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The new shift in the ideal ballet body type

In an age where body positivity and dancer health are emphasized more than before, can the dance world become more accepting of varying body types?

by Emily Villa

In recent years a slight shift has begun in the ballet and dance worlds, where a larger variety of body types have begun to be more widely accepted. This shift is due in part to the few ballerinas working today with more athletic body types. A great example is Misty Copeland. Although she is very petite, she is strong—and also very visible as a role model, attracting high profile press and endorsements formerly reserved for athletes.; this shows how the world not only considers Copeland to be a dancer but also an athlete. It is extremely challenging to get people to view dancers as not only amazing artists, but also athletes, as fit as competitive basketball or football players. With the increase in cross-training among dancers and the new trends of having healthy bodies that might show muscle development and curves, the ideal body type of a dancer has the potential to change. This could give dancers who don't fit into a certain mold the chance to have professional careers in dance.

Ballet has typically favored the body type of a girl who is thin, usually thinner than what is deemed to be healthy, with long, lean limbs, an extremely flat front side, and little to no curves throughout the body other than a small waistline. This ideal body type is so hard to achieve that many dancers force themselves to live unhealthy lifestyles, even developing eating disorders. These are especially prevalent in the ballet atmosphere. In 1997, in the *New York Times*, dance writer Jennifer Dunning quoted Dr. Michelle Warren as saying that, “The average incidence of eating disorders in the white middle-class population is 1 in 100. In classical ballet, it is one in five” (Dunning).

From a young age, many dancers are told that their bodies have to look a certain way, but strict diets often don't provide them enough nourishment for the amount of exercise they do on a daily basis. Dunning explains that, “The problem of eating disorders has created a minor industry of nutritionists and therapists specializing in dancers' emotional and physical problems” (Dunning). In a *Pointe Magazine* article called “Too Fat? Too Thin? Too Tall? Too Short?” dancer Melissa Sandoval, who has danced with companies across the United States and competed on the TV show, “So You Think You Can Dance,” explains how her experiences with her weight affected her. After being advised to take hormones for health issues while dancing with a company, she was put on probation for gaining a little weight and felt she “could not make the artistic management happy” (Blank). This eventually led to mental trauma and leaving the company and the ballet world for the time being.

It is clearly important not to “body-shame” dancers. Even though that dancer was talented, given many roles for a while, she dropped out when she got signals that she was not being accepted by the company's director. If an athletic body, one that is healthy and muscular, is taken into consideration by ballet companies, there may be an increase in healthy, strong, athletic bodies, while simultaneously decreasing the amount of frail and fragile dancers. The growing shift in body aesthetic outside of the dance community can help to increase a positive outlook on the way bodies are viewed in the dance community. Ultra-thin bodies have not always been the norm.

In an interview with *New York Magazine*, Misty Copeland stated that it is important to look at the different time periods when trying to understand the change in the ballet body. She states that the, “ballerina body is constantly evolving. In this day and age we do a lot more contemporary and athletic movements that create a more athletic physique. With the conversations that I’ve opened up, people are more open to expecting the different body types that exist. Also, if you go back to the 1930s and ‘40s you’ll see these ballerinas that had really soft physiques — they didn’t have muscles, they weren’t six-feet-ten, and had big breasts — but that changed through the ‘60s and ‘70s when ballerinas got really thin. Now people are more open to the concept that dancers come in all shapes and sizes” (Weatherford). Through this statement, she shows that when looking at the ideal body type it is also extremely important to look at the different time periods through history.

Today, it seems more important than ever for bodies to look healthy, without having to be too skinny. Maybe, then, there is a slight window to take advantage of this and incorporate this body style into ballet. The fitness craze has been booming in America in the last few years, and the idea of cross training, or having many different fitness training types, so popular with elite athletes, has made its way into ballet as well. Pilates, yoga, and exercise routines such as Barre technique, which is inspired by ballet, have become more instrumental in fitness training across the United States. And when dancers cross train, they may build body types that look more athletic.

Pilates has been popular with dancers for many years, because, as one popular dance magazine summarizes, “the exercises target specific muscles and joints, they make you more aware of your body so you can work to prevent future injuries” (Do’s). Pilates is also extremely helpful at strengthening your core and other muscles in a beneficial way for dancers. Yoga and meditation are also often used by dancers, improving balance and focus. These are some of the reasons dancers find that cross-training helpful. Along the way, dancers may gain excess muscle in pursuit of strength, so the dance world may continue to see bodies change, perhaps developing a broader view about what they deem beautiful. As society’s definition of the word changes, so does ballet.

Misty Copeland is only one example of what the ballet world can become. More people with varying body types need to push themselves to pursue a dance career, if it’s what they are truly passionate about. It is important to look back at some of the amazing dancers that may not have been accepted immediately into the ballet world, but their persistence led them to be accepted. Their passion will help them flourish, and they will be able to affect future generations of ballet, becoming positive role models for all those dancers who may have different body types. Then, young dancers may not feel it necessary to pursue an “ideal body type” through unhealthy methods. A dancer’s health is the most important thing they can cultivate in order to last very long in a physically tough career. When the ballet world starts to prize truly healthy and fit dancers, a negative outlook can become a positive one.

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