

Life As Dance

How our passions help us stay
on *pointe*



BY GINA MAZZA HILLIER

Up the marble staircase I skipped to the third floor of the Jenkins Arcade, straight into Jean Ralph's Theatrical Shoppe. I was 11 and on the verge of an event that any young dancer anticipates with fervor: being fitted for my first pair of *pointe* shoes. For days preceding that trip to town, I was good for nothing except lying around with a wistful visage, imagining myself aloft in a spectacular *pas de bourrée*, my feet a flash of pink satin.

Jean Ralph's was a microcosm of the *atre* life behind the scenes. Just turning the door's hefty brass knob and leaning inside was enough to lure any hopeful girl into a sanguine dream of dancing at Carnegie Hall, twirling endlessly while Tchaikovsky's score blares out a big finish. The shop was a fairyland of sequins and netting, dance-weight tights and feather boas, supple-leather jazz shoes and yes, ah yes, those pink beauties that would soon be on my feet.

Finally, my exalted moment arrives.

Jean measures each foot twice then whisks behind the stockroom curtain, re-emerging with a Capezio box.

The lid is tossed.

The slipper is lifted from tissue.

Its soft sheen nearly blinds me with delight. I gingerly slide in my foot, and suddenly... transcendently... I become beautiful. The world spirals away. There is only me in the room – Cinderella, gazing upon a glass slipper. Emotions too immense to contain in my young heart swell to the surface as a giggle that sustains itself for a good ten minutes. Giddy was all I could be for the next few days.

Was there some magic in cotton-backed satin stitched around a block of packed paper and paste? Perhaps a bit of the mystique surrounding several hundred years of dance lore, but more so what touched me was the indescribable joy of happening upon one sure thing that signified my precise place in the

scheme of things. In those moments, not only did the shoe fit, but I fit exquisitely into my life.

From age eight into teen-hood, I gave myself to dance and discovered through it the meaning of vocation—an internal calling that intersects passion and action; something that, whenever I did it, reminded me of who I was, completely. As a girl, unbothered by worries that wreck havoc on adults' lives, I happily immersed myself in all the sensations of being a dancer. I pulled my hair into a chignon and wore leg warmers as a fashion statement. During math class, my feet would mark off combinations beneath the desk. Walking anywhere usually involved some version of a leap or turn. Spare hours were spent tapping out time steps in the game room, scuffing the tile floor beyond recognition. Mom once told me I was born breach, feet first, because I wanted to arrive dancing. I loved this anecdote because it seemed to confirm how I was meant to be all along. The rewards for nurturing my natural ability were a surety of purpose, a sense of belonging, and *pointe* shoes—beribboned trophies for having reached a level of achievement doing that which I loved.

I've never forgotten that feeling. It set a life-long criterion for me to uphold, a litmus test against which I measure the appropriateness of all my important endeavors, and how relevant each one is to me.

Relevance, the word, derives from the Latin root *relevare*, to raise up. In the language of dance, the equivalent verb is *relevé*, a movement in which the dancer raises the body onto the toes. It's an apt metaphor to describe one of the most intimate tasks we're each called upon to perform: defining the point of our lives, and identifying the actions through which our singular identities blend with the rest of the world. We're each dancing solo but part of a greater corps. Our charge is to find our proper pulse within the universal rhythm.

What lifts you up?

What is relevant to you?

When you listen to your heart, what is it calling you to do?

Of course, finding what we love doesn't disqualify us from strife. Any worthy dream, while striving for it or once reached, is liable to be fraught with some version of disappointment. We can live our passions and still feel awkward, at least until we've gained competence. Athletes, CEOs, rescue workers and world leaders aren't born—they're made.

To those of you who've dared to follow your heart's calling, you can empathize when I compare pursuing one's most precious goals to auditioning in front of a packed auditorium—naked. The very act of revealing our innermost expressions begets vulnerability. We stand fragile and fully exposed, hoping the world picks us for callback status, or better still, chooses us for the coveted role. In this sense, we set ourselves up for rejection, and our longings must be strong enough to withstanding our anguish. More often than not, simply preparing for a chance to compete demands hard work, tenacity, a touch of madness—even agony, as in my toe-shoe story.

Shortly after those first slippers were purchased, disillusionment set in. During class, they felt boxy on my novice feet. Pointework adds grace to the dance, yet I wondered how with what felt like blocks of wood tied around my appendages. At first, forcing my entire body weight onto the toes felt abnormal (which it is). The fact that it can lead to deterioration and malformation of the feet, vertebrae, hips and knees didn't occur to me then. Sometimes we're oblivious to our own sacrifices.

Preparing the shoes seemed uncertain, as well. Only by trial and error did I learn where to sew the ribbons and elastic to keep the slippers from flopping off. Then came the selection of toe pads to stuff into the shoe's platform. Foam rubber crumbled easily. Rabbit fur made my feet sweat. Before long, blisters formed along the fronts of my toes. I settled on lamb's wool, jamming in just enough of a glob to feel comfortable on any

given day. Blisters further mixed with sweat and broke open. Rising to a simple *sous-sus* sometimes felt like razorblades were in my shoes. I found it to be an interesting challenge, feigning grace when you're actually in excruciating pain.

Weeks more of training, and I understood what my ballet mistress meant when she deadpanned that *pointe* shoes are the only instrument of torture from Catherine de Medici's day to survive intact into modern times. Continued chaffing caused blood to ooze from the blisters, necessitating bandages. Just wrap those toes and work through the hot spots, was all I could do. Eventually, my feet hardened to the task with calluses, scars I bear to this day.

I didn't go on to audition for a ballet corps or seek klieg lights on Broadway. Circumstances led me away from home, financially on my own and apprehensive about my ability to make it in a profession that isn't known for top salaries and job security. Instead, I took a bank job, opened a savings account, and in three years had enough to start college. I chose a sensible major at a state university down south. Teaching dance helped pay for textbooks, gasoline and plenty of Domino's pizzas.

Life ensued, including marriage, kids and a career. The last of many pairs of *pointe* shoes were packed in a hope chest along with my bridal gown, graduation mortar and a childhood doll bought with S&H green stamps. As an adult, I sought work that rivaled the intensity of my affection for dance, something I could lunge toward with equal whimsy and conviction. I found it in writing—again, an intrinsic joy that took root in my formative years.

Writing is similar to dance in the feeling that it gives me. When I adeptly throw myself into the spirit of the work, I experience that same glad, expansive, inner flutter as trying on a freshman pair of toe shoes. One carefully constructed sentence can send me to the same place in my mind that the first sublime oboe notes of Mozart's "Serenade in B Flat" take me in body: a space outside of ordinary time where I move to a primal, centric rhythm, blissful in my eloquence, not caring what anyone thinks of my fevered display, and not judging myself, either. I'm convinced that this core of passion for what I do is comprised of the same artistic substance that Nureyev

developed into his legendary dynamism, that Baryshnikov molded into technical proficiency so constant he could afford to be nonchalant about it.

Funny, I've chosen another profession that isn't known for its stability. Yet I tolerate the uncertainty of a writer's life because my desire to see a creation become real carries me across choppy waters to an island of profound beauty and meaning. I sense oncoming tides wanting to reach the shore, and am impelled to meet them with my arms extended. Any sacrifice, in my mind, is less traumatic than succumbing to inertia, less terrifying than attempting to stave off a creative tidal wave. Besides, I expect to be continually startled, made uncomfortable and taught in my work. I may not be the best writer in the country, just as I wasn't the best dancer, but I've learned that's not the point. As Baryshnikov said, "I do not try to dance better than anyone else. I only try to dance better than myself."

Do you recall a time when you fit perfectly into your life? There's a "toe-shoe moment" somewhere in your personal biography, one in which circumstance and desire intersected with astonishing accuracy. In that moment, your existence shifted from ordinary to enchanted. The shoe fit and you felt sublimely free to be who you are.

Perhaps such moments have been obscured in the fog of daily obligations, or forgotten altogether. Reflect on your childhood. There is authenticity in the yearnings we feel when we're very young. These early expressions serve as touchstones that guide us to our relevance. By once again giving these instinctual imaginings our full attention, we can recognize and appreciate the deep meaning they represent—possibly blending bits of their magic into our current lives. With hope, these inclinations become our life purpose, contribute to a portion of it, or serve as high watermarks for our present endeavors.

I still take class every week and occasionally perform because dance still has the power to ignite a fire within me. So long as this desire burns, I will give it expression—either by engaging in it or writing about it.

We cannot sequester our passions inside us. They will invariably reveal themselves somewhere in the choreography of our lives—either by calling them forth or in less opportune situations that push us toward them.

And why would we want to abase them? Our passions catalyze self-awareness, so useful in helping us grasp and give shape to our world. Like fine sculptors, we can use it as raw material to carve the masterpiece that is our life. In expressing our genuine character, we learn to shrive away that which is tangential, and keep what's most significant. Over time, a complete image begins to form. We "imagine" ourselves into wholeness.

So I ask again, what brings you alive? Stripped to bare essentials, what really matters in your life and to what extent are you honoring it? What is the point of your life, truly? I'm inviting you to know.

This piece is part of an essay collection that Gina Mazza Hillier is writing about "choreographing a life of personal relevance." Visit www.ginawriter.com.