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REACHING FOR PERFECTION - THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A DANCER

By Toni Bentley; Toni Bentley, a member of New York City Ballet, was a friend and colleague of Joseph Duell, a dancer who committed suicide on Feb. 16. In this essay, she discusses the impact of his life - and death - on his friends, his fellow dancers and the company. Published: April 27, 1986

Just over two months ago, one week before the end of the New York City Ballet's winter season, Joseph Duell, age 29, one of the company's principal dancers, took his own life. It is shocking when someone commits suicide and it is shocking when someone you know commits suicide. But when there is a suicide in the midst of a ballet company, the shock is mixed with a bewilderment that shakes our world to its very foundations.

Classical ballet dancers must study from the age of eight for 10 years before they might - just might - move in a way that is interesting and beautiful to watch. As professionals we work 12 hours a day for six days a week. We inhabit an environment of order, routine, discipline, beauty and youth. Our obsessive preoccupation with physical perfection is the external result of a deep, silent and very private spiritual commitment.

Dancing has no future and no past. It exists only in the moment it happens. It is life itself; no affirmation could be stronger. The source of a dancer's power is the energy that distinguishes life from death. For suicide to enter such a world as ours totally dislocates us, our values and our visions.

Sitting in the audience one evening I overheard a group of young girls giggling happily when they read that Joe was dancing. Their eyes twinkled and they held their hands over their hearts. Joe was handsome, with light brown hair, wide green eyes and a beautiful body. He was Prince Charming on stage and off. He was our matinee idol. But this was an ironic side effect of a career built on moral integrity.

I first knew Joe when we were in our last years at the School of American Ballet in the late 1970's. On sunny spring Sundays we would plan picnics in Central Park, imitating what regular school kids did, though our lives were already embedded in ballet. Joe was famous for the salad he always brought. It was full of every fresh fruit and vegetable to be found in the market, topped with every nut and seed to be found in a health food store. The dressing was Joe's special invention. The most amazing thing about the salad was its size. Joe confessed to having mixed it in his kitchen sink, which he swore he had scrubbed thoroughly first. It arrived at Sheep Meadow in a huge cauldron with a soup ladle to serve it. Joe's salad was different, generous beyond all requirements. It was wonderful.

Then there was ethics class, a short-lived offering by the school to try to expand our minds while we were not in motion. We didn't know what ethics were, and if we couldn't relate something directly to dancing, our interest in it was small. Except for Joe. He virtually conducted the class by himself, getting very excited about the metaphysical issues of right

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
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
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and wrong. He knew before the rest of us that a life in the Balanchine world involved a lot more than tights and toe shoes.

When Joe joined the New York City Ballet in 1975, his older brother Daniel had already passed through the School of American Ballet with flying colors and was on his way to becoming a principal dancer in the company. This no doubt enhanced the usual peer competition for Joe. Classical technique did not come easily to him. Perhaps less than most. He was tall and lean and turned-out, but elevation and pirouettes did not come naturally. He became intensely involved with his shortcomings, going to an exercise class that works on strength-building machines, using barbells to increase his partnering power and lifting weights with his legs until he developed thigh muscles beyond what is needed. His work habits were stoic. He monitored his diet, did not drink or smoke, went to bed early, and got up on time for an exercise session before the morning ballet class.

His leadership qualities first became apparent when he was 16. Members of S.A.B. were giving lecture-demonstrations with one of our teachers at public schools around the city. Joe was the one who called us all at 6 A.M., gave us a warm-up at 7 A.M. and then, often being the only boy who volunteered, did all the demonstrating and male dancing on the program. He also choreographed a ballet for us to the music of Elton John. It was very complex, and Joe was very specific about how he wanted each movement performed. Later he showed the ballet to Balanchine, who liked the movement very much but had reservations about the music.

During Joe's years in the company he choreographed several ballets for the S.A.B. Workshop, often incorporating the jazz movement he had studied. His ballet "La Creation du Monde," to the music of Darius Milhaud, was considered so fine that it was performed by the New York City Ballet in 1982.

After he was in the company, Joe organized his own lectures where he would both speak and dance. He became coordinator of Ballet Guild luncheon programs and family matinee programs, which he would cast, choreograph and accompany with a lecture on the history and technique of classical ballet. He spoke wonderfully - he was clear, witty and very passionate.

Most of all Joe wanted to dance. He worked and worked on steps, musicality and presentation. Joe questioned technique. Fifth position -why has it been the central focus of classical ballet for over 300 years? He spoke with Mr. B. about this during Balanchine's last months. Yet Joe, like all of us, had been perfecting his fifth position for almost 20 years. Because his fascination with and love of dancing were total, his exploration of it never ended, only intensified.

Joe could always be found after class repeating the combinations he had the most trouble with over and over. The evening before he killed himself he rehearsed "Who Cares?" - a ballet he had danced many times. After repeating his variation full-out again and again, he asked an onlooker, "Was that better?"

It was also the day before he died that I watched Joe dance the first movement of Bizet's "Symphony in C." He was elegant. He was noble. He was good, very good, perhaps better than ever before, with a long, lean line and a carriage of the upper body and port de bras that denoted the great pride he felt when he danced. His partnering, famous among us - coveted and sought after by all the ballerinas - was superb. His self-effacement and strength were a deliberate homage to the women he partnered.

A year after Joe joined New York City Ballet he had some deep emotional trouble and went away for a year. We thought he would not return. But he did. Dancing was his ultimate



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commitment. And for the next nine years he worked like a horse with blinders, concentrating on nothing else. He rose from corps dancer to soloist to principal. But his public "success" meant no more than "yes" to him. There was no sense of "arrival" or "I've made it." There was only being better. Always better. Perhaps the infinite scope of this overwhelmed him in a very profound way. And while his daily approach was grounded in reality, his inner life counteracted it with the opposite extreme.

We all knew that dancing was very hard for Joe, but perhaps we did not know, until now, how hard. He was never satisfied. His career, a totally "successful" one, was a battleground where enormous ambition fought against incredible insecurity. The conflict was the cross Joe had to bear. It was also the cross that made him achieve so much.

He moved far beyond the childish longing for talent where so many careers begin and end. His dancing was proof of will, of desire (that underrated wonder) and of inner strengths not so much winning out as being used, as practical tools of his art. Practicality about technique, routine, work habits and physical health was Joe's way, as it was Balanchine's. If something needs doing or changing, do it. That's all. Just do it. Complaints and delays waste energy.

Balanchine was interested only in what a dancer did while dancing, not in falls or mishaps. Misfortunes do not detract from what is good; they are merely separate things, not negative things. Joe had all of our excuses and more, but he never used them. The confusions, questions and very real problems that dwelled in Joe's mind remained there. Joe's pain was not visible on the stage. His work grew always stronger, never stagnant. It became a separate entity and stands now, as clearly as it did before his death, as a shaped and beautiful testament to the Balanchine ethic. A dancer in Balanchine's company wants nothing else than this - to serve. To serve what is bigger and more powerful than any single ego. Joe was the one among us most aware of this.

Joe's death was deeply confusing to us because there was no apparent reason for it - his career, his social life, his physical health all promised him everything. He was greatly in demand, often dancing two or three times a night. His death was a statement of his pain, a cry not for help or pity, just oblivion. It is in the arrogance of our own pain that we feel cheated and outraged and angered. We want more of Joe Duell. But it is not for us to ask for more from a dancer. Joe Duell gave us everything he had. Perhaps he was tired and needed rest; he was not one to find it as some of us do.

As on the day Mr. B. died, the day Joe died we danced as scheduled. It was the only thing we could do for them. Their lives were, after all, about dancing. "Living" was merely a means to this end. Joe may have lost this cynical and humorous approach somewhere.

On Feb. 16, we all went to the theater whether we were dancing or not. We had lost one of our family and it was the only place to be. We cried and held each other. We could not believe it and we did not understand. That so much pain dwelt among us without our being able to give help and solace breaks our hearts still. We loved Joe so much.

We performed "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at both matinee and evening that Sunday, dedicating the evening performance to Joe. A massive support system was at work: the most important thing of all was to dance well for Joe, without tears. Onstage and in the wings, eyes and arms and voices were joined in a relay of love and strength to one another. The dancing was beautiful.

But in the New York City Ballet we do not dwell on the past. Not for Mr. B. and not for Joe. We do remember. Remembering is vital. It changes us, makes us think, makes us dance better. Joe, while alive, taught us that being better is so important. But in death he showed

us that loving is more important. Loving life, loving work and loving each other.

Photo of Joseph Duell at a City Ballet Rehearsal (Martha Swope)

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