

ABOUT CULTURE

Examination At the Barre

By Toni Bentley

FOR ME, as a ballet dancer, seeing the epic Degas show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art served to reaffirm Degas' unsurpassed genius at describing my profession. But I did not see, clearly, what many others have chosen to see: additional evidence that dancers are victims of their art.

Over the last decade there has emerged a notion about the dancing profession that has captivated the minds of many who watch it, as well as a few who have pursued it and survived to tell the tale. It is, paradoxically, a romantic horror story: dancers, especially classical ballet dancers, are controlled by their directors, underpaid by their management, wounded by their toe shoes and generally martyred to an art form that is completely ethereal. Despite the fact that thousands flock to performances, and ballet schools are overcrowded, data



Dancers at Their Toilette, Edgar Degas, c. 1879.

are still being collected to prove that rigorous classical training is not worth the invisible reward of moral attainment. Such has not been my own experience.

Nevertheless, I should not have been surprised to learn that even Edgar Degas, painting dancers over 100 years ago, has provided some with visible proof that the plight of dancers has always been a sorry one. With the additional incriminating evidence provided by his other series of women ironing, bathing, singing and prostituting themselves, the artist has been called a painter of women of the less fortunate classes, enacting their private moments of suffering.

But the convenient view is not always the truest one, as Degas himself showed in his paintings of a stage where the orchestral instruments seem to intrude upon the dancers' movements. The movements are often cut off by the edge of the canvas, and the point of view is rarely centered. To summarize Degas as a recorder of the emotional plight of women is perhaps inevitable in a time when the discovery and condemnation of female oppression is politically noble, but it does Degas' work — and a dancer's work — a gross injustice.

Lincoln Kirstein, co-founder of the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet, was once overheard to say that Degas' painting "Young Spartans" was the best of all ballet pictures. But this depiction of naked adolescent boys and girls, each in their own group, posing, taunting and cajoling the others, is not even a dance picture: it was painted 10 years before Degas' full-fledged foray into the backstage world of the Paris Opera Ballet. Therein lies the key.

Degas captured the theatrical design of everyday life, and he found it everywhere, not only in the dressing rooms and studios of the opera, but in bordellos, in bathtubs, at millinery counters and at the horse races. His overriding pursuit is most clearly illustrated in the connection between his horses and his ballet dancers. It is not that both are driven by male superiors (jockeys or ballet masters), but that both are supreme examples of physical expression at its most developed, horses in their lithe speed and dancers in their perpetual turned-out stance.

George Balanchine, the greatest choreographer of this century, likened his own dancers at the New York City Ballet to thoroughbreds and himself to a veterinarian who "must take care that they win the race." It was to his dancers a statement not of tyranny but of admiration and

Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 11 years. She is the author of "Winter Season: A Dancer's Journal" (Vintage).



love, just as for me, Degas does not show pity, or even sympathy, for his dancers, but rather a respect and fascination for moments of their refined movement. Be-

cause his canvas is two-dimensional and static, the painter was unable to do more than vaguely indicate a movement just finished or yet to begin. In this sense he was unable to capture the essence of dance — or of bathing, or of ironing — but that was not his intent.

Degas was interested in unconscious choreography — the poetic poses and tableaux of humans wholly absorbed in tasks both private and public. At the ballet he does not record the effects of performance but the atmosphere of work. Degas' dancers are not oppressed by this work, they are merely the center of it. How lovely for them.

POINT OF VIEW | There's Still Some Magic in the Air

IN NEW YORK, in the mid-Sixties, when I was in my early twenties . . . I envied the Surrealists their coffeehouse trances and theater scandals, their *amour fou*, their magical Paris. New York had no poetry that I could see. A hard, epic prose it had, made of stone and steel and dirt and glass, bright by day and dark by night, endless reams of it; but poetry — I couldn't see it. However, the magic of chance, I thought, must be present here as much as there, now as much as then. I had already had intimations of it. Everyone does: you think of an acquaintance you haven't seen for years and wonder why she has entered your thoughts, and as you turn the corner, there she is, stepping out of a taxi. Or, in conversation with a friend in a restaurant, say, at the moment when you both tacitly agree to avoid a certain issue, you notice it has become the topic of discussion at a neighboring table. This, I assumed, was the household variety of surrealist experience, available, indeed inescapable for everyone, and one had only to make it the object of one's most expectant attention to begin to harvest the first shining fruits of that enchanted garden.

— Joel Agee in *Harper's* magazine

LETTERS

They're Tough on Terrorism

New York Newsday implies that by not extraditing Rev. Patrick Ryan to Britain because of prejudicial pretrial publicity in that country, Ireland is "soft" on terrorism ["It's Insulting," Dec. 22].

Because of the extreme nature of the adverse publicity against Ryan, including statements in the House of Commons, Ireland's attorney general decided that "it would be improper, and an abuse of the process of the courts, to initiate extradition proceedings in this case." Our attorney general expects, and hopes, that the case will remain a unique one. Extradition remains part of the law of Ireland and will continue to be used.

Our attorney general has also said that the charges against Ryan are serious and should be investigated by a court. He has left it open to the British authorities to pursue this case under our Criminal Law (Jurisdiction) Act 1976, whereby certain offenses committed outside Ireland can be tried in our jurisdiction. Of the 13 people brought to trial for offenses committed in Northern Ireland or in Britain under this act, there have been 10 successful prosecutions. This is clearly a law that has been tested by both the British and Irish authorities and found to work. It remains to be seen whether British authorities will use it in this case.

Furthermore, the commitment of the Irish government and the Irish people to combatting terrorism is consistent, and effective. As our prime minister, Charles Haughey, said: "Our commitment in this area is freely given, in the common interest of society, North and South, to ensure that the forces of terrorism — whether of domestic or international origin — do not prevail." Any suggestion to the contrary flies in the face of reality in Ireland.

Anne Barrington
Manhattan

Editor's Note: The writer is press and information officer for the Irish Consulate General.

Not For Middle-Aged Yuppies

Regarding D.D. Guttenplan's column "The Other L-Word" [Media Notes, Part II, Nov. 23]: Guttenplan quoted an Ad Age magazine's speculation that the magazine *Mother Jones* "is targeting aging yuppies." The demographic information we provided to both Ad Age and New York Newsday clearly demonstrates that our audience represents the antithesis of the "me-first" greed that enveloped American life in the '70s and '80s. Last year, 90 percent of our readers contributed to a social issue; three-quarters want to know whether the

companies they do business with are socially responsible — hardly the yuppie stereotype.

As for the contention that *Mother Jones* is taking a right turn: In recent issues we've chronicled George Bush's year as director of the CIA, exposed the ways the Mexican presidential election was stolen, and punctured the myth that day care is harmful to children. Our February/March relaunch issue will include a damning indictment of the bipartisan-supported drug war the U.S. is fighting (and losing) in the Third World; a piece about actress Susan Sarandon's political commitment; and a story of the struggle of Julio Godoy, an investigative reporter for *La Epoca*, a Guatemalan newspaper whose offices were bombed last June.

Douglas Foster
San Francisco, Calif.

Editor's Note: The writer is editor of Mother Jones.

Letters are subject to editing for length and clarity. Writers should give a full address and home and office telephone numbers, if possible, and should mention special knowledge of a subject or relevant financial or political interest. Anonymous letters are not printed, and letters cannot be returned. Write to: Letters Editor, New York Newsday, 780 Third Ave., 37th Floor, New York, N. Y. 10017.