

Ashley Baer '02



How to Pivot During a Pandemic

By Alice Roche Cody

When Ashley Baer '02 talks about her career projection, the famous quote from Louis Pasteur resonates: *Fortune favors the prepared mind*. For every professional advancement, Ashley found herself in exactly the right place to propel forward and she had the relevant training behind her. Starting in high school as a dance studio receptionist, her trajectory progressed to become company manager for one of the leading classical ballet companies in the world.

Ashley always had a passion for dance. At age 3, she began lessons at the Dorothy Del Guercio School of Dance in Chester. As a preschooler at Gill St. Bernard's, she started seamlessly blending her hobby with her schooling. By sophomore year, she balanced her homework with her parttime studio job, and her senior year, she taught dance classes.

"Gill helped me develop my own passions and enabled me to engage with my passion for dance," said Ashley. "At school, I developed other parts of myself. I learned how to be a leader and how to be organized. I didn't know what I wanted to do. Gill gave me the opportunity to figure out what I'm good at."

As a senior, she and her friends created their own unit that focused on television production. The group visited three popular daytime talk shows in New York City. This marked an *Ahh-Ha* moment – when Ashley discovered she's a backstage person.

"It was my first experience with how entertainment comes to be and seeing how people make that happen," she said. "Watching the camera operators and all the people behind-the-scenes doing work to make a live production happen. Walking backstage and seeing it all come together, it's what I do now."

Gill also gave her the nudge she needed to take center stage as senior class president. "I was a really shy kid, but because the Gill community is so loving, I felt driven to have a leadership position," she said. "I'm glad I had a push." For this role, she led assemblies and gathered the courage to give a graduation speech.

At Bucknell, Ashley majored in business management and anthropology, with a dance minor. Even though she spent many hours dancing in the studio, she knew she didn't want to perform professionally.

"My college friends were getting internships and jobs with consulting agencies, finance companies, and think tanks, and even though that's where my major was pushing me, it wasn't the direction I wanted to go," she said. "Graduation was approaching, and I didn't know what I wanted."

Then Ashley heard that the Bucknell Dance Company scheduled its first international performance in China that August. She had to go: "I love to travel, I'm graduating, why shouldn't I travel to China?" Already a dance department TA, she was the only graduating senior interested. *Why not?* She volunteered to organize trip logistics, including student visas, contracts, hotel bookings, and travel arrangements. "I had a blast," she said. "I was actually taking my first steps to become a company manager."

Meanwhile, at rehearsals that summer, a friend mentioned an internship at The John F.

Kennedy Center for Performing Arts. "A light bulb went off," she said. "I could work with a theater that presents dance, and it could be my job. I was so excited!" By September, she moved to DC and her four-month stint in the dance department turned into a permanent position dealing with the top ballet and modern dance companies in the world.

"I was meeting all the players in the dance community, doing logistics, such as securing visas, hotels, and tickets," she said. Then the executive director at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater invited her to breakfast. The meal turned into a job interview, and she moved to New York City to become the woman's executive assistant.

"It was a dream come true," she said. "It allowed me to be at center of a dance company and see how it worked. I got to see how all the pieces of the dance company fit together: the board, the educational programs, development and marketing."

Next came American Ballet Theatre. "Everything fell into place, I didn't even apply," she said. "An associate position opened, and they said, 'Are you interested?' I said, 'No, I have a job.' But this was my dream job."

Ashley felt comfortable moving back to the company side, thanks to her time at the Kennedy Center. "I get to travel and see great dancers grow and develop," she said. "Dancers who were apprentices when they started are now soloists. I feel like I have 90 talented and amazing children. It puts me closest to the stage without having to perform."

For eight years, Ashley toured the world with the ballet company, visiting theaters in Japan, Abu Dhabi, Australia, Europe, Singapore and Hong Kong. "I help our dancers get from point A to point B as easily as possible," she said. "All logistics so they don't have to think about it."

Then on March 13, everything stopped. Domestic and international tours were cancelled due to the pandemic, and Ashley started working from home. "If our dancers can't perform or travel, I can't do my job," she said. "I had self-identification issues. I didn't know my place in company and how I fit in anymore. I had to pivot."

American Ballet Theatre (ABT) had to pivot as well. "The performing arts world has been devastated by the pandemic," said Ashley. "With theaters shut down, the main revenue source for performing companies, ticket sales, has been eliminated." Most, including ABT, were forced to move digitally. For one such project, Ashley connected with Mount Sinai Kravis Children's Hospital to coordinate digital orchestra performances broadcast on the hospital's inhouse TV. The shows provide comfort to patients, parents and healthcare workers.

With a recent promotion to company manager, Ashley traveled to Lake George with a group of dancers who isolated together so they can dance without masks. The filmed performances will be featured at the fall online gala.

"I'm thrilled to get back on the road to do my job," said Ashley. "We're getting creative finding ways to bring art to people in unique ways. We're a national ballet company, and our mission is to bring ballet to the country and the world, even within the pandemic restrictions."

For now, 2021 plans can't be pinned down. "We're hoping to move forward with Plan A for our domestic tour starting in April, but we also have a plan B, C, D and E as backups," she said.

When the world opens up again, Ashley is poised to move forward.

