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## Beauty Work: Lessons in Ballet

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# Beauty Work: Lessons in Ballet

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More than any other art, classical ballet makes gender its problem. The focus is obvious but subtle. Almost every class is two-thirds female and the hallways of a ballet school are always disproportionately pink. But ballet also curates a vision of femininity as the very ideal of its practice. The vision is manifest not only in the old, narrative productions of the nineteenth century—like *The Nutcracker*, or *Swan Lake*, or *Giselle*—full of the tiaras and tulle that women wear, but also in the newer, abstract pieces of the twentieth century and after, where dancers shuck off fairy-tale stories and make abstract shapes in nothing more than leotards. In all of these, women are the furthest extension of the classical ballet idiom, literally and figuratively. It's women who rise up to their toes en pointe, women who unfurl their legs to that height around the ears, women who do the thirty-two fouettés. Women who are lifted up to make gravity-eluding shapes in the air. The *pas de deux*, a male-female dance at the core of classical technique (partnering is usually the last class added to a dancer's training), remains a vision of heterosexual relations that exchanges support for lift, ballast for flexibility, power for finesse. Men are in control; women are on display. Ballet stages gender with every step.

Ballet has always known, that is, that gender is performance. It's easy to assume or even to dismiss the word—performance—when it comes at you in a theory of culture. In ballet, it comes at you with the power of art. Femininity is something to be perfected and made beautiful. A hard, endless, noble kind of work. That's why ballet can seem, to the young women practicing it—to me, for example—like an honest and subtle thing, even if its artifice is obvious—more than obvious, pretty embarrassing, really—and its relevance waning. Here's the ideal, it says. Here's the effort. Here's the distance between the two.

“You have to fall in love with the discipline”: that's how Wendy Whelan [puts it](#).

Whelan was until October probably the greatest female ballet dancer working in America. Six weeks ago she gave her last performance with New York City Ballet, the company where she danced for thirty years. I saw that final show. I probably also saw her first, since I grew up with the New York City Ballet and for some time lived close enough to go to most season openers. Whelan arrived in the company just after George Balanchine died—Balanchine, the founder and choreographer who made it the greatest and most important place for dancing in history. He famously declared that “[Ballet is woman.](#)” Whelan’s career stretched from the time I came to dance as a passionate childlike fan to the time I came to dance as a serious young-adult critic to the time—now—when I come to dance as an uncertain, middle-aged watcher. I loved Whelan through all of this. She was the first ballerina I picked out as special and followed particularly, one I could always count on both to show me something new and to remind me of what I loved. Steely-thin as a young dancer, she only got thinner, more muscular, as she aged; she has an angular face and limbs with muscles so long and powerful that it seems her bones have to stretch to fit them. Her fingertips don’t trace arcs in the air so much as send arrows through it. As Alexei Ratmansky, a choreographer for the company, pointed out in a [New York Times story](#), the span from knee to ankle in Whelan’s legs is “perfectly proportioned,” offering her legwork a hyper-precision that she can exploit mercilessly. As a young dancer no part of her was soft. Plus she wasn’t classically good-looking. She wasn’t an obvious Aurora, the “Sleeping Beauty,” or Odette, the swan from *Swan Lake*. Not an obvious Sugar Plum fairy, in *Nutcracker*. But she was strong. She worked hard. There was an unapologetic sense of effort, even tension, in everything Whelan did. To some, that was off-putting. I thrilled to it. “If it were any easier for me I wouldn’t have been interested,” Whelan said about dancing in a documentary interview, and I believed her when she said it.



Photo by [Henry Leutwyler](#)

I danced from when I was four and told my mother out of the blue that I needed to start ballet class to when I was

sixteen and left for college in a funk of injury as well as acquiescence—finally—to my basic lack of talent. Classical ballet requires a certain kind of body in women. Height helps, but proportion matters more: long legs and a short torso, a small head and even, articulate feet. I have none of those. My feet are double-wide. I'm moderately tall but it's mostly torso; my legs are short and squat. My head is abnormally large. I have big hands and stay thin only with extreme effort. Plus I'm not flexible enough, musical enough, quick enough, physically articulate enough for classical ballet. I knew all this early; from the age of about twelve, I knew I'd never be much good. But I kept going—daily classes, exercises, stretching, in spite of my body's resistance. Or because of my body's resistance, as if I wanted to defy the more-and-more insistent suggestion that hard work might not after all be the entirety of the endeavor. I kept my makeup and sewing supplies, for ballet, in a green tackle box. I punctured blisters to make callouses form more quickly. I could snap the shank of a pointe shoe and get blood out of satin. I wanted to believe that beauty was the product of effort. Faced with the agonizing difference between what you see in your mind and what you see in the mirror, the only answer is effort.

That's what discipline means, after all. Classical ballet is built from a series of basic steps, which students practice at the *barre* for the first half of class before moving into the center of the room for more complicated combinations. The first and most well-known is the *plié*, a bend of the knees, but perhaps the most basic of those basics is the *battement tendu*, a movement of the foot and leg out and in. The exercise couldn't be simpler, but so much builds on it: the reach of a *tendu* toward each position—front, side, back—defines a kind of radius, emphasizing how the surety of a dancer's up-and-down axis allows the reach of a dancer's out-and-in sweep. If you can do *tendus* slowly and well, you understand how every part of your body fits together. If you can do *tendus* quickly and well, you're ready to use that understanding. *Tendus* are an unassuming test. A sadistic teacher could make up a pretty good hour out of nothing but *tendus*. Balanchine reportedly gave his dancers dozens of *tendus* per class.

This fall, when with Whelan's retirement I began to think about my own involvement with ballet, I visited a school near my home and watched some classes. The atmosphere was familiar, though I'd never been to this particular academy before: the waiting room where parents keep watch with a motley of coats and bags and water bottles, the halls where students take up various versions of slouch and stretch. The air of sweaty innocence scored by the overlapping fuzz of different classical music CDs thumping out from different classes. Inside, the rows of intent faces, the visible intake of breath as preparations sound for the next exercise. The furrowed brows while combinations are explained. There is no room for sentimentality in ballet class; what grace and loveliness come are wrung from an industrial commitment to repetition. *Tendus*, especially. Because this is an excellent school, because it teaches clean, pure, technique, every class I saw had a lot of them: the hesitant group of barely-begun six-year-olds just as well as the fleet of breathtakingly-advanced teenagers. *Tendus, tendus, tendus*. 16, 32, 64. One side, the other. Again. I realized, watching, how revealing the step is, how you can tell from *tendus* which bodies make sense, in the strange and sense-defying idiom of classical ballet, and which don't. Given *tendus*, even an out-of-practice eye (mine, at this point) can pick out the dancers who will certainly have the chance to make real beauty with their bodies and the dancers who never will.

Who never will: the decision to train in any art is the agreement to open yourself to a similar disappointment—to realize that your voice or skill with words or drafting ability might never be enough, regardless of how much you try. The same with the decision to practice a sport, perhaps (though athletics, which also maintains bodily health and includes the periodic pleasure of winning at competition, seems to me more forgiving in this regard than art, the goals of which are unquantified, inhuman and out of reach; worth mentioning, perhaps, is the fact that dance requires a physical condition that is ultimately punishing for joints and bones and muscles). Such a realization might be the real lesson of growing up. Not the achievement of the ideal but the relinquishment of it. An early version of the inevitable, middle-aged concession that much if not most work is wasted, that you will never reach the standards set for yourself, that the narrative of effort and merit is a lie that you learn, live, distrust, and then pass on again. What choice do you have?

And yet ballet seems a particularly cruel brand of that choice, given the magnitude of work it requires and purity of beauty it promises, given how those standards and beauty are lodged in the brute physical fact of having a body and

the weird, ideological performance of being a woman.

There's a history to this performance, of course—though the twinning of femininity and virtuosity is surprisingly recent. Dance forms gestured towards ballet from the sixteenth century, when French kings included choreography in court pageantry. But ballet became recognizably *ballet* only from the early nineteenth, when Marie Taglioni rose onto the tips of her toes (actually not quite the tips, but the effect was the same) and lifted an art form with her. The image of Taglioni as *La Sylphide*, clad in a white tutu (pictured), still seems lodged in some archetypal cache labeled *ballerina*. With Taglioni, dancing shook off its heritage as the concern of men who wanted to be noble and became the glory of women who wanted to be beautiful. Taglioni's accomplishment was purposefully paradoxical, since she made ballet seem more otherworldly only by making ballet much more arduous (Jennifer Homans describes this combination well in her history *Apollo's Angels*). Taglioni leaped, turned, skimmed the floor with her toes: with her, movements that were formerly seem as rare stunts became part of the standard vocabulary. To do this, she practiced six hours a day (under her father's tutelage). She performed steps over and over and over. She made sure that she could hold the most difficult poses for a count of one hundred. All this to make ballet ethereal, otherworldly, light, graceful, *feminine*. Taglioni underlined the silent truth of the art form; ballet is woman when ballet is work.



Taglioni did more. When her dancing concealed that work, when she made grueling steps appear natural and spontaneously expressive, she made ballet—precise, noble, restrained—an opportunity for emotion. Taglioni's art emerged when a classicist drive for form ran into the romanticist need for feelings. Women in particular loved the results, Homans reports, because they saw in it a chance for femininity to be passionate. Taglioni put on stage an emotional depth that had been excluded from respectable definitions of what women should do. So women adored Taglioni. Who knows if they suspected the six-hour days.

The standard narrative of Whelan's career is that she softened, in her maturity as a dancer, in order to reach new heights. By her thirties, she was no longer tense with effort. She relaxed and achieved greatness. The culmination of this shift is generally thought to be a 2005 ballet called *After the Rain*, choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon and now staged most often as its second half only. In it, Whelan appears in a pale-peach leotard without tights, recently without shoes, her hair down—as close to naked as a ballerina is likely to get. She and a partner move through a series of intimate entanglements. He lifts her from the ground, he leaves her there. She curls and extends. He carries her, horizontal, over the floor, raises her onto his shoulder, his back, his thigh. The ballet seems unconventional in its simplicity and vulnerability. But in other ways it's the essence of conventionality, a *pas de deux* that takes to extreme the woman's exposure as an aesthetic object. This piece presents a limit-beyond-limit of women's work, in which subjection emerges from the other side of achievement. Whelan's body, with its almost ethereal glow, seems in this piece to have strained itself into translucence. This is what comes after working so hard, this is the reward. It's not just that you get to be perfect. It's also, then, that you get to feel.

I have never liked *After the Rain*. Or, perhaps more accurately: I have never liked the fact that I like it. The drive toward unassailable beauty is not, covertly, a desire for emotional openness. At least, I hoped not.

This fall, waiting for Whelan's last show and watching ballet classes, I decided to take a class, too, for the first time in about two decades. I'd been enduring a bad season, in general, a time when various efforts had come to nothing, when my mind and emotions felt as wrinkled and worn as my body. So I did exactly what I shouldn't have done. I ordered a new leotard and a new pair of pink tights and I sewed a new pair of shoes (you never forget) and I put my left hand on the barre and stood in fifth position and did some *tendus*. I remembered the nothing-else-like-it

sensation in my thighs, with those *tendus*, the satisfaction when the simple movement of your legs coming together pulls your whole body into alignment—the feeling something like a spiritual version of perfectly sealing a Ziploc. I remembered why this training is so alluring. And then, as I looked at myself in the mirror, so impossible. It was over, what had never been. I didn't go back to the studio.

The farewell performance for Whelan included that documentary about her career, in which she spoke about her gratitude for the past and her optimism for the future (she will keep dancing, in different forms; she has begun some modern-dance collaborations). She spoke of her evolution, her gradual transition into self-confidence. “I was not necessarily beautiful then,” Whelan said of her early years. “I’m beautiful now.” The audience liked that line. Look at this gorgeous woman, the thousands of us thought together, saying that she wasn't! Imagine her needless diffidence, those years ago! How funny, we agreed. We all laughed. Then the movie ended, and the dancing began again, and there was Whelan in the flesh, taking her last steps on the NYCB stage—and then she finished, and curtsied, and high-fived her partners, and collected flowers, and the curtain came down. And we all cried.

But I watched the next day's performance, too. It was an ordinary Sunday afternoon. Outside was a bright fall day. The roses and confetti from the last night had been cleaned from the stage. The program was full of Tchaikovsky, including a *Tchaikovsky Suite No. 3* that included several apprentices—youngest of the company's members, just beginning their careers. (Whelan started as an apprentice.) One of the dancers came from that ballet school whose classes I had just observed. She is not yet twenty, already among the best of the best in the world, dancing on this wide, wonderful stage, and she still has so far to go—to earn a full spot in the company, to become a soloist, to become a principal. To get better and even better. “You don't have to have a master plan of how you're going to be successful,” she explained in a [podcast interview](#) from last June. “You just have to work hard.” Also: “you deserve to dream big.”

I asked her how she got involved with ballet—this art, history, discipline that has become her work and her dream. She told me that she wanted to dance before she'd seen a single performance, before she'd seen any of her eventual idols, like Whelan, on stage or even in video. She was drawn by the image on a poster showing a young girl performing a perfect *tendu*. She thought, “I can do that.”

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