

A DANCER'S DILEMMA

IT WASN'T UNTIL MEG HOWREY GAVE UP BALLET AND AN OBSESSION WITH HER FIGURE THAT SHE DISCOVERED HER FACE.



ON POINT
THE AUTHOR
DANCING WITH
CITY BALLET OF
LOS ANGELES
IN 2008.

I never had a normal body. At my birth—a process that took approximately 30 minutes—I slid out long and thin (“Like an eel,” my mother has said) with exceptionally long fingers and toes. I was not a beautiful baby. My older brother was beautiful, sweetly dimpled, and perfectly proportioned. With my attenuated limbs and serious expression, I resembled—even in the best of childhood photographs—a somewhat lugubrious reptile.

No matter. It was discovered, quite early on, that this not-normal body of mine was actually ideal for dance. The chromosomal soup had brought forth a high instep, long arms, long legs, slightly hyperextended knees, narrow hips, a flexible back, and a long neck. For a ballet dancer, this is the genetic equivalent of waking up on third base and getting credit for hitting a triple. My body got scholarships, even when I still didn't have much control over what it could actually do. But I loved dancing. It was so private. I could do it and remain inside my own head, apart from all that was ordinary and dull in daily life. It made me feel powerful and special and different. And these things made me feel beautiful.

The face doesn't matter so much in ballet. Whatever assemblage of features you might have been born with is not going to affect your scholarship, your getting into a company, or even the roles you are chosen for. The face is the thing that gets covered with makeup, and a dancer's makeup is meant to transmit past the lights, past an orchestra pit, up to the back rows. Any face will serve as a platform for false lashes, scarlet lips, arching painted eyebrows.

In ballet, beauty happens below the face. This obsession with the body is probably what gives ballet dancers the reputation for self-absorption at best and pathology at worst. Ballet dancers are obsessed with line. Although stringent ideas on the ideal physique have relaxed recently, excess weight— not to mention certain *beauty* >000

ARTHUR ELGORT; COURTESY OF MEG HOWREY

secondary female characteristics—can obstruct the line, and they are not welcomed. Another word here on the weight issue: Dancing requires an immense amount of physical and mental strength, and one simply cannot take an hour-and-a-half class, rehearse all day, and then perform at night if one is constantly—both literally and metaphorically—losing one’s cookies. But under fierce and unforgiving self-scrutiny and the constant presence of full-length mir-

big guys to partner. Sometimes being tall made me feel queenly, and sometimes it just highlighted the fact that there was that much more of me to dance badly.

I lived in a world where beauty was about what one could do with one’s body. And although I never reached the Olympian heights of the supremely talented, I did know what it felt like to dance well, to truly move. But as intoxicating (and seductively elusive) as this was, I soon became restless for other

scholarships or jobs or even a seat on the subway. With practice I learned my best angle for photographs, but it’s difficult to move through life only from the right and in three-quarter pose. You run into things.

“What you don’t see,” my mother told me, “is what your face looks like when you’re talking. That’s what’s beautiful about you, how full of expression you are.” Perhaps there was some truth in this, but she was my mother and also believed the wooden Mrs. Claus Christmas tree ornament I painted in second grade was beautiful. Moving this hideous object to a hidden location at the back of the tree was an annual ritual.

By my mid-30s, I was writing and had moved away from dancing entirely, and my body changed. I didn’t gain a ton of weight or lose all muscular definition, but I did gain and lose in both of these directions. The difference was hard to explain, especially to other women who didn’t have the same standards. “When I was dancing all the time,” I said to a friend, “I looked quite different. I was really . . .” and I sketched an elegant, threadlike shape in the air. “Oh, you look good now,” she assured me, unaware of the fish I was trying to hook. “Not too skinny, not too big.”

Normal, in other words. Even my body was no longer special. It didn’t do anything special. It just did normal things. Also, what had been good for being a dancer wasn’t necessarily good for just being a woman. No man (who wasn’t also a dancer) has ever stared lustfully at the curves of my . . . feet.

I went to the gym and enlisted the aid of a personal trainer. He asked me what my fitness goals were. “I want to have an amazing body,” I said, and then amended, “for a writer.”

“Television writer or movie writer?” he asked, because this conversation took place in Los Angeles.

“Well, I write literary fiction,” I explained. He looked blank. “Books,” I said. A puzzled frown formed on his handsome face.

“Fine,” I sighed. “An amazing body for a television writer.” He looked me over and deemed this a “reasonable goal.”

Gaining upper-body strength and a facility for plyometrics increased my confidence. It wasn’t likely that there would be a push-up contest at the Los Angeles Festival of *beauty* >000



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“I LIVED IN A WORLD WHERE BEAUTY WAS ABOUT WHAT ONE COULD DO WITH ONE’S BODY”

rors, it is easy to develop a distorted view of things, particularly in adolescence, when pretty much all your views are distorted in one way or another.

My school had a public weigh-in every week in which all the dancers had to queue up while a fellow student recorded the pounds. At twelve and basically a stick figure, even I did the trick of placing one foot against part of the scale that would subtract a few ounces. (People also tried to bribe the boy who recorded the numbers.) Ballerinas hardly have a monopoly on body dysmorphia, though. I’ve noticed that for a lot of women, thinking one looks good and thinking one looks like a yeti can be a matter of two pounds. Or, in my case, two inches. Five feet eight and a half inches is tall for ballet, and since being on pointe adds several inches, I needed

worlds. I wanted more words, more thinking. “You should take acting class,” a friend suggested. “You’ll like it. There’s lots of talking.” There was, and I did, and in my mid-20s I managed to forge a sort of hybrid career for myself, sometimes dancing, sometimes acting, sometimes—most wonderfully—both. But in this new arena, with its larger horizons and different standards, I discovered something very important.

I discovered I had a face. And that in the “real world,” people look at faces, actual faces, not the ones you paint on in the dressing room. For the first time, I turned my critical attention to my face and experienced a deep alarm. *Panic* may not be too dramatic a word. Not that my face was so very awful. It was worse. It was so very . . . normal. Unlike my body, my face wasn’t going to get me

Books, but if there were, I gave myself odds over Jonathan Franzen. So I began to feel good about my body again, but feeling good is not the same as feeling beautiful. Nothing made me feel the way dancing had. Nothing made me feel as deeply feminine, as strong, as released from ordinary cares and concerns. The ability to dance is a unique skill, which in some sort of mental checks-and-balances list in my mind had made up for my many inadequacies in the normal world. So I didn't have a college education, any sort of practical skill set, or financial security. I could pirouette! How many people can say that? Except now even

health, basically." This worked about as well as perspective usually does.

Actual help arrived from, of all places, a phrase in a Henry James novel. I was reading *The Europeans*, and this little sketch of the character Eugenia jumped out at me.

A compliment had once been paid her that, being repeated to her, gave her greater pleasure than anything she had ever heard. "A pretty woman?" someone had said. "Why her features are very bad." "I don't know about her features," a very discerning observer had answered; "but she carries her head like a pretty woman."

Now, this may seem like just another version of the old confidence-as-beauty

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I couldn't really say that. Whenever I tried recapturing some stray sense of self by returning to ballet class, the difference between what I could once do and what was now possible was too great to make me feel good. It actually didn't feel good at all. Joints had stiffened. Flexibility was lost. I could make pretty arms while sitting at my writing desk, but this was not profoundly inspiring. Neither my ego nor my paragraphs were impressed.

And there was still the matter of my face. After a visit to the dermatologist to have a mole removed, the office started sending weekly e-mail offers for discounted Botox and various fillers, but I hesitated over these. Not that I oppose medical enhancement out of hand, but late 30s seemed too soon for that, and this was an identity crisis, not a cosmetic one. Also, according to my mother, variety of expression was my real beauty. If I froze up the works, I could get stuck with a perpetual Mrs. Claus face, and hiding behind tree branches would be my only option.

I scolded myself for being so vain and ridiculous. I told myself, "Let it go" and "You know who you are and what's really important" and "You have your

trope, but for me this was more than beauty as a state of mind; it carried an actual physical directive. I could imagine a choreographer or a director giving it as note: "Try your entrance again, Meg, but this time carry your head like a pretty woman." I could picture what to do. An insecure woman would carry her head down, apologetically, or maybe thrust out, defiantly, but a pretty woman would carry it easily, balanced just so at the top of her neck, floating. A pretty woman is free. She can take her loveliness as a matter of course and get on with the interesting task of thinking and doing.

If I know anything, I know that to do something well means you have to do it a lot. You have to train. You have to absorb technique in order to be able to transcend it. And—and this is important—you have to forgive yourself for failing to achieve it absolutely, constantly. You have to take the long view and trust that you will get better, that your understanding will grow, that there is a process to all the things that matter most in life, and that the best things are difficult. Difficult is good. And so I'm practicing. I'm working on it. I am training to remember to carry my head like a pretty woman. And I'm hoping that eventually, this will feel . . . normal. □ *beauty >000*