

bridget breiner

I have two seemingly unrelated stories to tell you; to me they demonstrate the same thing.

When Merrill Ashley retired from the stage of the New York City Ballet in 1997, she was ending a career of 31 years. Joan Acocella, dance critic for the New Yorker, wrote a lengthy and beautiful tribute to her. She described Ashley as a dancer of great technical skill and precision, but also as a dancer who longed to be what she saw as Balanchine's true ideal – a dancer of "emotion, self-abandon." She was an allegro champion who longed for adagio, and this shaped her distinctive quality. Ms. Acocella writes:

"Ms. Ashley's career, then, like many big careers, is the story of an enormous gift combined with a yearning for something else. We always imagine that these artists come to us whole. They don't. Behind the scenes, they are killing themselves to repair or at least cover some flaw that they received with that gift."

This statement hit me like a blow at the time, and for about two years I could quote it verbatim to anyone who would listen. It always had the same effect. Everyone recognized it as the deep truth that we all felt but could never name: our heroes are imperfect. Their great gifts are coupled with great failings, and it is the struggle between the two that makes the great artist.

We see it in ballet and theater, music and opera. Maria Callas, who was said by her critics to sound as if she sang with potatoes in her mouth, used this same voice to become a legend. She was famously imperfect, and she made people weep. Marie Taglioni was criticized by her father and ballet-master for her long, ungainly arms, yet with the crossing of those arms she changed the entire aesthetic of Romantic ballet.

I don't mean to suggest that these artists sit back and wait for Art with a capital "A" to happen. They are working like demons to overcome some perceived failing, struggling for an ideal of perfection that is perhaps not even physiologically possible for them to attain. The irony is that this imper-



© Stuttgarter Ballet

fection and this fierce work are as essential to their art as their gift is. It makes them unique.

As an audience, we are impressed with perfection – we admire skill, and rightly so. But it's not what moves us. What moves us is the part of the performer we can identify with – the chink in the armor, the frailty of being human flickering through the picture of perfection. In striving to become their ideal, these artists become real. They give us a personalized vision of what it means to be alive, right now.

My second story is a tale not about an artist at all. Derek Redmond was a British sprinter in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. Perhaps you remember this incident. On the track during the race where he hoped to make history, he ripped his hamstring and fell to the ground. In a later interview Redmond said that he was so focused, so committed to the race, that he actually believed that if he got up that second, he could still win it. He couldn't even walk. As the whole world watched in shock and horror, he struggled forward. The crowd began to cheer him on, many in tears. His father climbed down from the stands onto the track, put his arm around his son, and helped him hobble across the Olympic finishline.

I don't remember a single other event from that Olympics; I don't know who won that race. What stuck with me, and in the minds and hearts of most of those watching, was the image of human tenacity and compassion exhibited by that son and father. Certainly he would rather have won and been a hero in the obvious sense. In showing his failure and his longing to the world he became a hero. He touched millions of people in a way that mere success would never have reached them. He became an artist of life.

Bridget Breiner has been principal soloist at the Stuttgart Ballet for ten years. Next season she will transfer to the same position at the Dresden Ballet while still supporting Stuttgart as a guest

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Die Stadt an der Newa duftet nach Puschkin. Das Mariinsky muss sein Stammhaus verlassen, weil die Bühne renoviert wird. Der Star schlechthin, Diana Vishneva, gastiert entweder in Berlin und New York oder feiert daheim im Forsythe-Programm Triumphe, während vor dem Haus die Szene auch andere Kompanien wie Kannon Dance oder Iguan Dance verehrt. Eine Weltstadt im Umbruch

Erbschaften

Wie Tänzer anderen Tänzern Tänze weitergeben – und damit die Choreografen entmachten

Royal Ballet turns 75

One of the major companies of the world at a cross roads in their history. A lot has happened. Dowell was ineffective, Stretton was a disaster and Monica Mason has worked miracles to restore the morale of the Company. However, there is only one British female principal in the company: Darcey Bussell (who has now left full-time work with the company) – and one male: Edward Watson

Frederick Ashton with Marie Rambert in his first choreography "A Tragedy of Fashion" in London 1926 © Yvonde

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