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The Worst Break Up: Falling out of Love with Ballet

by Isabela DePalatis

At the age of two I met my soulmate. They were my best friend and closest companion. We went to school together and spent every recess playing in the park. As we grew older, we experienced traumas together and shared our deepest secrets. They were always my best friend and my partner for life. We got into our early teens and we began to grow. As my body changed, their love for me shifted. I was a woman now and the curves I began to show were not the most flattering at times, but they would tell me this would just be a phase. Though they made comments here and there about my new found “look”, it was nothing to fret about because, as they had always been there for me, I knew I could trust them to keep me feeling safe and as myself.

As I kept growing, they found new ways to tease me about this insecurity. They looked at my breasts getting “too large” and my hips getting wider and really beginning to look “like a Latina.” They would convince me to try on the tightest clothes and look at myself in the mirror for hours. I began to curse my heritage and family for giving me this body. For how could my best friend—who I used to confide in to help me when I was anxious and pull me out of my depression—hurt me in such ways? I continued to trust them. They may do this, but they still knew how to get to me. They would buy me flowers and tuck my hair behind my ears and whisper secret dreams of success and a future of love and devotion. I continued to love them.

As I moved on to college, the abuse got increasingly worse. Not only did they continue to make me wear tight clothes and blame my adult body on my genetics, but they began to tell me I wasn't good enough for them. They would compare me to every girl in the room and tell me I wasn't anything in comparison to the others. I began to suffocate at the thought of meeting them. I dreaded walking into the room and seeing them with other beautiful women who deserved to be with them much more than I ever did. This was when I realized I had fallen out of love with “them”—with ballet.

I wasn't the first person to experience traumas at the hands of ballet. I began to realize how widespread this experience was when I was scrolling on TikTok and finding that so many other young dancers face the same thing. This has become an epidemic for so many young women in the ballet world, feeling as though they are not enough, along with having big issues around body image. In a study done by Angela Pickard, she followed twelve young dancers over the course of six years who strove to be professional ballet dancers. Many of them had experienced body insecurities as young as twelve and began limiting their diets or being overly cautious about their weight.

Another example of ballet causing detriment to body image is in the case of famous former ballerina Miko Fogarty. She first caught the eyes of the public at the age of twelve in the documentary *First Position*. By 18, she had signed onto the Birmingham Royal Ballet. After only a year of dancing with that company, she began questioning her love for ballet. She had started meeting with therapists because of issues with body dysmorphia, anxiety, and depression, and stated later she had lost her passion for ballet, wanting more out of life.

This isn't to say that ballet is all bad or affects everyone in this way. Ballet serves as an escape and a love for many people around the world. Though this is true, we do have to wonder, why is it that it can cause so much trauma to some, but not to others? In one study, it was reported that over 45% of female ballet dancers had struggled at one time with disordered eating, and that far more male ballet dancers suffered from disordered eating than non-dancers (Stevens 19). This does not even account for all the cases that go unreported. Pickard found: "The dominant values and body beliefs are transmitted through a process of continued perpetuation of the ballet aesthetic: particular size and shape of the ballet body, how the ballet body is viewed and how it is treated. Ballet body perfection is prevalent, legitimized and accepted as the expected norm in ballet culture" (Pickard 16). Ballet has a tendency to push for the "ideal body" and this can lead to many issues around body dysmorphia and disordered eating that contributes to a toxic environment for dancers.

Another issue with the ballet world is the lack of diversity amongst professional ballet dancers. According to Zippa in their article titled "Ballet company member demographics and statistics in the US," according to the United States Census Bureau data of 2021, 49.6% of dancers were White, 3.8% were Black, and 9.1% were Asian or Pacific Islander. The report also found that Hispanic/Latinx dancers made up 26% of the total, while dancers of mixed race or ethnicity made up 10.6%. The lack of diversity plays into a lack of body acceptance, furthered by ballet's emphasis on the "ideal body," oppressing those who don't match what is stereotypically preferred. Having a lack of representation in the ballet industry leads to a lack of confidence and role models for young dancers, increasing negative self-talk in the classroom or feeling as though one is unable to achieve one's dreams.

All of these things make ballet into a toxic environment where some young dancers feel they are unable to shine or achieve their goals. In order to fix this issue, it all starts with home studios providing positive feedback to their dancers and encouraging them to pursue their passion, no matter what they look like. It is also important to push for large companies to diversify their spectrum of dancers when it comes to weight and cultural background. Every dancer has a dancer body, regardless of the current state of the dance world, and it is the responsibility of future generations to take the steps to alter society's perceptions around what ballet looks like.

One day I hope my soulmate finds its way home, but till then, I will continue to explore my other loves and push to change the realities of ballet.



Isabela DePalatis graduated from University of California, Irvine in spring of 2023 with a BFA in Dance Performance, another in Dance Choreography, a BA in Psychology, and a minor in Drama. She is excited to continue exploring dance and further deepen the ways it can depart from stereotypical norms. Hoping to study Dance Movement Therapy eventually, she believes that when you find your own style of dance or movement, you are finding your way to understanding yourself at a new level and learning to relate to others.

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