

The Ballet Barre

by Aminah Wells

There is a ballet barre in my living room. There isn't much room for it, but I make it work. You see, just before COVID-19 arrived, I took my first ballet class. I felt awkward and gangly trying to waltz and pirouette across the floor, but there was a sense of belonging at the barre. The barre was smooth to the touch and securely fixed to the wall, a reminder to keep my core stable while attempting the unfamiliar movements and positioning of my feet, legs and arms. When the world shut down and my classes were canceled, barre work seemed easy to replicate at home and a good form of exercise. My kitchen counter, however, wasn't cutting it—I felt like I should be cooking, not pliéing—so, I bought a barre.

I never took ballet as a child but I have always loved to dance and the way music makes my body move. In middle school, my mom enrolled me in African dance classes where I learned how to move to the beats, colors and textures representative of my ancestors; my feet bare, my body clothed in bright fabrics, my heart beating in time with the drums. But the teenage years came, along with self-consciousness and self-determination, and I gave up these classes to be like my friends, which meant sleeping in and playing sports and chasing boys.

My Saturday morning classes were replaced with Saturday night mixers and the droning beats of hip-hop and R&B. Dark gymnasiums filled with sweaty kids were now my dance studio, the twisting of my hips calling to the boys looking on. I'd eventually lose myself with those boys while pressed together in crowded spaces, teasing at an intimacy belonging to adults. But in the daylight hours those boys were less interested (and less interesting) and so we'd go our separate ways. In college, school gyms were replaced by clubs and bars and young men who would become my friends. Sometimes

we'd test boundaries and flirt around the edges of being something more, but in the end, they only wanted to dance with me.

It's not uncommon for children to give up their hobbies but adult eyes look back on these decisions with regret, and I've often wondered what if I didn't quit dance? What if I learned modern, tap, or jazz? I ponder these questions, thinking about the joy dancing brings me and the things I admire about a dancer's body—their long lines, graceful movements, strong posture, the way their body always seems to remember that it is a dancer. So, I entered the world of ballet as an adult, hopeful that despite being in my forties and heavier than my sixteen-year-old self, I might still be able to capture a piece of what I gave up all those years ago.



I learn from a simple Wikipedia search that: *Ballet originated during the Italian Renaissance in the 15th century. It spread to France where it was formalized, resulting in most of the terminology used today. Ballet is French for “to dance” with origins in the Greek work Ballizo which means “to dance/jump about.” Barre is French for bar—a handrail used to maintain balance.* Nothing surprising there.

A barre helps dancers by providing a means of stability and balance and barre work often comprises a significant portion of the beginning dancer's classes. It is an essential tool when first learning foot placement technique. Barre work helps dancers prepare for partnering, with the barre simulating the support of a real partner.



Of all the things one needs to survive twenty-five months of a global pandemic, something supportive, stable and balancing is high on the list. Here I was thinking I

bought the barre because it was a good form of exercise for my aging joints. And this bit about preparation for partnering ... can a barre really do all that?

I've often joked that when it came to dating and relationships, I must have missed a class that everyone else took. I watched friends marry and have kids while the patterns of high school and college followed me into adulthood. The support and stability I sought seemed to constantly evade me as I danced from partner to partner, accepting too little and bending too much. Was the class I missed ballet?



In ballet, a pas de deux, French for "step of two", is a dance duet in which two dancers, typically a male and a female, perform ballet steps together. A grand pas de deux has a structured five-part sequence, consisting of an entrée (introduction), an adagio, a solo for each dancer, and a coda (conclusion). It is effectively a suite of dances symbolic of a love story or the partnership inherent in love. During the adagio, the ballerina performs slow and sustained movements while the danseur supports her. The danseur, in turn, strives to maintain a display of poise and seemingly effortless strength while providing support for the ballerina. This includes lifts and offering a steady arm for her to use as a "virtual barre" when she performs balancing feats that would be difficult or impossible without assistance.



My boyfriend of five years would tell you I'm great at dancing solo. It's a consequence of years spent mostly on my own. I don't see my independence as a bad thing and I'm proud of what I've managed to accomplish, the pain I've survived, and obstacles I've overcome. But when there's someone in your life who has no intention of leaving, who

expects a partnership and stepping together, being a soloist does not make that partnership easy.

At times, I'm unsure of how to position myself and I struggle not to simply do what my body wants to do vs what our duet needs. I'm unsure about how to show the well of love in my heart which lives behind awkward words and misunderstandings. I'm unsure how to balance the different parts of myself, when they all seem to want something different from me. But I'm working on it. I work on it every day because he's my best friend and I can't imagine life without him. I work on it every day because his poise and strength aren't effortless, so I need to carry my own weight. Apparently, I'm also working on it each day when I'm at the barre in my living room, building the balance, strength and muscle memory needed to be a better dancer.



Aminah Wells is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice and a native of Baltimore, MD. She attended Loyola University where she majored in Psychology and minored in Creative Writing. She holds a MSW from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Writing has been a passion since she was a child and her niche is poetry and creative non-fiction. She believes writing is a powerful tool for healing and she uses it for her own self-reflection and in her work with clients. In the coming years she aspires to write a book from a little bed and breakfast by the beach.