

Children in Ballet: Strung Up, Strung Out

The following article is excerpted from the wonderful book, "Games Children Play" (Hawthorne Press). It is provided here by the kind permission of its author, Kim John Payne, whose website - <http://www.thechildtoday.com> - is a resource for parents and teachers.

Along with opera, ballet is one of our classic artistic forms. Why is this? And why is it that so many children undergo a classical ballet training?



Ballet is a highly stylised, perhaps the most stylised, of all movement forms. While an ordinary human being can kick, strike or bounce a ball, punch or wrestle, perhaps even do a roll or turn a cartwheel, there are very, very few who can move like a classical dancer. This is not surprising since it is exactly the point,

the aim of ballet. The movements are designed to appear not only graceful but 'other-worldly', to lift the audience up and away from earthly existence; another, connected feature of ballet is that it is almost totally audience-centred. Of course the dancers experience feelings - particularly pain! - but they must not communicate this to the onlooker. They must appear as if the earth with all its cares and limitations does not exist. Gravity is overcome and denied. The dancer seems to draw us away into another dimension.

This denial of gravity shows itself in many ways. The most obvious is the tutu, and the costuming in general. The tutu extends out from the waist and forms a frilly band around the dancer. It draws a clear distinction between the body that shows above the waist, which is often gaudily and attractively dressed, and the lower body which is as far as possible plainly adorned in tights. The tutu emphasises the dancer's upper body, and also prevents her from seeing her own legs and feet.

The whole posture of the dancer is developed and sustained by training the muscles, particularly of the abdomen and the legs. The dancers spend painful, feet-distorting

hours, learning the en pointe technique, in which the knuckles of the toes are forced to carry the entire body weight. This increases the illusion of weightlessness, as only a tiny surface area is in touch with the floor, reinforcing the impression of a negative attitude towards the earth - the least possible physical contact with it the better. The feet move in tiny steps that seem to float the upper body across the floor; or the dancers are thrown and leap high into the air, seeming to hover there like a bird. The gaze is directed up and away. The arm movements generally begin at the waist and move upwards, seldom dropping below the tutu. A stylistic copy of the way a child moves with ease and levity is sought and parodied.

So ballet audiences, particularly since the industrial revolution, were encouraged to leave the world behind, with all its increasing materialism and mechanisation, and be transported to higher, more graceful realms. Not to appreciate this artform was considered to be the mark of a Philistine, someone who was cut off from the more noble aspects of cultural life.

In fact, a child's movement and inner intent, particularly at play, could not be more different from the ballet dancer. Whereas the dancer undergoes hours of training to achieve a technique-based levity, the child moves with an effervescence and buoyancy that is as beautiful as it is unconscious. The classical dancer's movements are highly stylised, the child's are totally natural. The dancer draws a sharp divide between inner experience and what can be externally observed, while the child knows no such divide; the way the child moves is strongly motivated by the way he feels. Whereas the dancer deals in abstraction, the child is immersed in reality. The dancer's moves are carefully directed, the child's are spontaneous. The dancer moves for the appreciation of an audience, the child plays because it is a natural expression of life. The dancer's aim is to rise above an earthly existence, the child's energies are completely opposite - he wants to learn about the world and become a part of it.

The following is from "The Art of Dance" by Isadora Duncan.

"The school of ballet of today, vainly striving against the natural laws of gravitation or the natural will of the indi-

vidual, and working in discord in its form and movement with the form and movement of nature, produces a sterile movement which gives no birth to future movements, but dies as it is made.

The expression of the modern school of ballet, wherein each action is an end, and no movement, pose or rhythm is successive or can be made to evolve succeeding action, is an expression of degeneration, of living death. All the movements of our modern ballet school are sterile movements because they are unnatural. their purpose is to create the delusion that the law of gravitation does not exist for them.

The primary or fundamental movements of the new school of the dance must have within them the seeds from which will evolve all other movements, each in turn to give birth to others in unending sequence of still higher and greater expression, thoughts and ideas.

To those who nevertheless still enjoy the movements for historical or choreographic or whatever other reasons, to those I answer: They see no farther than the skirts and tricot. But look - under the skirts, under the tricot are dancing deformed muscles. Look still farther - underneath the muscles are deformed bones. A deformed skeleton is dancing before you. This deformation through incorrect dress and incorrect movement is the result of the training necessary to the ballet.

The ballet condemns itself by enforcing the deformation of the beautiful woman's body! No historical, no choreographic reasons can prevail against that!

It is the mission of all art to express the highest and most beautiful ideals of man. What ideal does the ballet express?"

To encourage children to take up ballet is to impose an adultified concept of beauty on those that have no need of it. If the child is repeatedly exposed to this form of training, he will eventually begin to adopt the adult values of the dancer; this is to invite emotional disturbance and to restrict the child's full experience of childhood.