
NON-FICTION PERSONAL ESSAY

Dancing in the Darkness

When a twenty-two year old Boston Ballet dancer died this past June of heart failure, the nation cried out in shock. The dance world remained silent. The nation linked her death to anorexia nervosa, and they connected her choice to starve her body to the words of her ballet director who said, "she was a little chubby...and the artistic staff asked her to lose five pounds."* The dance world mourned over the loss of Heidi Guenther, but shrugged its shoulders at the accusations that Anna-Marie Holmes was out-of-line to tell an already thin girl to lose weight. In our democracy, people have a hard time understanding that a woman in authority could use her power in this manner and that a girl would actually follow these demands. However, dancers know that the society within the studio does not practice the freedom of the one outside the window. They brush off accusations against Anna-Marie Holmes because they realize "That's just the way things are. If you don't like it, you leave." An article in Dance Magazine notes that the "controversy" of Heidi Guenther's death "cast a shadow over...the ballet world."** It failed to admit that the dance world always has and always will function in shadows. The real shadow fell upon the minds of the public when Heidi revealed to them that the brilliant light the dance world sheds in their eyes is all an illusion.

Dancers do not live by the standards of the

*Ben-Itzak, Paul and Beatrice Gruber. "Dancer's Death at 22 Casts Shadow Over Boston, Ballet World." Dance Magazine September 1997: 26,34.

**Ben-Itzak and Gruber.

"normal" world--as we like to call it--where beauty is prompted by superficial images on paper, screens, and billboards. As a nation, we publicly criticize these ideals because we know that only molded plastic dressed, boxed, and stamped with "Barbie," is perfect. In the "normal" world, a girl who's 5'6" should weigh at least 130 pounds.*

I live in the dance world. Beauty is not an inanimate image to consider from a distance. Beauty is the body of the dancer on your right and on your left...and the girl pirouetting in front of you, the one stretching out in the corner, the one sewing her pointe shoes, the one flying through the studio in nimble leaps. It's not a picture that you and your friends can jeer at saying, "Nobody really looks like that," because in the dance world you are surrounded by *real* people who *really* look like that, and the only way to survive in this Barbie Dream House is to make yourself look like that too. If I weighed 130 pounds, I would be dining on ice cubes, exercising to the beat of Karen Carpenter.

You may think I look fine as a "normal" everyday person, but I know that *you*--the audience--want to see me with narrow hips, a flat bottom, and no belly. Ballets are not about real people. The audience comes to see other-worldly figures--angels, numphs, sylphs, swan princesses. Light, graceful, delicate creatures with fairytale bodies. When you tell a dancer she must be crazy for thinking she's fat just remember that you don't have to look at yourself in a leotard and tights for three to six hours every day and be judged according to that image.

*Phipps, Wilma J., Virginia L. Cassmeyer, Judith K. Sands, Mary Kay Lehman, ed. Medical-Surgical Nursing: Concepts and Clinical Practice. 5th ed. St. Louis: Mosby, 1995

Take a moment to switch your glasses. Get up from your plush purple seat in the audience and wander through the darkness backstage. The body issue for dancers is not "I gotta start getting ready for bikini season" or "Better be able to fit into that dress I bought a month ago" or "I want to impress the guys at the club." The body *is* dance: fragile crystal elegance. "I have to look like a feather when I jump." "My partner has to be able to lift me easily." "If I lose a couple inches from my thighs my dancing will be worth watching."

Some teachers encourage us with lush words on how dance is from the heart. With sparkling eyes and enthusiastic motions, we hear how the most beautiful dance radiates from within yourself. The audience can only believe you if you believe yourself. Dance by your passion, your conviction, your emotion that flows from deep down inside! The movement can course through your veins, seizing its control, and you abandon your body and mind to its powerful energy. You become the movement. That is dance! The words inspire us and we start the dance once again, but this time with our hearts pounding and minds set free. Feel the movement and dance by the heart! But as we bask in this newfound inspiration, the teacher yells, "Pull in your tummies! No one wants to see what you had for lunch! Tighten your muscles! I want to see you work! Point your toes, your feet look like dead fish!" The heart shatters as the mirrors become reality.

In ballet, image is everything. The body serves as the instrument of dance. You can't always expect them to inspire you with "dance by your passion," but you come to rely on "if you really want to make it as a dancer you must look like this." Don't become discouraged as you try to comprehend the mentality backstage, just believe us when we say we must excuse Anna-Marie Holmes, director of the Boston Ballet, for telling a thin Heidi Guenther to lose a

few pounds. Just know that we should all excuse the directors of the Milwaukee Ballet for making ninety-two pound Marisa Soltis join a weight-loss program. "You don't understand. If I don't lose eight pounds I'll get fired," Marisa pleaded to the program's staff.* Teachers, choreographers, and directors have the power to say such things because they expect perfection from us. "Every mistake you make is a choice," we were scolded in ballet class one day. "You chose to make your mistakes."

Journalist Suzanne Gordon found the life in the dance world so incredible she turned her magazine article assignment into an entire book, Off Balance. In her study of dancers, she came to realize that "ballet training is not only a long and painful discipline of the body, it is a discipline of the spirit as well."** The ballet dancer's beliefs have been constructed by every criticism that echoes in the studio. This is why we must agree with these young dancers, Heidi and Marisa, when they say they are fat. They are swimming in a collage of mirrors, gasping for breath in a life of images. They depend upon the saving hands of those who see them.

Teachers and directors are very generous to help us mold into the textbook images of the perfect dancer. Daily, they make us point our feet harder, jump faster, lift our legs higher, position our arms correctly, and use our bodies "efficiently." We accept each compliment and criticism like a precious pearl, stroking it in respect and polishing it to shine back at them. If we don't take their comments to heart--and to body--they will not bother to look at us anymore. "As far as you're concerned," a teacher

*Leung, Shirley. "Some See Choice: Art vs. Health." The Boston Globe 11 July 1997: B4.

**Gordon, Suzanne. Off Balance: The Real World of Ballet. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983: p. 14.

lectured us in ballet class one afternoon, "the person standing in the front of the room (the teacher) is God." Without their attention our dancing is worthless. "Only when you are noticed do you exist," an anonymous New York City Ballet dancer once explained.*

They feed us with roles in *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty*; they sustain us with praising words. They crumble our passion with their apathy, and they crush our selves in disgust. We stand before them, stone-faced. Inside of us a voice cries out for reasoning and helpless sobs proclaim weakness we dare not admit. When we climbed into our first leotards and tights, we climbed onto a never-ending roller coaster. We have come to know the rhythm: the climbs, the sharp turns, and the heart-stopping falls. It's all just part of the ride. At the bottom of the plunges we wonder if we should just jump off and leave it all. But, as this thought turns over and over inside vulnerable minds, we hear the teacher yelling, "It's a matter of do or die. Don't walk out on it!"

I am a 5'6" dancer weighing 120 pounds with hips that are too wide, a waistline that has half an inch too much to pinch, a rib cage that sticks out, a torso that's too short, shoulders that are too narrow, a neck that could be longer, shoulder muscles that are too tense, arms that are too bony, feet that are too flat, toes that are not the same length, ankles that are a little on the thick side, legs that aren't turned-out enough, and a spine that's painfully rebelling against sixteen years of bending, twisting, and contorting. But, for some reason, every time I meet someone in my "normal" life, he or she eventually say to me: "You look like a dancer."

Katie Sillanpa

*Gordon: p. 130