



# DANCERS: THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

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A BLOODED TOE INSIDE HER FIRST PAIR OF toe shoes is a welcome symbol of initiation for a young ballerina, just as it is considered a sign of good luck for a professional. It is the initial stage in the development of the corns and calluses that are a prerequisite for a career in toe shoes. Herein lies one of the many choices dancers must make through the years about whether or not this is a career they want. If the soreness of muscles and toes does not seem insignificant beside the rewards of dancing, the aspirant will not continue. The profession is not regulated as much by audition or the whim of directors as by this form of natural selection.

Much has been written recently about the physical problems and pain involved in a career where, as the ballet master Jean Georges Noverre wrote in his "Letters on Dancing and Ballets" in 1760, "it is imperative to reverse the order of things and force the limbs by means of exercise both long and painful, to take a totally different position from that which is natural to them." Dancers have been perceived as victims of an arduous profession or martyrs to a high art, but neither of these roles encompasses the joy of the internal process of self-mastery that is at the core of being a dancer.

With the arrival in New York City of the Paris Opera Ballet, the Netherlands Dance Theater and the Bolshoi Ballet during the next several weeks, and with American Ballet Theater and the New York City Ballet continuing their spring seasons, hundreds of dancers are filling dance studios on both sides of the Atlantic, learning new ballets, perfecting old ones and examining their instrument, the body, with the finely honed sensibility that their work demands. Pain is a highly subjective sensation that in our society is generally considered an unnecessary evil. This is often associated with one idea of democracy: No one should have to endure anything even vaguely unpleasant. If it is said that certain types of pain are not always evil, this is regarded as masochism or sadism. Sometimes, for dancers (and athletes), endurance is merely a necessity - the achievement of a state where human anatomy is molded to create beautiful and expressive images in space inevitably has its moments of extreme discomfort.

To a dancer, physical pain is not synonymous with suffering. This is a very important distinction. Pain is fact, but suffering because of that pain is subjective. It is not automatic but, to a large degree, chosen. Along with their anatomical control, dancers develop an expectation of a certain amount of pain or soreness. Like a language, manners or morals,

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this acceptance is best learned at an early age; it is an integral component of the job. A dancer's body is regarded objectively, with sympathy not sentimentality, with pity not self-pity. \* \* \*

The most intimate relationship -physically, emotionally and often spiritually - that professional dancers have in their lives is not between two bodies and two minds but between one mind and one body - their own. This is not an endeavor of superficial narcissism or deep self-love but the antithesis. It involves a vigorous, profound exploration of the eccentricities, habits, capabilities and requirements of each. This is teamwork of a very subtle nature, requiring all the patience, compromise and compassion usually associated with a love relationship between two people.

Classical ballet requires at least a decade of extensive, precise training. This training begins before puberty, when the muscles, ligaments, bones and tendons become fixed in the turned-in stance. The academic tradition is a belief system that is physically alien and rationally absurd to anyone who has not absorbed it from childhood; it is based on maintaining anatomical symmetry in a turned-out stance, both in motion and in stillness. After 15 years of study, one classical perfectionist wisely admits, "If you really think about it, you have to be sort of crazy to turn out." Crazy enough to let it happen and to want it to happen.

After as many as 10,000 hours of study, a student will have knowledge of and instantaneous control over every part of the body - from the motion in the big toe and the kneecap to the more than 50 muscles involved in rotating the leg in its stationary hip socket. He or she will also know what tensions and simultaneous releases are required throughout the body for the correct line of the leg to the front, the side and the back, on the floor, at 45 degrees, 90 degrees, 180 degrees and in between. He or she must be able to re-enact precisely and immediately the infinite variations on the tilt of a neck.

Dancers become intensely aware of the strengths, angles and effects of muscles that the average person takes for granted. They develop an acute visual sense of not only their own equipment but also that of their peers, who are recognized by a pointed foot or arabesque line as readily as by a face or a voice.

A dancer's work is entirely dependent upon one very resilient, but very breakable instrument: the physical self. For dancers, the statement that anatomy is destiny is not a trite metaphor but an ever-present fact. This is never more apparent than when injury divides the vision of body and mind as one. If a dancer has been cast for an important debut, the combination of nerves, excitement and meticulous rehearsing can contribute to either a stupendous performance or a possible mishap that could prevent the debut. A dancer may want desperately to dance, but the will often has less influence than might be supposed in the events that mark a career. **ACHES, PAINS AND SCHEDULES**

Both modern and classical dancers now perform, study and rehearse on a daily basis, year round, adhering to schedules that were unheard of in the days of Petipa or even Diaghilev. Technique, accuracy, precision and, most of all, speed have also reached levels that were inconceivable 50 or even 20 years ago. All corps de ballet members today can execute the 32 fouettes (consecutive turns on a single pointe whose impetus comes from a whipping motion of the other leg) that in 1893 gave Pierina Legnani a place in the history of dance.

Alongside the development of sheer physical prowess have come injuries as curious and chronic as their causes. At any given time any dancer, like any athlete, could list any number of aches and pains, both serious and transitory - sprains, tendinitis, ingrown toenails, blisters, pulled muscles, muscle spasms and stress fractures. Modern dancers,



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because they usually dance barefoot, can develop skin burns, bruised metatarsals, splits in the skin from excessive dryness and broken toes, injuries less common for pointe dancers whose feet are tightly bound in satin shoes.

But the vast majority of these afflictions can be treated while one is still performing, thanks to the increasingly specialized medical and therapeutic care available. Performers have, of necessity, become educated about cause and effect among the various body tissues, and their knowledge of treatments and prevention is prodigious. Socrates' admonition "Know thyself" takes on new implications for those whose bodies are their work.

After decades of scrutinizing one's body - its contours, lines, flexibility, weight and grace - for as many as eight hours a day, it is not surprising that dancers develop curiously distorted visions of themselves. The ever-present mirror reflects a one-dimensional, reversed image of one's superficial shape, but attitudes, criticisms and judgments about that image are also present in the shiny apparition. Some love what they see, others hate what they think they see. The best use what they see - to change, improve, grow, simplify. Dancers never really see, know or feel their work as their audience does. For all that they know of their craft, they know nothing of its impact. This is the beauty of performance, a fact of the ephemeral - and the reason for risk. HUMOR: A DANCER'S CRUTCH

The most commonly confronted hazard of rehearsing and performing is physical trauma. Years of training methodically prepare a dancer for endurance: 8-year-old students will have four hours of class a week, building up to 20 or 30 hours by the time they are 18 and ready to perform. New York City Ballet, for example, has work schedules that can require 72 hours a week in the theater, rehearsing, taking class and performing. Only the job itself can prepare the body for this kind of maximum energy output. It is here that dancers ingeniously employ an amazingly useful device: humor.

Objectivity about one's own physique reaches great heights in this special brand of humor, a conspiracy of wit, which is very effective in releasing the tension that aggravates fatigue and coaxing a reluctant body into action. Dressing-room conversation before a performance and after seven hours of rehearsing is peppered with loud sighs and cries of mock desperation, ending in laughter. Dancers develop a wonderful sense of the absurd that is virtually a prerequisite for success. It is not unusual when asked how are you, for an elated dancer, ice bag on foot, to reply, "I'm great - my foot is bad." There is a substantial distinction. \* \* \*

When physical trauma is experienced, the actual pain rarely approaches the depth of anxiety, frustration and sadness that a dancer not dancing (because of injury) experiences. Recently, during the final rehearsal for "Tchaikovsky Suite No. 3," Adam Luders of the New York City Ballet heard, along with everyone else onstage, a loud snap in his foot when he landed from a jump. Shocked but not incapacitated, he finished the rehearsal; only two hours later did his damaged ankle swell up like a balloon, forcing him to cancel the performance. But while the immediate physical pain was negligible, the long-range implications were not. Mr. Luders said later, "In that moment, I saw my whole life pass before me."

Dancers do not stop dancing because they hurt, but because they need to heal in order to dance again. Pain, when present, is regarded as an indication, a warning, that perhaps the body is being overworked or worked incorrectly. It must not be intensified by tears or resentment; there is neither time nor energy for self-indulgence. It is what pain implies, not the pain itself, that concerns a dancer and provokes fear. Acute pain can be far less serious than a dull ache in terms of actual damage. Performance ability is the gauge by

which all malfunctions are measured. 'ADDICTIVENESS' OF PERFORMING

It is an accepted fact backstage that very often in the 10 or 15 minutes of actual performance general stress or a specific pain disappears. Ironically, the biochemical changes wrought by a demanding activity, like dancing, can do more to relieve actual physical pain than most pain-relieving drugs. This phenomenon of natural pain relief is found during childbirth, combat and sports where the body is stressed beyond a comfortable barrier. Only within the last 15 years have scientists identified chemical messengers called endorphins, morphine-like substances in the body that are released from tissue sites and interact with cells in the brain, producing an analgesic effect on the body and decreasing the perception of pain. The discovery of this self-induced narcotic may explain the apparent self-proclaimed "addiction" that dancers and athletes have to their respective activities. The daily craving may be a symptom of "withdrawal" - the brain has formed a real physical dependency on movement, "endorphin addiction."

Adrenalin also contributes to the distraction from anatomical discomforts, but perhaps the greatest alleviation of all (or is it diversion?) arises from the wondrous event itself, performance, where there is no hesitation, no time as we perceive it between thought and action. With the first notes of music, years of training and discipline rise to the occasion, and until the curtain falls the body is possessed by the choreography, not individual concerns or physical infirmities.

When the curtain does fall, aches usually return, at times with a vengeance. But the pain usually pales beside the satisfaction and exuberance that in a very real physical way dominate the entire body. Dancers are neither victims nor martyrs. In the joy that overwhelms in work well done, they are closer to the fleet-footed messengers, the angels that George Balanchine considered them.

An irony of injury is that a dancer can learn invaluable information about the idiosyncrasies and specialized needs of his or her unique physiology that could not be learned otherwise. Injury can be a great teacher. In the long run, it can even prolong a career, temporarily slowing down work and forcing a stubborn or willful mind to reassess the balance between the actual equipment and the image that the mind's eye wishes to impose upon it. A young dancer will often find that taking three classes a day in addition to rehearsing actually serves to undermine the strength, stamina and enjoyment of a performance, rather than improving it. A certain amount of physical indulgence is required for a overworked body to heal; often this is the hardest lesson for an ambitious dancer to learn. But physical sensation, pleasant or unpleasant, is the vital reminder of reality in a profession where illusion is the dominating goal.

A single slip or fall can result in the end of a career, but only to dancers who have had warning of such an ominous possibility, through a previous or chronic problem, does this loom large. Most people, after all, do not live their daily lives in fear of momentary death. For those who have endured serious injury, there can be deep anxiety about possible recurrence of that injury. But the fear lessens when they are actually dancing. It is a bizarre truth that dancing is often the cure for its own ills, physically and psychologically. In any relationship based on love and respect, such as dancers have with their art, solutions are usually found within the parameters of that relationship, not outside it.

The passing of years has a critical importance for dancers whose careers are dependent on supple and obedient bodies. Ironically, artistry and knowledge peak just as the body begins its decline, prolonging a dancer's career far beyond what might be physically expected. Aging is a law of nature that dancers stall, even ignore, with great success - for 10 years perhaps. But, eventually, agility, speed and elasticity decrease. This process is

resented, for it is virtually the only obstacle that dedication and devotion cannot ultimately overcome.

While it may be overly dramatic to say that it is like the death of a close friend, retirement does require a vast alteration in the balance, equality and responsibility of body and mind toward each other. The physical self has attained an incredible wisdom and pride that no longer can be expressed in the familiar way. Is there life after dancing is a very real question for a professional dancer.

The balance of the body and mind working as a partnership can be abused by dancers as by anyone; injuries can be self-induced, unconsciously. The most extreme examples of asking (and ostensibly answering) emotional questions by way of one's body are in cases of anorexia nervosa, where confusion becomes physically displayed and acted out in a lonely internal drama. (This is an abuse of what constitutes great dancing - spirit made flesh.) But while this illness has received a great deal of notoriety in the ballet world, it must be remembered that it is neither a symptom nor a result of the profession, but an imbalance within an individual consciousness. Eating disorders are a misplaced manifestation of a very normal and prevalent desire to control one's destiny and the general chaos that is life. They are highly emotional, frightened reactions to a maturing body and the responsibilities inherent in a growing and often ambitious intelligence.

A distinction should be made between what Dr. William Hamilton, orthopedist for the New York City Ballet, its affiliated School of American Ballet and the American Ballet Theater, calls true anorexia and "pseudo-anorexia." The severity of the former affliction creates a state where the physical demands of dancing become virtually impossible. "Pseudo-anorexia" is not a disease but a manifestation of deliberate concern, often preoccupation (only natural in a profession that stimulates the appetite to distraction), with one's body and food intake. It is something with which most of the population today can identify; as one dancer confesses, "All I think about it when can I eat and what will I eat." That dancers frequently subscribe to this behavior does not imply a neurosis but rather a conscious career decision, just as it is for a boxer, swimmer, runner or gymnast; extra poundage can alter a crucial balance of both esthetics and performance ability. Dancing is a language of the limbs, and the clarity of their lines is of paramount importance. Beyond the Internal World Dancing itself, with its regularity, familiarity and discipline, answers these same needs for control in a very positive and healing way. Though performance is ephemeral, the unchanging nature of applying an academic tradition or choreographed steps to one's own body provides a tangible security, a comforting stability, as well as a heightened sense of possibility. The power of self-determination is focused beyond the internal world of self-concern, producing a discrete three-dimensionality. For a dancer, this is salvation. In this endeavor, the body is the crucial ally and is recognized as such.

Most people develop a Cartesian view of themselves as body and soul separated, and proceed to search for compromises that will satisfy the demands of each. "Dancers," Balanchine said, "are the only ones who can have their cake and eat it too"; their work combines the various human components - body, mind and spirit - into one visible vision. To a dancer, "life" is a metaphor for dancing.

Dancers learn that the body has laws of its own to be respected though tamed, that morality is a choice not only of conscience but of the body, for the body, by the body. The complete fusion of body and mind that is great dancing is a process, a method, of definition, moral and metaphysical: I dance, therefore I am.

Photo of dancers (NYT/Leonard Kamsier)

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