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Breaking points

Does anyone really have an ideal ballet body? Or do unrealistic body standards just end up taking a toll on every body in ballet culture?

by Isabella Lara

[Content Warning: This Essay Discusses Eating Disorders and Body Dysmorphia]

Throughout my years of training in classical ballet, I have heard all sorts of comments about my body and overall physical appearance. Even if instructors don't intend to make negative or insensitive comments, whenever I heard "lengthen" or "engage your abs," I've heard "you're fat," or "maybe you shouldn't have eaten that lunch." While I understand logically that this may not be what was meant, there is always a part of me that can't let go of what I've heard in the past.

These disordered thoughts have become almost inescapable. In a world of dance based on appearance and a thin and lean aesthetic, it isn't surprising that body dysmorphia, along with clinical eating disorders, are so prevalent, especially in girls ages fourteen to eighteen. Even as an adult, in a collegiate dance environment, I have encountered comments from instructors about my body which triggered these unhealthy thoughts. Even if these comments were not meant to be negative or malicious, my internal negativity toward my body led me to perceive these comments in a negative way. Hearing "you've lost so much weight," on the other hand, made me happy, as if this were some kind of incredible achievement. Then I thought that I must have looked bad before if my losing weight was that noticeable.

While I understand that seemingly benign comments have been normalized in society, it is important to recognize how comments about the body of any kind, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, can have a large impact on a dancer. Especially in the case of dancers who have had a history of disordered eating, there is no telling how these comments can affect a dancer's mental health.

Eating disorders are currently considered a public health crisis within North America, with approximately ten percent of young girls diagnosed with clinical eating disorders based on research from the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA). According to their research, those who participate in sports that are reliant on outer appearance and aesthetics, like dancing, are much more likely to develop an eating disorder. For young girls, there is already pressure to look a certain way based on societal ideals. Especially in the age of social media, it is difficult not to compare ourselves to the thin or ideal body types

society has placed on us. For dancers, and especially those training in classical ballet, there is a fixation on appearance, and each class is spent meticulously working to obtain an impossible level of perfection.

Even with body-positive feedback from instructors, staring in the mirror for hours a day is likely to lead to hyperfixation of the body and overall appearance. That being said, I believe there is a long-standing culture in ballet which prizes physical aesthetics over passion and artistry. So... where does this standard of thinness in ballet come from? It wasn't always the case. In the early 1800s, this preference for a thin body type wasn't common. It was considered a good thing to have muscle and weight, because it meant you were able to afford food and other basic necessities. During this time, those who were thin were the people who couldn't afford to eat regularly, as identified in an article (Ferris). French ballerina Louise Fitzjames was described as being "Skinny as a lizard" by a French critic in the mid-19th century. The expectation of thinness in ballet didn't start until later on. Balanchine is famous for stating his ideal ballet body which includes a long and thin frame. He is even rumored to claim he wanted to see the bones in the chests of his dancers, though this has been disputed by former dancer Toni Bentley.

The thin aesthetic in ballet persisted. Can we let Balanchine take all the blame? An already unrealistic body expectation may have allowed for these ideas to flourish regardless of Balanchine's preferences. We may never know exactly where this ideal ballet body came from, but it is clear that the desire for this aesthetic is still around.

While there is more open dialogue surrounding these issues within the dance world, body shaming and disordered eating among dancers have not disappeared. Dancers who have spoken out against the negative treatment they have received because of their bodies not being the "ideal shape" include former New York City Ballet soloist Kathryn Morgan. She joined Miami City Ballet as a soloist for the 2019-2020 season, and in YouTube video discussed the unfair treatment she was subjected to and the body shaming she underwent. Morgan had parts taken away from her despite how hard she worked and ended up spiraling into an unhealthy and disordered mindset. Morgan's experience is just one example of toxic and unhealthy expectations set for dancers.

Despite choreography becoming more difficult and standards of technique becoming harder to obtain, dancers are expected to stay unreasonably thin, which can result in malnourishment and energy deficiency. According to the National Eating Disorder Association, some further complications of disordered eating can include the breakdown of muscles, low blood pressure, and low pulse. Health and nutrition specialists like Rachel Fine, better known as "To the Pointe Nutrition," have worked to spread awareness about the dangers of under-fueling and present ways in which dancers can develop a healthy and nurturing relationship with food.

I think as dancers, it is important to hear from our instructors when it comes to proper nutrition and fueling. There should not be a stigma around eating, and it is the job of a company or school to provide dancers with the proper resources for a dietician or nutritionist, to avoid unhealthy

habits and dangerous information that may be given by those who are not nutrition specialists. While of course there will always be many teachers and directors with advice on the best diet, true health and balance can only be achieved by listening to the body and receiving guidance from a licensed nutritionist.

I believe if I had heard more positive talk surrounding food and body image growing up in ballet, I would not have gone through the issues I did as a result of body dysmorphia and eating disorders. While we can't go back in time and undo all the toxic aspects of ballet and the disorders that accompany it, we can change how we operate in the future by being more aware of language and representation both in and outside of the classroom. Dancers need to know that there is no such thing as a "perfect ballet body," or one kind of "ideal body." After all this archetype of the "perfect body" was just made up arbitrarily, and it's the dancing that counts.

Bella Lara graduated in the Spring of 2024, with a BFA in Dance Performance and a minor in Literary Journalism. Bella hopes to dance professionally and will be freelancing with several companies in the upcoming season.

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