

Are You Enough?

In the ballet world of ideal forms and mercilessly mirrored spaces, dancers can lose heart—but fortunately, there are some teachers who use improvisation and individual empowerment strategies that can turn things around.

by Emily Chapman

It was the winter of 2016, and I was sixteen years into my training as a ballet dancer. I was eager to dance, with the same trepidation many young dancers face, bracing myself for correction and wondering what it would take to finally get it all right. I was lying on my back, on the cool gray marley floor, dressed in thin pink tights and a simple black leotard that fit the dreaded dress code. There were unavoidable mirrors on three walls of the room, and there were young dancers surrounding me, experiencing the same space in silence.

Our teacher began to lead us through a breathing meditation to start the ballet class: “Take a deep breath in,” *how long is everyone else inhaling for? I don’t want to be the first one done.* “Deep breath out,” *are we making a sound on the exhale? Should I exhale through my nose or my mouth? When will we start dancing?* “Deep breath in,” *Uh oh, I started breathing in before she asked me to. I’ll just take a shallow breath so I catch up with everyone else. Can we start dancing yet?* “Deep breath out,” *okay I did that one with the right timing. I’m getting cold, when will we start dancing?* “You are enough.”

I had no response. Those words shocked me. That day, in 2016, when I was 19 years old, was the first time I had ever heard someone tell me that I was enough. “You are enough,” she repeated, “right now, in this moment, exactly as you are.” I felt tears well up in my eyes, even though I couldn’t fully process the weight of what she said. This teacher was Katie Scherman, a choreographer and teacher inspired by the philosophies of Alonzo King and Pina Bausch, and I am forever grateful to her for this moment.

The culture of ballet as I knew it did not support this statement. In ballet, we are often focused on the future— from pliés that inform jumps later in class, to rehearsing for our next performance. We are very rarely aware of the present without a connection to the context of our futures. The ballet culture that I knew projects a “never enough” mentality in which dancers strive for perfection, knowing all the ways in which we will fail along the way. So, to be made aware of my body in the present moment, and to accept myself as “enough,” was a radical shift in perspective.

Having established a classroom culture of acceptance and the valuing of personal experiences, we continued through the technical motions of a ballet class. Scherman prompted us to make choices with our musicality, our upper body orientation, or the textures of different movements

within a sequence. She encouraged us to close our eyes, and to feel how the movement existed within our bodies, removing the pressures of external imagery. With this new awareness, she offered an opportunity to improvise in a ballet class, giving agency to the dancers to make decisions about their own movement practice and take risks with the development of their artistry.

Our first attempts at improvisation were timid and restricted, having never experienced the opportunity to assert a creative voice through ballet technique. I remember getting my feet wet with imitation, trying to embody Scherman's improvisational style rather than take the risk of listening to my own impulses. However, the more we were prompted with imagery and challenged with tasks, the more willing I was to step further outside of what I had always known—continuously encouraged by the sounds of “good,” “beautiful,” and the affirming “yes!”

Past Teachings

Typically, in ballet, most aspects of a dancer's professional life are decided for them by authority figures: from what classes they take and what they wear, to what they perform and any form of promotion in their career (Wulff). Ballet training does not often involve learning how to make decisions for ourselves. Growing out of a culture of authoritarianism, obedience to a teacher or master has been valued over speaking out with an individual perspective (Lakes).

Along the same lines, ballet is often taught with the image of a perfect ballet body in mind, which is subject to change with historical context. This image acts as a guiding principle to the technical standards of the form, creating a system that values the imaginary ideal over the perceived imperfection of one's own body. Maartje Hoogsteijns approaches this conflict from a materiality-theory lens, asserting that “one could say that ‘the ideal ballet body’ has more weight and presence, or is more material, in the training method than the actual physical bodies of dancers. The perfect ballet body is actually a ‘disembodied’ body” (Hoogsteijns, 129). The constant need to mold one's body to “the ideal” restricts a dancer's ability to be an individual or to express themselves through ballet.

Tasking students with improvisation while practicing ballet technique subverts these views—creating space for individuality and respecting the value of different bodies in ballet.

Call it Contemporary Ballet?

With the added freedom and emphasis on individualism, does improvisation turn any ballet class into a “contemporary” ballet class? This is how Katie Scherman's class was labeled within the

context of a Ballet BFA program. Clearly, ballet technique has evolved over the years to accommodate the demands of choreography, and to continue to challenge the field. For example, George Balanchine made a version of ballet technique that served his own choreographic sensibilities, including more speed and exaggerated positions. This way, the steps done in class would support the steps done in rehearsal. In today's professional dance world, dancers are often tasked with improvisation as a part of the choreographic process (see Alonzo King, William Forsythe, Crystal Pite). So, training to improvise in ballet technique would be reflective of current choreographic tendencies, and thus a progression of ballet.

Personal Pedagogy

Prior to Katie Scherman's classes, I danced for others—adhering to their definitions of perfection and feeling stifled by the molds that I could never seem to fit into. Inspired by the freedom I felt in Scherman's class, I want to develop my own teaching style in this direction. Incorporating improvisational practices into ballet technique classes is one clear way to do this. Training dancers to make decisions for themselves, assert their artistic voices, and express their individuality, offers a new opportunity for growth in the field of ballet. It is through this freedom of exploration that new ideas and information emerge.

Most importantly, with this practice, we honor and respect students as empowered individuals with clear artistic views; encouraging creativity and innovation past the conventions of classical ballet technique. Scherman's class opens the door for further exploration of progressive pedagogy in ballet, and the other ways educators can empower students in dance.

Katie Scherman told me that I was enough; my students will know they are too.

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