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Counterpunch: Critic's Argument for Heftier Dancers is Thin

April 16, 2001 by Toni Bentley

As a former member of the New York City Ballet during George Balanchine's tenure, I feel compelled to respond to Lewis Segal's April 1 article, "The Shape of Things to Come," calling for ballet dancers to gain weight and stop being victims of the slim, linear image that surfaced in late 20th century dance.

Coupled with Krissy Keefer's lawsuit against the San Francisco Ballet School for "discriminating" against her 9-year-old daughter by not accepting her for professional training as a classical ballet dancer, we are entering the dangerous world of art as politics.

Should music students be admitted to the Juilliard School who are tone deaf and to medical schools with C and D grade averages? Should short guys be hired by the NBA? Should round little girls be admitted to professional ballet schools, thereby being subjected to a competitive discipline for which they are at a disadvantage?

Simply put, if the arts or sports are to be subjected to affirmative action and lack of discrimination against the untalented and physically inappropriate, then they will cease to exist.

Classical ballet in this country--in a slow but inevitable decline since the death almost 20 years ago of Balanchine, the Shakespeare of 20th century dance--is already in the process of losing its passion and its purpose: spiritual ascent, good behavior and harmonic cooperation. And now the very line upon which it depends for the language of movement itself is being threatened by the notion of political correctness.

Who really wants to pay \$80 to see a dancer who is physically unsuited to display a tiara and tutu as the Swan Queen? Not me. It might indeed present the ultimate image of equal opportunity for all, but it won't be pretty.

There will always be those who find a particular kind of beauty offensive, especially that which beckons moral reckoning. Rather than received with gratitude as a rare gift, it is perceived as a personal threat.

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Using Casey Kirkland as an example of self-destruction of the mind, body, talent and spirit in the hands of ballet, and specifically Balanchine, is now old and tired. Kirkland was an anomaly in the ballet world, both in her enormous gifts and her even more mammoth ability to destroy those gifts. Her book "Dancing on My Grave," which details her plastic surgery, starvation diets, drug abuse and unsatisfying sex with Mikhail Baryshnikov, has become the miserable manifesto for all those who wish to perceive ballet dancers as victims. This attitude is patronizing and uninformed. She does not speak for the ballet world at large and most certainly not for the experience of most of us in it.

As for the anorexia argument, this disease has far more to do with a girl's family of origin than her toe shoes or her ballet teacher. To assign the ballet world as a breeding ground for anorexia is ridiculous--there are anorexics to be found in high schools and colleges around the country, majoring in French literature and studying for degrees in engineering. This profoundly sad disease is not career specific and its causes lie far deeper than the desire for a tutu. Statistically, most anorexics are not ballet dancers, and to blame the profession itself is not only myopic but also suggests an agenda not based on truth or medical evidence.

Blaming Balanchine personally for this disease is too easy--he is dead. Kirkland, it should be noted, wrote of "hovering at 80 pounds" in 1976, two years after she left Balanchine's world. In point of fact, during my 10 years in his company, there were three girls who were anorexic and Balanchine tried to help them, encouraging them to eat, and eventually not letting them onstage unless they gained weight. He did not like the way they looked, and it must be remembered that his most beloved muse, Suzanne Farrell, was not only never anorexic but was quite round in face and limb when he first fell in love with her as a young dancer. Balanchine loved beauty, not bones.

Why is there this insistence that ballet dancers must be saved from themselves? Balanchine believed that we were his angelic messengers, and Lincoln Kirstein that we were the "lambs of God." Who saves whom when a beautiful performance takes place before an audience?

If affirmative action triumphs and ballerinas become increasingly short, round and inflexible, their partners will have chronic back pain and the theaters will be empty. As Balanchine responded when asked by a mother if her little girl would become a great ballerina, "C'est une question morale" ("That is a moral question").

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