Body Image In The World Of Ballet

As a young dancer, about the age of 13, I joined a competitive dance team at my local dance studio. The countless hours of working towards this high level of dancing had finally paid off. I would quickly learn that even though my hard work got me on the team, my instructors wouldn't often put me in the spotlight, and I began to wonder why. The girls who had the "perfect dancer" look were often put in the front, wanted for solos, and given special attention in class. They would go on to earn roles on the current show's pas de deux and variations. One day I would ask why I was denied these roles to my instructors and they told me that I just didn't have the "look". Their "perfect dancer" bodies were naturally more thin, and mine more on the thicker side. So if I wanted to earn these spots, I would have to work just that much harder to achieve not only the athleticism of a dancer, but the look of one. This was something I wasn't able to achieve over my next three years of competitive dancing, and I have recently learned that not only was that okay, it might have been impossible for me to achieve. Only recently, six years later, have I begun to try and undistort my body image from the toxic one I was given.

The more I researched about body image in the dance world, I discovered my story was not the only one. Wendy Whelan, Principal ballet dancer for New York City Ballet accounts, "I was well into my professional career when I was first criticized for being too thin, too angular and crooked. I have a body where, if I drop a few pounds, it shows a lot. I wasn't trying to lose weight, but when you work hard during the season, you do. I felt defenseless. Even now, it can still feel harsh when a critic remarks on my 'physicality'" (Blank, Gaynor, & Wozny, 2019). Misty Copeland, Prima Ballerina for American Ballet Theatre, faced more than just body type discrimination in the dance world. Not only was she African-American, but "She didn't fit the predetermined mold. The image we have of ballerinas is one of very thin, very pale, fragile fairies who flit across the stage with ease...Misty is athletic and voluptuous with a brown complexion" (T, n.d.). Though it made me sad to see that this was a community-wide issue, I was not surprised. I even admit to seeing certain people as ballerinas, and others not, because it has been ingrained into my brain ever since I entered the dance world.

How did this distorted image of the "perfect dancer" begin? Mackrell (2014) points to the 1920s, an era where "women in general were under a new pressure to become slender" and clothing was "cut to reveal boyish hips and flat breasts". In the 1930s, George Balanchine reinforced this idea by emphasizing the importance of the ballerinas' bodies being the "line". "Dancers felt immense pressure to adhere to that image, often resorting to eating disorder behaviors. Whether it was a severe restriction or replacing food with cigarettes, the goal was to lose weight that wasn't there in the first place" (Mamoulides, Joseph, & Coban, 2018). Mackrell (2014) also accounts that the first generation of women wearing leotards hated them, because they suddenly needed to be conscious of their image all of the time. This image of the perfect, slender, dancer has stayed relatively the same ever since. As recent as December of 2019, Dorothy Gunther Pugh, Artistic Director of Ballet Memphis, said, "As an artistic director, I care about how our ballets look. Weight is important. Choreographers, certainly, come in and say, 'I will not cast that dancer because he or she is too big.'...Trying to keep women like little girls is a power move, albeit sometimes not a conscious one....dancers' bodies need to look a certain way to make the kind of pictures we want for classical ballet" (Blank, Gaynor, & Wozny, 2019).

Though I think that this “perfect dancer” image specifically is unhealthy, I do understand that there is a certain “physique” that comes with dancing the extreme amount of hours professional dancers. “This is a profession of athletes; it is a profession where we look so closely at the body. We enjoy looking at the body—healthy, beautiful bodies. Sometimes both the excess and the underweight are unappealing to look at” (Blank, Gaynor, & Wozny, 2019). One wouldn’t expect a football league to draft players who are not physically fit for the job, and same with ballerinas. But even in the NFL, not all bodies are the same. We shouldn’t put ballet, an art form, in a box with so few dancers