Mistreatment in the Ballet World

The dark story behind a dance studio's rise to excellence

by Cayla Flagg

I had a teacher growing up who changed my life, who came into our mediocre dance studio and made it excellent, imbuing it with exquisite technique and award-winning precision. Maybe this is the reason our studio director turned a blind eye to students and parents who reached out to report suffering they experienced under his reign. For a long time, I worshipped the ground he walked on; most of his company members did. He was strong and definite and decided our entire futures, which, at the time, meant he cast everything, including ballets that gained company entry into the Regional Dance America national festival. He also trained us for scholarship auditions, and under his leadership, the dance school became of the top in the area. This is the dark story behind how we achieved our rise to success with such rapidity.

The man who was both our teacher and artistic director had a gift for making exquisite costumes, and, if we spent enough years dedicated to him and became one of his few elite, he would loan hand-crafted tutus to the studio for us to wear in company showcases and ballets. One year, I was at a costume fitting for *The Nutcracker*. It was a Tuesday night, and a handful of us had been asked to stay late after class. Literally quivering with excitement, we lined up in front of the mirror, and tried not to look too eager or crowd him too much as he slowly and deliberately looked at the costumes, smiling maliciously, seemingly pleased that he was torturing us with his leisurely pace. Halfway through the line, as the Teacher closed the hooks on someone's pure white tutu, the dancer wearing it gasped, "I literally can't breathe in this." "Well," he said, "you have two weeks to lose the weight." None of us said a word. It was expected, normal. And the evening moved on.

On another occasion, the teacher called one dancer's forehead a "five-head," a weak joke to make about someone we all knew had insecurities about her looks, already worried that her forehead was too large. Scholar Robin Lakes writes about this type of behavior in an essay about authoritarianism in the dance world, pointing out how ballet and modern dancers have been treated over the years, and the origins of such behavior. She says, "the teacher solidifies his power in the classroom by granting himself the right to comment on students' looks, including physical 'defects' over which the student has no control." At times, I had noticed the Teacher was inexplicably cruel towards his best students, so that "their egos didn't get too inflated." About this old-fashioned notion, Lakes says, "some of this derives from historical tracts about rearing a gifted child...the gifted child needs punishment so that he or she does not get too inflated...because of assuming evil intentions on the part of the child."

As we rose up in levels at my ballet studio, we had to take more and more classes from this same artistic director/teacher. He also controlled our actions outside the studio, as I found out. The summer before I was to be put on pointe, I decided to attend a summer intensive and auditioned into a level in which everyone was expected to be on pointe, so I went out and bought my first

pair of pointe shoes. I had already been cleared by my Teacher to start my pointe training in the fall, so I figured I'd get a head start. However, knowing this Teacher would want to not just be told, but asked, I emailed him asking if it would be okay if I started pointe a few months early. He replied that no, it would not, explaining that anyone but himself could let me get into bad habits. According to Lakes, this kind of proprietary behavior "emphasiz[es] the cult-like nature of [our] environment, [in which] the teacher becomes 'convinced of the rightness of his solutions' and claims to have sole insight, characteristics which find support in studies of gurus" (Lakes).

Another ballet teacher I respected, who had, in part, inspired me to audition for the summer intensive in the first place, was furious. She saw I was being stripped of valuable training and encouraged me to go on pointe that summer, anyway. But I was terrified of angering my teacher back at my home studio, so I spent the entire summer watching the rest of my friends dance on pointe, while I was stuck on flat. When I returned to my studio, my Teacher informed me that he would like me to drive two hours to attend a fitting up in San Francisco for new pointe shoes with the rest of the new pointe class; apparently, he found the pointe shoes I'd bought myself to be unsatisfactory. I complied.

I tried to comply with being on time for classes, as well, but sometimes it was out of my control. If we came late to class or failed to correct mistakes, we had to sit and watch the rest of the class. It's not an unknown rule in ballet classes, but it was imposed on us way before we were old enough to drive, so we depended on parents, who often had many other demands on them. This threat of punishment resulted in a lot of stress and many an argument between me and my mother if she was running late. I would spend the first fifteen minutes of every class attempting to slow my heart rate, reminding myself that I hadn't been late. Why were we blamed for something we often couldn't control?

Other times when empathy was absent with this Teacher come to mind. When a wave of teen suicides consumed our community, it took a dancer's sibling with it, and the grieving dancer's class had just heard the news of her brother's passing in the lobby. Dancers came into the studio hugging each other, tears splashing down their fronts. Her friends in the class had gone on trips with the dancer's brother, hung out at their house, had gotten to know him, to love him. Our Teacher yelled at them to stop crying, and told them that this is why people like to dance, because it distracts them from the problems of the real world, so they should force themselves to be distracted, force themselves to stop crying. This is a story I was told later, at that night's rehearsal and will never forget.

The next time a high school student committed suicide, a few months later, he told us that we could text him if we ever needed anything, and even wrote his cell number on the mirror. Not one person wrote it down. We already knew this Teacher had a real problem with crying. He would teach us to never cry and to always lie instead of risking looking bad or making him look bad. "Are you tired?" The answer was unequivocally "No." "Are you upset?" "No." "Are you ready to work?" "Yes." He took our voices from us and replaced them with his own.

He would prowl the room, keeping his voice loud but just under what could be considered yelling, while holding eye contact for prolonged amounts of time. His volume of vocalization was a threat, a reminder of how easily he could be pushed over the edge into "yelling territory." His fingers snapped menacingly along with every beat. He later informed us he called this state "putting on his 'intimidation factor,'" and kept it up for the entirety of most classes.

Unsurprisingly, he believed it was most effective to intimidate people into trying their hardest, and told us so. This makes sense in the context of his authoritarian personality structure, in which characteristics such as a "low opinion of human nature" are present, for he believed we otherwise lacked the motivation to try our best (Lakes). However, whenever we had a substitute teacher, most students, instead of doing their normal, safe, clean double pirouette, would try for a triple or a quad, and usually land it cleanly. We would take risks and dance more artistically. I could almost see the rigid tension leaving my classmates in waves and the feeling of freedom emerging from inside them as their improvement skyrocketed.

One time, I missed a three-hour class and rehearsal on a Friday, but came to the full seven hours the next day. I went up to the front of the room on Saturday to apologize to my teacher for missing class the previous day because I had been sick, though, of course, I'd already emailed him before that class to let him know. He took one look at me and said, "You don't look sick," then proceeded to explain to me how another of his dancers had arrived that day with a completely white face, looking very sick, and he'd sent "*him*" home. Clearly, the message was that I should have jeopardized my health by coming to class sick in order to let him see the physical confirmation of it right in front of his face. And I should have been so ill that I still looked it the next day.

Another time, I was taking pointe class and could feel my skin tearing into a blister near the end of class. I knew I could handle the pain, but I also knew I would perform better at the all-day rehearsals Saturday and Sunday that weekend without a full-fledged blister, and, therefore, asked this teacher if I could remove my shoes. His reply was something along the lines of, "When you're Clara, will you stop in the middle of the show if you have a blister?" Then he knelt in front of my feet and yelled, "Harder! Harder!" during the next combination of bourrées. I'm still not sure who was right in this instance, which, perhaps, speaks to the still-lingering effects of his mistreatment. Sure, I had to get used to the pain of blisters so I wouldn't stop in the middle of a rehearsal or show. However, I know that sometimes pain can become so extreme that my body acts in a manner to protect itself, for example, to reflexively fall off pointe in a surge of pain, no matter how hard I try to tell my feet to stay up. Later, I told a dancer at another studio about the incident. She said I should have claimed that I thought my foot was bleeding and asked to wrap it in order to get a few minutes off. Was it really necessary to lie in the ballet world, I wondered?

After each run of Waltz of the Snowflakes in *The Nutcracker*, we would all rush to our dressing room to find a note taped to the mirror, either wrought with awful criticism, or bland satisfaction. Although our artistic director was in the back of the house on what we called the "god mic," he would somehow leave a note for us at the opposite end of the theatre without anyone ever seeing him do it. The underlying intention is now clear to me: he was omnipresent. He saw and heard all, but was seen only when he wished to be. The cast and crew would joke about those ominous

notes left for us, but anyone could see the fear in all of our eyes as we rushed backstage, leaving a trail of fake paper snow in our wake as we thundered and clacked toward the dressing room on twenty-one pairs of pointe shoes. That fear existed alongside the laughter of small children playing games and having red circles painted onto their cheeks.

At his most positive, we were almost never given the feedback "good," only "better." One afternoon, he used the word "excellent," and I could have sworn every head in the room swiveled on the spot to stare at him. Much more often, we got pointe shoes and tennis shoes thrown at us. We were told to suck in our stomachs because he didn't want to see our "dinners hanging out." He once asked the younger sister of one of the greatest dancers ever to attend our studio, as she held one leg in the air, "Why can't you hold your leg this high? Your sister could at your age." Not surprisingly, tears filled her eyes and her face blossomed bright red. I felt, even then, that our Teacher's behavior in this instance fell in line with a different segment of the authoritarian personality structure, a "contempt for the weak" (Lakes).

We didn't complain about his abuse, but I'm sure he could see the hurt and betrayal in our eyes whenever he dished it out. I'm certain he was aware of his own actions, for he would say sometimes that, although we might think he was bad, the teachers he had growing up were much worse, that we didn't know how good we had it. He would talk of the man who would ignore a student for a year if they messed up in his class, and the woman who would screech, yell, and storm out of the room, unwilling to continue. The latter, now, to me, doesn't sound too different from how he acted.

But that wasn't the worst of it. Possibly the worst of it all was that we were all on his side—we shunned those who were yelled at most, and made friend groups based on who his favorites were. I think that let him know that his control was, as ever, impeccably in place. For example, during an evening rehearsal in the second semester of my senior year, he performed some of the worst yelling I had ever seen from him. After a pointe solo that looked beautiful to me, he screamed at the dancer that it had been "terrible." I don't remember exactly what else he said, but I still remember the gut-sinking feeling of horror inside listening to it. The dancer maintained a neutral expression on her face until she was excused, then ran into the lobby and cried. I was the only one who followed her out and comforted her.

The next day, during the fifth of the seven hours of rehearsal that day, I missed an entrance. Our artistic director stopped the music and accused me of missing it on purpose. I implored that I had not, that I was simply tired, and that I was sorry. He told me no, that I was lying, and that I'd missed it because I didn't like how he'd been treating that girl the previous day. My eyes snapped up to his and I declared to him, for the first time in my life, "No, I don't like how you treated her. But that is not why I messed up." I can still feel the terror I experienced after saying those words, the rush of pure anxiety rising though my stomach and all the way up my neck. I knew then, looking into his eyes, that I had signed my death warrant with him. He never gave me a decent role in a ballet again. I had waited years to say those words, and knew exactly the threat that awaited me when I did. In the wake of my proclamation, his face became increasingly red as he yelled and cursed at us, finally screaming that the rehearsal was over because he couldn't take

our incompetency any longer. However, I knew that he was truly upset about losing his control over me, someone who had played his game for seven years.

Even so, my ballet career continued. I attended college dance auditions and wasn't nervous at all. I knew nobody was going to throw a shoe at me. No one was going to yell at me. Nobody was going to take away a role I'd been dreaming of performing since I was three years old. When I attended the UC Irvine audition, I was shocked at how kind the teachers were. I couldn't believe the lack of threats, and I can still remember the shock I felt when the professor in charge said that the faculty understood we were nervous and would make allowances for that. Why would they not try to intimidate us to the best of their abilities, to see what we were made of and how much we could handle? I couldn't understand it. I was in the audition waiting room practicing for hours and hours while my fellow dancers lounged on the floor, eating snacks and tapping on their phones. I couldn't believe their level of relaxation and lack of work ethic. There was material to be learned and practiced over and over again! How did they ever get away with this kind of behavior?

Even though I saw how calm and nice the teachers were at the UCI audition, at first, I was terrified of my dance professors, especially those who taught ballet. As Lakes says about dancers who have been treated badly, "it's almost like child-abuse victims...it takes a while for them to trust that these nice people who are teaching them are not going to suddenly turn and strike them...They come in already wounded." Indeed, the biggest challenge I worked on those first few months was relaxing enough in class to allow myself to make mistakes, so I could dance without fear and grow to deepen my knowledge.

Even after four years at UCI, my biggest issue is not my technique. It's not my performance ability or my strength, my acting, my stamina, my artistry, or the speed of my learning. It's the fear that I will forget the combination while dancing because I'm so nervous. And why am I so nervous? Because I'm afraid I will forget the combination, even though I know that I know it.

I think it's important to demand excellence inside one's classroom, but to also show students that failure is an opportunity for growth, and not an act to be punished. When I teach, I try to create an environment open for experimentation and joy. I aspire to treat everyone as though they all have an equal chance at becoming a professional, regardless of their body type and physical appearance. I admire the respect we give to our dance teachers, but considering them gods who get a pass simply because they are older and possess impressive resumés is no longer permissible to me.

Cayla Flagg began dancing at the age of 3. Throughout their youth, they not only took classes in dance, but also became part of their studio's performing company, with which they won various scholarships, competitions, and awards. They also traveled with their studio's ballet company to regional and national festivals. They graduated from the University of California, Irvine in June of 2021.

Works Cited

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