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## The Artist as Leader: Susan Jaffe

**Interview conducted by Rob Kramer and Corey Madden**

**Edited by Betsi Robinson**

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*Susan Jaffe represents the artist who has succeeded at the highest level in her field. Oftentimes being the greatest “performer,” be it a dancer, musician or athlete, does not necessarily translate to being a great leader. Not all award-winning actors make good directors. Not all hall-of-fame athletes make good coaches. And in the workplace, it is common to see someone promoted who was really good at their job, such as a great engineer, struggle as a manager of engineers. Moving into a formal leadership role requires a different skill set. Marshall Goldsmith, author and executive coach, summed up this issue well in the title of his book: “What Got You Here Won’t Get You There.”*

*In the case of Susan Jaffe, we see an artist who uses the self-awareness she developed as a dancer to great advantage in her work as a leader.*

**RK:** How does your arts background influence how you work as a leader?

**SJ:** To be a dancer you have to be extremely disciplined. You have to look at yourself and scrutinize every aspect of your technique, of your performance, of your artistry. You have to constantly search for a wider perspective and deepen your art. And you have to be compassionate toward yourself. As an artist, of course you have to be hard on yourself. But if you're too hard on yourself, it blocks your progress, you can't move forward. And part of being an artist is also accepting your humanity and the humanity of others, right?

So all of that actually translates into the way I lead. I want the people around me to be excellent, and if they're not necessarily living up to that kind of constant self-scrutiny and trying to improve, I will nudge them along and get them to really take a look at themselves. Not to say to yourself, 'I'm bad or I'm wrong,' but that, 'I can get better here,' to still have compassion for oneself, because none of us is perfect. We're not perfect beings. And so I try to lead with compassion, yet have a strong, firm hand. You really have to be at the top of your game because, in this case, as the Dean of this School of Dance, our students are deserving of that.

**RK:** Sounds like a fine line between high demand and precision versus vulnerability? Is that accurate?

**SJ:** Yes. There have been quite a few instances where I understood that we could improve as a group, as well as individually. And trying to bring that idea up without making people feel wrong, or bad, or dishonored, I think that it takes a certain kind of skill to do that.... You know, when I was younger I was a perfectionist, and I laugh now because I say I'm a reformed perfectionist. Which really means that yes, I do strive for excellence, but perfection is impossible as it actually squeezes you down. It strangles the life out of you. We need room to be human within our excellence. That was something I learned as an artist for myself, so it translates out to others now.

**CM:** Can you remember a particular moment when you were dancing — a moment when you realized that a flaw in your work was actually what made it great? The way the Japanese keep a flaw sometimes in their pottery?

**SJ:** One day this very famous ballerina from Paris came to be a guest artist at American Ballet Theatre, and the whole company was on stage for a tech rehearsal. She was dancing one of the most difficult variations in the classical cannon, and she just kept falling out of her turns. And everybody's staring at her, and she'd try it again, and again. Finally, she shrugged, walked over to the front of the stage and plopped down in a chair. She crossed her arms and said, 'Eh, *tomorrow*.'

I remember that I was just aghast, because I used to self-flagellate and bear down on myself — always ‘you’re wrong, you’re wrong, you’re not doing it well enough.’ I thought about that moment deeply, because the next day she was great! And I thought, ‘Gee, I’m just going to try that for a little while. I’m gonna try to be less hard on myself for not being perfect.’ And I tell you, I improved so quickly, because compassion gives you room to be imperfect, and in fact all that imperfection is what gives us our humanity. And it’s that yearning to be better, or to widen, or to deepen, and that striving that makes us beautiful. Perfection actually brings a hardness, and a sharpness and an ugliness to our beings. And so after that moment it was just absolutely like my cells heard me, and everything started improving so quickly.

**RK:** This is what I love about the creative process in artists. In the language of the leadership world, that is called “authentic leadership,” which is to be one’s genuine self, and allow our flaws and humanity to be part of the equation as a leader. For the artist, that’s the natural process, and it translates then to how one leads. For leaders who don’t come from the arts, they are kind of coming at it through the back door unless they have a natural affinity — or, in leadership, they call it “emotional intelligence” — which for some people is *very, very, very* difficult. Because they haven’t gone through some sort of growth process where they’ve challenged themselves, and opened themselves, and forgiven themselves, and navigated on that edge. It sounds like you really took a hard look at yourself and you grew as an artist.

**SJ:** I believe that an artist should strive to be the purest form and reflection of humanity. So we’re like the conduit, the dark and the light, whatever we’re interpreting needs to be from the purest space and, therefore, authentic. But in order to be pure, you have to know yourself and try as hard as you can to understand humanity. As you watch yourself, you’re also watching what we all struggle through from the beginning of time. That way you can really embrace who we are as humankind, and then reflect that back to your audience through the story, and your characterization, and through what you’re going through as a character.

**CM:** That’s very powerful. Now that you’re choreographing, can you talk a little more about how the creative process translates in relationship to leadership — like how it shows up in rehearsal?

**SJ:** As a creative person and as a choreographer walking into a studio, you have to have some ideas and some sort of structure, even if you don’t know what will happen next, and you have to know your music. But you also need to be open and flexible, like the bamboo in the wind — if you’re too rigid the wind will break you. So you have to be flexible, be able to keep yourself available to say, ‘Oh, that was a mistake, but I really like that.’

And also waiting, waiting, waiting for the creativity to come. You cannot look at a blade of grass and scream at it to grow. You have to wait for growth and creation to come. And that can be really frustrating sometimes, but you can’t be upset, of course, you have to get yourself into that space where you’re just that vessel waiting. Sometimes I’m in the studio for five days, and I can’t think of one new thing, and that’s when I have to have a sense of humor. I have to say to myself, ‘Well, I’m just going to work on the things I have created until something new comes.’ And that is scary. It is scary because you don’t know when, or if, that new idea is going to come.

The same thing translates into my current job. So much of being a Dean is being a problem-solver. It's not necessarily your first fix that's going to be the right thing. So again, it's the ability to be flexible, to be open and to wait until the right solution comes. Although I have to say that, as an administrator, ideas come a little more quickly than they do in the studio, when you really have a blank canvas. And I have a bottom line on certain things, which is, of course, that we all have to be nice to each other. Those kind of things are non-negotiables.

**CM:** How much of your job as an administrator do you think of as being leadership versus administration? Are there differences?

**SJ:** There are differences! So leadership is: I would like the landscape to change, I would like to bring in this new program, I would like to bring in this guest, how is that going to happen? We need to go in a different direction, how is that going to happen?

**RK:** So vision, goals?

**SJ:** Vision and goals. Sometimes, for me, administration is when I'm doing evaluations on my faculty for rank promotion or reappointment. Sitting there with those documents, and reading all the information the faculty bring to me, helps me formulate what's working and what's not working. If I had somebody else doing that for me, I would be rubber-stamping basically. But I'm problem-solving as I'm working through these documents.

I had a situation last year where I did not rehire somebody right away. I said, 'You need to do these five or ten steps, and please don't look at this as something to be upset about. Think of it as an opportunity, I'm giving you an opportunity. But I can't hire you right now.' This person walked away, did the work and came back, and it was incredible how even the students' evaluations of this faculty member vastly improved. So those things I think are very important as a Dean, as a leader.

**RK:** We talk about leaders as athletes, and taking care of ourselves physically, emotionally and spiritually. It's like training for a marathon.

**SJ:** It is a marathon! For me, it is so important to exercise. If I don't exercise I'm foggy, I don't feel energetic, I don't feel well. I feel just kind of like a bag of bones sitting in a chair. And I don't think as clearly. It is so important. And to eat well, to take care of myself. I think that it makes a big difference.

**CM:** You're in the room, you have to be 'on' sometimes 12-14 hours a day. So you have to be in a good place, you have to have the energy for it.

**RK:** There has to be recovery time.

**SJ:** When I was an artist, I meditated for 20 years, every single day for at least half an hour, but oftentimes longer. Now finally, after a hiatus of a few years, I started that again. Not half an hour, more like 15 minutes, but just sitting and clearing has made a big difference. I feel a lot better. Because you can wake up with all this mental trash and, again, you've got to get rid of it

in order to be a clear vessel. Because you can't problem solve if you've got too much clutter inside.

**CM:** Can you describe the transition that you went through going from being an artist to being a leader? Things you learned, things you had to overcome, things you discovered. What was that experience like for you transitioning?

**SJ:** It was very hard to transition from being an athlete who was basically exercising from 10 in the morning to oftentimes 11 at night, where you'd have a couple of breaks during the day to eat, regroup, get a massage, whatever. But you were basically physical all day long. Moving into anything else, I really found it was like a descent from goddess status to regular human (LOL), which was very hard on my body. It hurt my body. It took about a year and a half to stop aching as a result of sitting all day. And also just having my body feel different than it had been feeling for basically my whole life was really tough. My first job was working with Lewis Ranieri, whose story was told in the bestselling book *Liar's Poker*. (During Ranieri's tenure at Salomon Brothers, the former bond trader played a pioneering role in the creation of mortgage-backed securities.) He was then the Chairman of the Board of American Ballet Theatre and he brought me on as Advisor to the Chairman and President of the Board. And I sat with him, spoke with him and followed him around in meetings. I learned an enormous amount just by watching how he navigated the world.

**RK:** What are the things that stick out to you, still to this day, that you learned watching him?

**SJ:** He was fun to be around, very jovial, but he was really hard core. And as far as when the line was drawn, you were not going to go past that line. He had no problem making tough decisions. I believe I was influenced by that — I really don't have a problem making a tough decision if it is for the good of the whole. And only if it is for the good of the whole. So I really appreciated that in him. But also he was likable, and he was a real artist at heart. He loved reading, he loved poetry, he loved art. In fact, my first conversation with him was about the Mayan culture, because I had collected quite a few artifacts and things. And he had his own archeological company that went out and dug through the graves and the land to find Mayan artifacts.

**RK:** So he had a curiosity about him as well?

**SJ:** Oh yeah! I liked that about him, because he was well-rounded. In fact, I was a lecturer for PricewaterhouseCoopers and Lehman Brothers, and I taught a class on excellence. They wanted me to talk particularly to the VPs at Lehman Brothers, who were the young whipper-snappers, who were on the floors, who cared more about money than about people. And the leader really wanted them to understand that their organizations were about people, not money. And so my course was really about how you become excellent through art, and how it translates to their work.

**RK:** You're hitting on two of the primary things I talk about. In my experience, effective leaders do two things foundationally really well that take care of 75 to 80 percent of a leader's success. The mentor you described sounds like he did those two things, which are to clarify expectations — you said he was really tough and direct about what he wanted — and then to build

relationships, build rapport. And if those two things are done in a balanced way, I see leaders have great success. The ones I see struggle more tend to have a breakdown on one side or the other.

**SJ:** Because, as a leader, you really have to understand that you are there to serve.

**RK:** Often forgotten.

**SJ:** Yeah, so if I nourish my faculty, and lead my faculty, they will then nourish and lead the students. And the same thing with the students. If I nourish and lead the students, I'm serving them in a better way. That's why one of the things that I really appreciate is hearing student feedback — because they're customers! This isn't a top-down school. Now, of course, at some level you have to say, 'These are the rules, and we have to abide by these rules, but I want to hear from you what is working, what's not working. And I want to serve you, because you are why we're all here.'

**CM:** So getting their feedback, their input, and using that as a way to create some direction?

**SJ:** At one point, some of the students said, 'We want to meet with you.' It was all the contemporary divisions of all four college levels. They wanted to meet with me because they were scared of me. I said, 'I'm not the man behind the curtain, like the Wizard of Oz. You have to look at me as Susan Jaffe, Dean of Dance, and then the subtitle is: *Here to serve you*. That's my job! That's why I'm here!' So I'm trying to get them to really understand they can come to me if they are in need.

**CM:** What are the sacrifices that you've made in that shift from artist to leader? Talk a little more about some things that you held most dear as an athlete artist, and the things that you had to shed as a Dean?

**SJ:** Well I love reading. I *loved* reading. Pleasure reading. Anything I read now is about my job. I'm still mourning that, because that nourished me on such a deep level. I had to give that up due to time constraints. I also went from being an artist, which is very self-centered, and self-focused, to I'm not here for myself actually, I'm here for the institution, I'm here for the faculty, I'm here for the students. It was surprisingly a natural thing for me, but I oftentimes talk to dancers my age or even older and they will ask, 'Don't you miss the stage?' And I say, 'No! I don't!' I don't miss the stage, and I don't miss actually having to always focus on myself. That, for me, was actually quite an easy transition. It was a relief.

**CM:** You had done that for 30 years, right? After I was in theatre for 35 years, I learned I did not want to be in the dark anymore. I wanted to do some other things! And I felt so freed by that idea.

**RK:** Working in the theatre, I got tired of being in an egocentric occupation, and I was so ready to walk away from that.

**SJ:** I don't want to say that artists are necessarily egotists, but you have to focus on yourself. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to be that artist. You have to have a healthy sense of ego, you have to want to be out in front of others, you have to embody that extreme magnetism. I remember that feeling of magnetism — I would walk into a room and people would want to come to me. And after I retired from dancing it started to dim. Over a period of years, that sort of electric presence was becoming dimmer and dimmer, and it became quiet. I wouldn't say most people think I'm a quiet type, but in relation to what I was like, I was initially a little uncomfortable. And then it became this beautiful sort of comfortable, relaxed quiet. You don't have to be the center of attention all the time, and it feels good.

**CM:** Do you think young dancers can understand that?

**SJ:** No, I think initially you have to be egocentric to be an artist.

**RK:** So it's almost like the phoenix, you kind of burn that bright light and then it kind of, as you said, quiets down and you reemerge.

**SJ:** Well, that's funny you mention the phoenix because that was my archetype my entire career. I let myself burn up several times. Like completely throw out everything I know, and start afresh. It happened physically, it happened emotionally, it happened spiritually. It was the only way I knew how to break through to the next level, to just let it all burn up. Yeah, I'm still the phoenix; it's a much quieter phoenix now.

**RK:** How does the current landscape inhibit artist leaders, do you think?

**SJ:** I remember when I was doing lectures for Lehman Brothers, and the VPs would slouch in their chairs and look at me like — 'What's a little ballerina gonna tell me about my job?' It's funny because I think until I start talking, people don't necessarily take me as seriously as they would if I was a scholar or a doctor or a lawyer. ... I don't know whether it's just my association with ballet that makes people sort of back off? Maybe if I said I was a dramaturg, they would want to know more about me. But often, particularly men, I'm sorry to say, think that ballet is just a bunch of flitting around in tights. They think of it as sort of fluff, so they say things like 'Well, I go to the symphony. Or I go to the opera.' You know, if they really, really understood what it was like to be a dancer, I think it would be different.

**CM:** What your dance conveys — the ideas, the beauty, the rigor — and all those things are so inspiring to people who love ballet. What do you think that they are missing? What do they *not* know?

**SJ:** I think a lot of it is cultural — I mean Fantasia, or Miss Piggy when she's wearing her little tutu, or Angelina Ballerina. Or those cartoon characters when they play the Sugar Plum Fairy variation, you see a little pig on her tippy toes with her hands above her head — it's funny. It's seen as something sort of low class and silly. And they don't understand the depths of ballet, which is really storytelling on a deep level, musicianship, moving people. We've been dancing since the beginning of time. And when people are really in love with ballet, it moves them beyond measure. They can't stop crying, or they feel moved on such a deep level. Dance, too, is

nonverbal. So as a dancer you really have to convey in a very articulate way what you are trying to convey. You have to work very hard because you're not using your voice, you are using your body. You need to convey exactly what you want your audience to understand when they walk away from, let's say, "Swan Lake." It takes an enormous amount of intelligence and tremendous research to be a true artist. This isn't like, 'Oh, I'm going to get up on my pointe shoes and flit about.'

**RK:** If you were giving advice to young artists, how would you advise them around career management and transitioning from life as an artist to whatever they evolve into next?

**SJ:** Dancers are very, very hard on themselves, and very vulnerable. Because if somebody doesn't like your dancing, they don't like you! It's your body, it's your soul, it's your being. It's not an object that you've painted, it's actually you— physically. There are several things that I like to tell students, and also dancers. First of all, in order to be a dancer you have to be extremely intelligent, so don't think of yourself as stupid because you're not an academic scholar. You're actually very smart. In order to be able to take in all that information, assess it and implement it into your physicality, you are multitasking on many levels. You are controlling your balance. You are making these very difficult steps work. You are coordinating. You are listening to music. You are interpreting. You are doing so many things, and it takes a very intelligent person to be able to do that.

**RK:** You're taking in all these different things at once, making decisions in the moment.

**SJ:** I also like to say to students, and even professionals, continue to educate yourself. Because the more you have in your toolbox, the more you have to give to your audience. And then you're also going to use that after you retire from dancing.

And I tell them, speak your mind. You actually know what you're talking about, so just speak up because people aren't going to take you seriously otherwise! Even here, when I teach class and take roll, I'll say, 'Sally Jane Jones!' And she whispers, 'Here.' And I will say, 'No, I want to hear you say: Here!' You actually belong in the room, so be in the room! And take responsibility for that. And the other thing that I tell them is don't blindly follow others. Don't look in the mirror to follow others. Let's say I'll give a combination and then the person in the front of the room makes a mistake, and then 10 of them make the same mistake. It is extremely dangerous in the world to follow without thinking. You are now showing me that you are following without thinking. Be a thinker. Lead your own self and you won't fall into that dangerous trap of being a non-thinking follower. We've seen it over and over throughout history — of terrible acts against the human race, of people following without thinking. So don't follow.

**CM:** Beautiful advice. Do you get the sense they can hear it at that young age?

**SJ:** I think they do hear it. But I think it has to be said over and over again. I am writing a book, so I definitely will make sure that that's in there.

**CM:** What advice would you have liked to receive when you were transitioning into an artist leader? Was there anything different in your own process that would have been nice to hear when you were young?

**SJ:** Well, I think I discovered that I actually did know how to handle things after I left performing life. I was surprised, actually shocked, that I did. When I first retired I thought — oh my gosh, yesterday I was a master and today I'm a novice. It was scary. It felt like I was climbing a huge mountain, and I thought I would never reach the summit. But you have all of these skills that you have no idea are going to be so helpful. You have more than enough skills and intelligence to do anything you want. The problem is, right now you don't know that, but you will eventually. Just take every day one step at a time, you'll start to discover — oh, I know how to do this! I say that to young people: All the stuff you're learning now, whether or not you become a dancer, is going to take you farther than you know.

I remember working with Duke Corporate Education to create courses on excellence, and my first group was the leaders of PricewaterhouseCoopers. They flew me to Florida, and the Duke person said to me, 'So in the debriefing, we'll sit there taking notes and they'll give their feedback about your class. I just want you to know this is a very tough group, and they killed the architect yesterday.' This is literally five minutes before my presentation, but no pressure! Do you know what that comment did to me? I said to myself, with hands on hips, 'I've stood on one toe many times while holding my balance in front of 4,000 people, what's a bunch of corporates gonna do to me?'

So I stood in front of them, crossed my arms, scanned every person in the room and said, 'You all think that dancing is just a bunch of flitting about, don't you? Well, I'm going to tell you a thing or two about dancing.' And I made them get up, and taught them how to hold in their stomachs and do a *tendu* while trying to hold their turnout with their real muscles. I told them, 'This is how you have to walk around all day; this is the starting point.' And then I asked them to be seated while I took them through the trajectory of my career.

So after my lecture, I sat down, and the first person from PricewaterhouseCoopers raised her hand. The Duke person said, 'Yes?' She said, 'Wow, I learned more about accounting in this one hour than I have over the course of the time I've been at Pricewaterhouse.' So I went, 'Hmmp!'

Epilogue: What lessons can be derived from Susan's experience?

- **Be self-reflective.** Knowing who you are and what you value, as well as your strengths and weaknesses, are essentially guideposts for leader success.
- **Understand the value of relationships, and that we are all human.** Compassion and empathy are cornerstones of integrity and trust.
- **Have the courage to make tough decisions.** Being a leader requires thoughtfulness, precise judgment and the flexibility to modify on the fly. Assess the situation, make a choice, and then go with it. Feedback can then inform the next decision. You cannot make breakthroughs without exploring what is negotiable and non-negotiable and then taking chances.
- **Take care of yourself.** Treat yourself like an athlete: eat well, get rest, and find activities that are replenishing and restorative. Being a leader can be wearisome, and resilience is paramount for long-term success.



## Susan Jaffe

DEAN, UNCSA SCHOOL OF DANCE

Declared by The New York Times as “America’s Quintessential American Ballerina,” Susan Jaffe was a principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre from 1980-2002 and enjoyed a career as an international guest artist with many ballet companies around the world. In 2003, Jaffe co-founded and co-directed the Princeton Dance & Theatre Studio and DanceVision Youth Ensemble in Princeton, New Jersey. She subsequently served as a Ballet Master for American Ballet Theatre from 2010-2012, then was appointed Dean of the School of Dance at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Jaffe also has choreographed for dance companies and universities across the United States. She currently is working on a newly envisioned, full-length production of “The Red Shoes,” using the mediums of both dance and film, for UNCSA’s 2018 Spring Dance performances.

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## Rob Kramer

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Rob Kramer holds a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Delaware and an M.F.A. in Dramatic Art from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the Founder and Principal of Kramer Leadership, LLC; provider of executive coaching and leadership development consulting. He is also a Founding Director of the Center for Leadership & Organizational Excellence at N.C. A&T State University and has served as Director of Training & Development, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as well as the founder and executive director of two professional theatre companies. He is the author of "Stealth Coaching: Everyday Conversations for Extraordinary Results."

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## Corey Madden

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Corey Madden is a graduate of the University of North Carolina School of Drama, holds a B.A. in Drama from UNC Chapel Hill, a masters in Professional Writing from the University of Southern California and a Professional Certificate in Screenwriting with Highest Honors from USC Film. In addition to her work as the Executive Director of the Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts, she is the Founding Artistic Director of L'Atelier Arts; was Director of Artist Programs for the Pasadena Arts Council; has worked as the Associate Artistic Director for the Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles; worked as Artistic Staff for the Actors Theatre of Louisville and is the creator and producer of more than 300 site specific, interdisciplinary and new works.

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