

From Dreaming to Living

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Recommended Citation

Horowitz, Emily (2018) "From Dreaming to Living," *The Mall*: Vol. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol2/iss1/9>

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From Dreaming to Living

Emily Horowitz

Sometimes I forget to breathe. My body finds itself tangled, hopelessly lost in the movement. My mind turns silent as something much deeper wins the battle for control. The world fades to a muddled background. I am free. Dance is my freedom. How can I explain a feeling? How can I possibly put into words this completely enigmatic experience, this pure contradiction? Dancing is both escaping life and fully embodying it. To dance is to dream.

I dream with my blistered feet, with my strained arms, my sore legs, my escaping breath. The studio is home to my dream. It is a whole other realm— detached from normal life. I feel the spring of the Marley-covered floor through my shoes as I enter the studio. I feel the cold air strike my skin as I remove my warm ups, air that I know will soon morph into a familiar mugginess and envelop me as the temperature rises and beads of sweat collect and trickle down my skin. Moisture accumulates on the barres and fogs the windows, protecting my dream from the interruptions of outside.

This is where all boundaries and impossibilities disappear, where my world simultaneously widens and narrows. It expands as rules vanish, shrinks as everything else loses significance.

My breath rises and lowers in slow motion. I can feel my lungs inflate with oxygen and my ribcage knit together as it contracts, the air escaping me and warming the room around me. This initiates movement that ripples through my body. Heat accompanies the movement and each muscle reacts to its adjacent partners, rearranging my bones almost involuntarily. It has begun—I have slipped in.

I start slowly as my body releases all the reminders of yesterday's work. The satisfying pop of my hips on the first plié. The gentle cracking that crawls up my spine, vertebra by vertebra, as I cambré back. The pull of my Achilles and the stretch across my instep. It's funny how soreness, a form of pain, has become such a comfort. I love the sensation of reawakening my tired body.

Each step is a familiar friend—has grown up with me, been by my side, been a part of me, since age four. Accumulated and strung together, they form a language— a language more innate than anything my mouth has ever spoken. Words are too limiting. No dictionary exists with sufficient pages to encompass the boundless range of expression I have discovered over the past fourteen years through dance.

But I am not the only one who has found this incredible freedom. My artform automatically connects me with other individuals, spanning the globe, who also consider dance to be their first language. Our dreams intertwine.

Several years ago, a girl who had just moved to North Carolina from Japan started taking

classes at my dance studio.. Neither one of us ever shared a word that the other could comprehend, but we still became friends. I could tell that she was funny, dedicated, kind, and so wonderfully fearless. We communicated through a common bond, a shared jargon, like an inside joke between old friends.

Dance opened my eyes to this world of nonverbal communication, and subsequently introduced me to hundreds of fellow dreamers. In every class I am both a unique individual and a small portion of one body. As the preparation begins for the first combination at barre, I tune in to the breath of the class— the breath of my peers, my teacher, the walls, and the floor. The whole room inhales.

The years I have devoted to this art have taught me to recognize the subtle hints that precede a new motion. Through my peripheral vision, I spot a gentle rise in the chest and an extra degree or two in the tilt of the head. I know exactly what that means. It is as clear to me as the words, “Ready, and...,” but why waste the breath to speak when there is dancing to be done? We don’t need words when we share this dialect of our common dream.

Ballet is my meditation. It silences my thoughts. It’s my constant in this crazy and ever-changing world. I get to push aside all of the stress and anxiety of life. I no longer worry about the mistakes I made today or the stress tomorrow will bring. I get to forget the world. I can take a break from reality and find refuge in movement. I become the best version of myself when I dance.

If the studio is where I dream, the stage is where I live.

Everything has been building up to this. I have spent months rehearsing the pieces while the shows still seem so far away. Then, all of a sudden the day has snuck up on me, and somehow it is here. When I wake up, I don't feel nervous or excited—I just feel numb. The performance day routine is ingrained in my body. I am barely aware of the tasks I am completing.

It doesn't feel like performance day, but it smells like it. The aroma is this mix of cheap stage makeup, heavy-duty hairspray, and worn pointe shoes. I slick my hair back into the picturesque "ballet bun," secured against my scalp with countless bobby pins. I cake foundation on my face and layer a myriad of shades of eyeshadow. I draw and redraw and reredraw the wings of my eyeliner, and I glue on fake eyelashes that feel more like butterflies fluttering on my eyelids. I head to the stage for a warm-up class. The air is dry. The metal barres are cold. The class moves by so quickly, and it feels more like I am watching it happen than actually participating. Class ends, and I walk back to the dressing room and slide my feet into perfectly worn-in pointe shoes. I carefully selected this exact pair nearly a month ago and haven't worn them since. I say a little prayer that they are still "perfect."

I cross my ribbons and momentarily remember a younger version of myself dreaming of the day I would get to tie up my pointe shoes. I hear the fifteen minute call over the intercom. Still no nerves. I sew the pointe shoe ribbons to my tights, remembering the threats of my

director warning against loose ribbons on stage. I pin in my headpiece, which somehow has this magical power of transforming me into my character. I take one last deep breath before my friend snaps up my bodice, restricting the amount of air I can inhale until after the show. I hear the five minute call. Still no nerves. I go back stage. There is a box filled with large rocks of rosin, which I apply to my pointe shoe satin in the hope that it will help prevent me from slipping. I step on the rocks and they crunch into a fine powder under the platform of my shoe. I hear the two minute call. The whole company has gathered on stage. We link pinkies in a circle and say “merde” to one another. This is ballet’s version of “break a leg.” I love this tradition. I feel unified and empowered and excited, but still no fear. Places. The call is places. I go to my wing. The overture begins.

All at once, my body fills with nerves. I feel sick. The boom lights brighten. They are blinding. My stomach flips. What if I fall? What if I blank out? There is no more time for “what ifs.” I watch as the backstage crew pulls the ropes. I clench my eyes shut and reopen them. The curtain is rising. I shake my hands and feet one at a time. This is it. There is no way out; I have to dance.

I step on stage and it’s just me. There is no audience. There is no fear. I get to live. But this is not ordinary living. It is relishing in the biggest adrenaline rush imaginable and savoring every last second of it. It is leaving everything I have and everything I am sprawled across the ground. When I finish a performance, I am both the wholest form of myself and broken pieces on

the floor. A good performance is exceptionally satisfying, yet completely draining.

I am addicted to dance. I cling to the impossible goal of perfection, and I crave the feeling of performing. I cannot imagine my life without it. It is how I get through my day. It is what I look forward to. Dance is my home. No matter where I am, dance always feels familiar. It grounds me. It is where I find myself and where I lose myself.

I step into the wing and it is over. While I was on stage, time moved in slow motion. Every second felt like minutes, and now that it is done, it feels like it flew by in a blink. I am left with an emptiness in my stomach. I am not sure if it is because I am drained from performing or because the rush left me craving more.

As life moves on past performance day, it becomes clear that the void is not exhaustion—it is desire. It is the need to return to the stage, to experience the rush, the adrenaline, the freedom.

So I spend nearly every day at the studio, dedicating hundreds of hours to meditating and preparing so that I might have the privilege to experience that feeling again, even if only briefly. I step onto the sprung Marley and place my hand on the wooden barre. I forget to breathe, I get lost in the movement—I welcome the freedom of dance as my body begins to move and my mind slips into a new dream.