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Good Enough

Ever felt discouraged by ballet's demand for perfection? Here's what teachers need to know—and what dancers can do to gain confidence

by Carrie Cox

Perfection. What does this even mean? Will *I* ever be perfect? This is a question that ballet dancers ask themselves on a day-to-day basis. The unrealistic standards of the ballet world have tortured young dancers into believing they will never be good enough. It's a world where mirrors are a mix of a necessity and a burden. Having the ability to watch oneself thrive is extremely rewarding, but scrutinizing yourself constantly can have lasting negative effects on dancers' minds and bodies. Body image is especially valued in ballet, and if expectations are not met, the ideals can lead to injuries, eating disorders, and low self-esteem. But all of these negative effects are completely avoidable. Personal goals and achievements are far more important and beneficial to dancers, in comparison to the way they look. In the long run, the discipline and hard work taught by ballet is far more important than anything else. But it's hard to remember that.

“Dancers can all tell you what they don't like about themselves, but very rarely can they tell you what is good about their body,” says Kathleen McGuire in her *Pointe* magazine article “Surviving the ‘Fat Talk’.” I completely agree, because I can name every single flaw about myself that I dislike. I don't even know where I'd begin. To this day, it's still hard to compliment my body, because I'm always comparing myself to those around me.

Forcing dancers to strive towards perfection does nothing more than lower their self-esteem, which is not something that should be happening to young, aspiring dancers. Dancers are very vulnerable, especially when they are still trying to discover who they are and where they fit into the dance world. As I was getting older, my teacher once told my mom that I should think about losing weight since I was getting “chunky.” While I didn't do anything drastic to lose weight, my self-esteem became very negative. I could not stand looking at myself in the mirror, and my motivation to put on a leotard and go to class dropped everyday – for nearly a year. I almost gave up dancing because I never thought I would be good enough.

Rather than teaching students ways to improve based on how each individual body is built, some teachers don't even bother working with those they do not believe have the potential of a professional career. I was a victim of this, as one of my ballet teachers from the past dedicated all her focus to the few girls who had the ballet body type. I had never focused on my figure before, but seeing how I looked in a leotard compared to most of the other girls made me question if something was wrong with me. Since I also craved my teacher's attention, I spent all my energy trying to get a better figure – rather than trying to improve on my technique and artistry.

A technique as demanding as ballet should be taught with care and attention to all dancers to help motivate them to succeed, rather than accept defeat. Teaching dancers to be more self-aware, rather than to be more aware of others, is key to success. Offering the best tools for dancers to be the best they can be can help turn defeat and fear into confidence. Learning to be

confident, hardworking, and driven are some of the best traits that can be taken from ballet, and it's more worthwhile than having the most open hips, arched feet, or thinnest figure.

Dance teachers should focus on supporting their students in technique classes, and teaching them how to approach material with the bodies they were given. However, as I was growing up, the aesthetic was the most important part of ballet – and it's still like that to this day. In a *Dance Magazine* article by Toba Singer, former San Francisco Ballet soloist Edward Ellison says that learning ballet is “a balance between giving 100 percent and allowing the movement to come.” While there is a “correct” way to perform steps, every body is different, and young dancers need to figure out how the movement fits best with THEIR bodies. All dancers have the ability to grow, but they need support from their mentors to achieve the needed confidence and motivation.

So, consider—is perfection the only way to succeed? This mindset can cause young dancers to make poor decisions in their daily lifestyle, some which results in negative behaviors. I know many dancers who cut back on their meal intakes to try to achieve a ballet body. The way ballet is represented on social media and the stage can cause dancers to go to extremes to achieve a certain body aesthetic, which is very unhealthy for the majority of the population who are not naturally thin.

There are few dancers who do not know someone in the dance world who has suffered from an eating disorder. There was a dancer from my past studio who suffered from anorexia due to wanting to be as skinny as she possibly could be. Because of her rapid decline in health, she was asked to leave the studio, and was not allowed to return until she was cleared a “healthy” weight by her doctor. When she was finally cleared, almost a year later, she was never satisfied with the way she looked and danced, causing her to eventually quit dance altogether. She was one of the most talented dancers in the studio, but her unrealistic expectations ended her desire to dance. In Dawn Smith-Theodore's article “The Eating Disorder Trap,” from *Pointe* magazine, she says about eating disordered dancers: “The love they had for dance eventually starts to fade away. Thoughts become very black-and-white: If they aren't perfect, they're a failure.”

I, myself, saw myself as a failure multiple times throughout my dance journey, and I've considered quitting many times because of it. Since I had such low self-esteem, my motivation and appetite suffered, causing me to regress and get injured. In fact, most of my long-lasting injuries occurred during the time I was most self-conscious about my body. Realizing I was on a downward spiral to quitting, I tried to have a more positive outlook on ballet. I realized that I was trying too hard to be someone I'm not, and that's when I realized my mistake. I was exhausting myself and burning out because all my energy was used to achieve a so-called ballet body. I had become distracted. I was seeing myself as a failure, and was beating myself up about it daily. Something had to change.

Gavin Larsen's article in *Pointe* magazine discusses how Miami City Ballet soloist Emily Bromberg found self-confidence. The article “The Quest for Confidence” says to “be pleased with yourself...it's not arrogance or narcissism. You know you're not perfect – but you feel good about yourself.” An aspiring dancer needs to hear and understand this. In an interview from *Pointe* magazine, principal dancer Maria Kochetkova explains how she had trouble with her height when she was first auditioning, “At auditions I was told I was too short, but then artistic

directors would see me dance and I would get invitations anyway...it proves it's not about your height, but how you present yourself in a certain role...It's all about your dancing." If Kotchetkova had not had the confidence and motivation to prove herself, then we would not know of the beautiful Maria Kochetkova today. I also had to overcome many obstacles, as described in these articles, to get where I am today.

It took some time, but I discovered that eating healthy and achieving my own personal goals was far more important than looking the part. When I finally realized that success is measured individually, and that I actually had the ability to create the confidence I needed to succeed, my dancing took a turn for the better. I started to see results, and I was living a very happy and healthy life. My teacher began taking notice of me not because of what I looked like, but because of the tremendous amount of work I was doing, and the clear improvement from my performances in my classes. Whereas perfectionism was causing me to fail, my strong work ethic helped aid my growth in ballet.

If I had succumbed to defeat when I began to lose my passion, I can safely say that I would not be dancing anymore. However, after watching friend after friend leave the dance studio, I chose to lead a healthier lifestyle to stay happy in the studio. The most important lesson I learned was that I should always dance for myself. This is also what brought back my confidence. Bodies in ballet have been a controversial topic in the dance community, but it should not be. All dancing bodies are beautiful, and that is what should be taught in a nurturing environment. Guiding students to be the best that they can be is far more important than asking dancers to pursue an unrealistic perfection. Ballet dancers need to learn to be confident with what they can offer within, and know that every body is good enough to dance.

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