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Meaning Behind Movement

I am six years old and standing hesitantly at the barre with at least twenty other girls in bright blue leotards. It is my first year of classes at the Gwinnett Ballet Theatre; my first year attending a professional ballet school. Ms. Sally is striding around the small, pink studio *I can* correcting our posture with her yard stick and counting out the music with fervor. *see this!*

“Tendu one! And two! And close on the beat! Again a la seconde!” Each instruction is punctuated by a hollow thud as her stick thumps into the sprung Marley floors. I don’t fully understand what is happening, but Ms. Sally does. She knows that she is beginning our comprehension of classical ballet. On this particular day, I work to master the simplest step in my slowly expanding vocabulary – the pli   – a bending of the knees. This is the start of my dance career, and also the beginning of my search for technical perfection. It is here that I mistakenly ^{think} learn literacy in dance is about the flawless performance of specific movements. Ironically, I still [↑] cannot perform a perfect pli  , as it is, according to my teachers, “the first thing you learn and the last thing you master.” *was*

Flash forward: I am ten years old. Staring at myself in the floor to ceiling mirrors that line the walls of my new studio, ^{*comma splice*} I am shocked to realize that I look nothing like a ballerina. Instead of the long muscular limbs and an innate sense of grace that are the mark of a dancer, I see myself as I am; nothing more than a skinny girl in a black leotard, my frizzy hair pulled haphazardly into a bun. I still cannot turn out my legs in my pli  s, or in any other position for that matter, and

nice wording

while all my friends can do the splits, I struggle to touch my toes. Isolated by this lack of ability, I vow to stretch every night. My mom helps me by pulling my arms forward in my straddle stretch, and I use the arms of the couch as a barre to position my legs on. And oh, does it hurt. I try not to cry when anyone can see though, because I want everyone in class to think it's as easy for me as it seems to be for them. The last thing I want is to be spurned any more for a lack of talent or ability. After many months, I appear to be catching up, but slowly, ever so slowly. It is here that I begin to wonder, as I will for years to come, if I will ever accomplish anything of worth in dance. Amidst such musings, I continue to dance around the house until I'm exhausted.

could use transition (I am fourteen years old and my friend Amelia moves to New York City alone to attend a professional training program. A girl in my level, Mackenzie, is accepted into the Washington School of Ballet shortly thereafter – it is the most prestigious dance academy within driving distance. I'm left wondering if I am capable enough to follow in their footsteps, but I'm afraid of what the answer to this question might be, so I don't audition anywhere. Perhaps in response to this lingering fear, I work even harder in class. I also begin training six days a week at my current studio. My dance vocabulary is very nearly complete and while I can't hold any sort of conversation in French, I know how to execute piques, passés, grande battements, arabesques and many other movements besides. I am working on consistent double pirouettes so that I can perform them onstage in The Nutcracker. Ms. Neal informs me that I have weak ankles and need to start a strengthening regime with a Thera-band if I want to refine my hops en pointe. The dry stretching noises the band makes when I flex and point my foot against the resistance become an insistent reminder of my inadequacies. And even with each small victory, there remain uncountable other battles to fight.

Suddenly, I have nothing to talk about with my friends at school except homework – a topic that is exhausted quickly. I am beginning to inhabit two separate worlds: one of normalcy in which I speak English, and another in which I speak dance. In fact, I become so completely fixated on my skills that I begin to unconsciously shun those around me who know nothing about dance, even as I was once shunned. My skills as a dancer have isolated me yet again. Because of this, I lose an important and innate ability: communication with others through both everyday vernacular and dance. Each bond I sever with the non-ballet world further compounds my problems as I destroy potential sources of empathy and connection to my peers. In many ways, I lose an understanding of what my art form is really about.

Now I am seventeen and applying for college. Eleven schools are on *my* list, but not on anyone else's. And as my classmates receive offers from academically prestigious schools, two of my top choices deny me entrance to their dance programs; Indiana and Butler University send me rejection letters one after the other. One particularly difficult application has an essay that asks, "Why do you want to pursue dance at the collegiate level?" The obvious answers swim before me: "to improve my technique," or "to expand my resume and network in order to gain employment later," but I know these explanations are only the *logical* reasons I want to continue my education. After all, I could gain valuable training and performance experience in a second company without the need to pay college tuition. No, in this moment I am forced to confront the fact that I have grown lonely. I have devoted myself so completely to the pursuit of perfection in dance that I have lost the ability to be literate in the ordinary lives and language of my peers. It hits me then: I want to go to college to try and regain what I have lost, that is, the experiences that will allow me to relate to and communicate with others.

94 Jessica - This still could be "smoother" between stanzas, but the transitions are much better than in the draft I read, as is the reflection of each part. You really did something very few students do - show the process of gaining a literacy & how it can actually alienate or isolate you →

It is the present day. I am eighteen years old, a Ballet Major in the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, and thoroughly engrossed in a search for new experiences and dialects of life. I know now what I had missed for so many years: literacy in dance is not merely having ability or technical mastery. A skill set on its own is isolating when it is not shared with others. Similarly, literacy cannot exist fully without communication. Growing up, I lost touch with those around me because I made no effort to connect with them, or to share in their experiences. With these mistakes in mind, I know that I have now mastered so much more than just ballet technique. While the average person doesn't know what piques, passés, grande battements, arabesques, or pirouettes are, the beauty of communication through ballet is that the audience doesn't have to know the specific movements in order to understand why the dancer is moving. To dance is to say something without words that transcends mere steps and instead speaks to the otherwise incommunicable nature of the experiences we all share.

Oops ← I started my
comments on the previous
page

← The originality of that
approach was intriguing &
really interests the reader.
It is both original & insightful
& shows the impact of literacy.

Kristin