-professional and professional companies. This was difficult to juggle, but I am glad I had both experiences to draw upon. I worked with Vicious Circle Dance Project, Kelly Alvarez and Artists, Nouveau Chamber Ballet; Lineage Dance Company, Embark Dance Theatre, and some other freelance choreographers. These were all project based and some had a modest performance honorarium, and others were unpaid.

In my last year, I was determined to see and learn more about the dance world. Debra Noble sent out an audition email for SJDanceCo, a company based in San Jose, California doing Limon repertory and contemporary works. They were holding an audition in San Francisco, and despite knowing the bare minimum, I went. I am thankful to have gotten the job before graduating, with a three month contract for their fall season and an optional spring festival continuation. I then danced with SALT Contemporary Dance and am currently a member of Repertory Dance

Theatre, a full time modern dance company in Salt Lake City, Utah. It took two years after graduating to join RDT.

How did you establish yourself in your new community?

Researching and visiting a place before moving always helps my peace of mind. I learn about the companies and dance organizations in the area, performance venues, if there is a university with a strong dance program, possible art organizations with grant opportunities, and cost of living in the area. I visited multiple cities for auditions and workshops to connect with the dance community and feel them out. I also kept in contact with alumni and asked for information.

My journey to Salt Lake City started with a friend I met at LAUNCH, NorthWest Dance Project's Summer Program, who connected me to both SALT Contemporary Dance and Repertory Dance Theatre. Without her, I would not have gotten either job. LAUNCH was a grueling process, and I remember auditioning to get into the program and immediately feeling inadequate after the ballet barre. I was still in school at that time, but made it through and got put onto the waiting list. The program itself, while intense, gave me some new vocabulary and pushed me to continue exploring contemporary movement. After, I joined SJDanceCo for their fall season, went to a choreography festival for SALT in November, then a winter workshop with SALT in January that happened around the time of RDT's winter workshop and audition. Both directors expressed continuing a relationship with me and got my contact information. SALT's director, upon completing the winter workshop, discussed an additional audition process. She wanted to see how I worked and what I was like in process with a choreographer and the other dancers. A choreographer was coming in the next two weeks right after the workshop, and while she stressed that we could see if another time worked, I decided to extend my stay. The process was highly pressurized, but I got hired as a guest performer for the end of SALT's spring season and danced with them for an additional year.

Linda Smith, RDT's Artistic Director, spoke with me about a potential guesting opportunity to perform Donald McKayle's "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder" in the fall. I spoke with SALT's director when I got hired and was luckily able to guest for RDT while dancing for SALT. This is not often possible, but there was not an exclusive contract for either company. I made sure to be transparent about scheduling and what was being asked of me to both companies. I learned the McKayle piece in the summer, while off contract with SALT, and then performed the piece in October. I continued dancing with SALT for their 2018-2019 season. I attended the 2019 RDT winter workshop, then got a call in March for a full time position with the company starting in June after my contract with SALT ended. I am now entering my second season with RDT.

Establishing myself in the community involved taking class, showing up to shows, and making connections with people. The business and networking side of dance can seem daunting, but learning to navigate those situations can help your career. I must also point out the inequality between a male dancer versus a female dancer while pursuing a career. It can often take more time for a female dancer to break through, and I must point that out to encourage a discussion on how to take that inequality away. The people that I see succeed are hardworking, positive, and have a strong sense of artistry and articulation in their movement. They often have skills outside of just performative qualities, such as being able to count/memorize well, administrative skills, choreographic and improvisation proficiencies, and acting abilities. Also, friends typically work together and create a community, which can provide opportunity. I have performed in many friends' works while in Salt Lake City. Being adaptable and contributing in multiple ways to a community helps establish yourself.

What are some tips you have about network building?

Be yourself. Don't grip an opportunity too tightly where you impede the creative and artistic flow. Place yourself in the most opportune or advantageous position possible, by doing your research and knowing your stuff. Be genuine in your interactions with everyone and not just the big names around; connect with people and not their image. Know your own self worth. Opportunities will come and go, but your own personal work ethic will push you forward. Remember where you came from, give thanks to the people who helped you grow and know the path forward is not straight and narrow. Trust your instincts about a person, train with people who inspire you to work and show up. Face uncertainty and difficulty with an open mind. Do not become a dancing robot. Open literal and figurative doors for other people because we are all in this field together. Hard times and hard bosses will come into your life, so you must figure out how much you can work with and find people who will create an environment of growth.

Other than dance, how did you prepare for a career in the profession?

A typical, idealized vision of dance is hard to obtain. First, I understood that technically and artistically, I was not ready for the companies I idolized. I had been dancing for only 8 years when I finished at CSUF, and while I had much to offer, I needed more refining. In order to be given the opportunity to keep working, I had to be flexible with where I was going to be based and had to keep a low overhead cost to be able to move around. Finding an entry level job that would allow flexibility with scheduling while making enough for life expenses was also important. One friend in Salt Lake City was able to connect me to a serving job at Olive Garden to make ends meet while I was doing part time company work with SALT. I saved up money for travel expenses and explored cities where I had connections, which enabled me to dive into the dance scene while keeping costs down. This also meant looking for cheap alternatives for

housing at times, which can be dangerous. I ran into a sketchy hostel situation while in Salt Lake City, but luckily a friend was able to give me a floor to sleep on. Be highly aware of your safety while traveling. Other people also had administrative, social marketing, costuming, lighting, etc. skills to offer, and I would recommend nurturing those aspects.

Do you have any advice on how to maintain physical health and stamina post graduation?

Always nurture both your mind and your body. A strong sense of self-worth that is capable of handling the challenges and stress will help you navigate the business side of dance, and prepare you for when things go quiet. I believe the physical and mental are intertwined, and you need to figure out what you need to stay motivated, whether it be a gym routine or an art class that gives you creative space to dance. Post graduation, I looked into yoga studios with introductory offers and cheap gyms to stay physically fit. The yoga classes I took focused on staying present in the moment, which helped me stay on top of my mental health. I took class as much as possible, because technique will always need constant nurturing. I designed a simple barre I could use for small spaces and continued to figure out how my body actually works. I just felt my psoas recently while dancing after extensively researching, so it is never too late to teach an old dog new tricks. I looked into an online training program geared towards dance, which helped me tremendously. It focused my gym time and helped me understand how to design a program for myself, especially in current 2020, COVID-19 situations where I had to workout from home. Look into Gyrotonic and Gyrokinesis. Do not take too long of a break after graduation unless you are burnt out. A small break is fine, but it takes a certain kind of hunger to survive in the dance world. Improvisational practices helped me stay connected physically and mentally, providing space for grounding my mind and strengthening my body. It served as an outlet and way for me to work through situations, and I found myself relying on this method to stay resilient. When casting or situations did not go my way, I was able to handle them with grace and focus on the work in front of me. Be aware of negative coping mechanisms. Find a sustainable source of cardio to keep up your stamina; your body will thank you. Get out into nature and re-energize yourself.

What is the most surprising aspect of the professional dance world?

Be prepared to advocate for yourself in a professional setting, regarding contract negotiations, networking, and maneuvering in the dance scene. Use your voice. While our profession involves the physical expression, the business side of dance largely awards the people who can both dance their socks off and hold a room. Also, even after you “make it,” you will still need a second/third/fourth job to survive in most cities.

How did you go about planning your living situation in a new location? How did you find a day job?

I lived with a family friend in their basement for about 9 months while I worked with SALT. I paid a small amount of rent, much smaller than if I got an apartment. I must also point out that my parents were able to help me with University, which allowed me to come out without any debt. The burden of loans can weigh down our decisions, and I must point out the privilege in my situation. The only advice I can offer in that situation is to not let choices you make weigh you down regarding what should be done; it only matters that you take an action that will help support your goals. Try not to unduly burden yourself with the weight of responsibility and stay focused on moving forward in whatever aspect you choose. By staying with a family friend, I could focus on SALT during the day and work my second job at Olive Garden at night. SALT had a schedule of Monday to Thursday from 8:30am to 1:00pm during that time, which enabled me to pay bills at night. It was not glamorous work and did stress out my back, so I had to be cautious while I was serving. After I got the full time position with Repertory Dance Theatre, I was able to quit Olive Garden and luckily made enough to support myself without a second job. I moved in with a roommate who also happened to be in RDT. Money was definitely tight, but I supplemented by teaching masterclasses and doing freelance dance work. As I go into my second year, I will add a teaching job at a nearby dance studio.

How did you discover your specific pathway in dance, or a related field?

I found opportunities that revealed themselves and took a leap of faith. Dance is almost never a certain endeavor, and it takes getting used to that idea of risk. As mentioned previously, I got my first job post graduation with SJDanceCo, from an email that Debra Noble sent out, after deciding to drive up to San Francisco for their audition. I learned about SALT Contemporary Dance and Repertory Dance Theatre through a friend I met at LAUNCH, right after graduation, and decided it was a connection worth investigating. I knew nothing about the Utah dance scene. While I am a shy and introverted person, something about pursuing dance pushed me to jump outside of my comfort zone and pursue my dreams and goals. There are a multitude of avenues that I explored that did not lead as far, but the experiences were still invaluable and prepared me for my current position.

What advice do you have for current dance majors?

There is always more to explore in class. Also, there is more to explore outside of class. Put in the work outside of class to prepare. Do not take your education lightly, it will serve you. Strengthen to find a deeper stretch instead of passively sitting in things. Soften to lengthen. Your arms come from a deeper place, and your legs start higher up than you want. Work efficiently and in alignment when possible. Velocity and speed need to be trained and fortified with

strength. Create a warm up routine before class that will prepare you for both technique and performance. Support your peers. They will help you on your journey in ways you cannot even imagine, and your presence will do the same for them. Being a positive energy will push you far. Understand that everyone's journey through dance will look completely different; there is no hierarchy of importance between each journey. You have the power of choice in each moment, so lean forward, lean in, and take it. Trust your teachers and trust your peers. Opportunity only comes to those who seek it. Strive for truth, not perfection. Have fun. People will remember someone who made them feel something.