



Leaping and Landing; A Male Ballet Dancer's Journey

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Abstract

Before I could walk, I have been told, I jumped. In the Minneapolis apartment my parents rented, using a convenient door frame, they hung what was called a Johnny Jump Up. Often, when my parents, now in their 80's, take me on a journey down memory lane, they recall my spending hours in the Johnnie Jump Up and share how they then thought I was destined for an athletic future. Suspended from hanging springs, I jumped without a care and certainly no concern for landing. My observing parents didn't imagine that my energy and joy in jumping would later find itself a home in ballet. They didn't consider this option because, other than the likes of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, the popular male movers of the time were athletes. The athleticism of dance was not generally celebrated in America. And besides, was dance really meant for boys?

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Introduction

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As a child growing up in Princeton New Jersey, I loved riding my bicycle, running and climbing trees, playing guitar, and once a week, I would accompany my mother to an international folkdance gathering held in a large room at Princeton University. Those nights, I would always come home drenched in sweat. The combination of music, dance and a connection of both to culture was an invigorating experience. As a junior in high school, I befriended a male doctoral student at Princeton who was an avid folkdance enthusiast. This friend encouraged me to join him in a jazz dance class he took once a week at the Princeton Ballet studio. Not long after taking my first jazz dance class, I ran into another Princeton student who studied ballet there and convinced me to try the ballet partnering class.

Before this first journey into the world of ballet, I had never seen a dance belt, never worn tights, and frankly had no idea of appropriate dress for a male dancer. Carrying the dance-belt I purchased in the little boutique at Princeton Ballet, blue women's tights my mother lent me, a canvas belt from my father's days in the Navy and the plainest white t-shirt I could find, I stepped into the small men's changing room, at the Princeton Ballet studios. Having arrived shortly before class, I

was rushing to get dressed when, fortunately, another male dancer entered the dressing room before I exited with my dance belt on backward. My life experiences prior to this class suggested that the smaller part of men's undergarments was worn in the front and the larger part covered one's bottom. That day, I was spared considerable embarrassment by a male dancer who stopped me from departing the dressing room with the thong part of the dance belt in front!

There I was, a senior in high school, in my mother's blue tights, entering the dance studio where the other male dancer stood in black tights and a plain white t-shirt alongside 20 women all wearing pink tights and black leotards. For the next hour and a half, it was as if I was engaged in an unusual form of wrestling sweaty, nearly "naked" women, performing steps which I was seeing for the first time while being directed by the instructor to approximate graceful movement. Just days before, I had watched the movie *The Turning Point*. The love scene that seamlessly takes Mikhail Baryshnikov and Leslie Browne from the dance studio to the bedroom all to Prokofiev's entrancing music from the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, was my initial inspiration, yet nothing could have been further from the reality of my awkward attempt at keeping a room full of very tall women, on their toes. While I had thought that ballet might help my popularity with women, my clumsiness was not earning me any favor. Exhausted and discouraged, my involvement with the world of ballet may have ended there, if not for a chance encounter while scooping ice cream at one of my many jobs senior year.

There was no other customer in the shop when the Founding Artistic Director of the Princeton Ballet Workshop, entered and requested permission to post a notice of an upcoming audition for her summer production of *Giselle*. Questions I asked led to her requesting that I stand in 1st position (a stance where your heels are together and your toes point outward) and bend my knees as far as they could go while maintaining a vertical posture and my heels on the ground. Being able to achieve a deep bend of the knees with heels on the floor facilitates a high jump and a soft landing. Later I understood that I was being pretested prior to being invited to attend the real audition planned for the following weekend. It was this summer production where I experienced telling a story through dance while discovering a vehicle to express my enthusiasm for jumping! We danced 6-8 hours daily. When rehearsing my role in the peasant pas, which involved jumps with beats (jumps where your legs either change front and back or come together and open again) I was simply instructed to change my feet in the air as many times as I could before landing. I was well aware that everyone else in the studio knew far more than I did, but I was given the impression that I could catch up. I felt at home. I had found a world where my expressive and physical passions were required, and on occasion, even celebrated! There was no going back. It was the summer before my first year in college and I was changed forever.

When you sign up for a career in dance, you are attempting to work your way into an extremely competitive field where your chances of earning a living are slight and the potential for injury great. But I was too attracted to the combination of artistry and athleticism that transform dancers into moving representations of art to notice or be concerned about the challenges that may lay ahead. Fortune presented itself again when at the end of that summer; I was offered a scholarship to a four-year College where I would be trained as a dancer while earning a degree that focused on the teaching of ballet. The director of this program became one of my life mentors. I especially admired how she had developed her own dancing career from dancer to teacher, to director, and had ended up owning a dance school and directing the company she founded, while maintaining her full-time position as Chair and Professor of Dance. For the next four years, I was both a member of her regional ballet company and a Teaching Major within the Dance Department.

Upon graduation, one of the guest choreographers brought to our college hired me to join the company he directed. His name was Robert Barnett and the company was the Atlanta Ballet. Dancing with Atlanta Ballet was a dream job. In addition to daily classes and rehearsals, I often took advantage of an open invitation to take extra classes and receive individual Pilates coaching free at the company's school. While beginning my serious pursuit of a dance career at the end of high school meant that I would have to work hard to catch up, I didn't mind. In fact, it was a labor of love. But strenuous work can take its toll, and while I never had an injury that kept me from performing, there were strains, sprains and aches that on occasion had me receiving one form of

physical therapy or another. It wasn't until my second full-time position with a professional company that I actually had to sit out.

The summer of my second season with Les Grands Ballet Canadiens, during a tour of Europe, we were stationed in London, giving performances at the famed Sadler's Wells Theatre. One night, before the curtain went up on *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*), while practicing some moves backstage, I felt a popping sensation in my lower back. After this, I couldn't put weight on my right leg without both weakness and pain. It was a feeling unlike anything I had previously experienced and certainly nothing I had ever felt on stage, in performance. The curtain was coming up, so there was no time for me to pay attention to my injury. For the next half hour, my only concern was to somehow manage to be where I needed to be at the time I was called to be there, and to appear as if I was still performing my expected movements. Frankly, I don't know how I accomplished this. At the end of this ballet, the closing piece of our concert that night, I stood with the company bowing on stage but could not put any weight on my right leg. While tears flowed down my face, I patiently waited for the final bow to be over, got down on my hands and knees, and crawled up the stairs to the men's dressing room. I had herniated a disk in my lower back and danced an entire ballet in that condition.

Generally, the most common injuries for female ballet dancers relate to their feet and ankles, back injuries are more prevalent among male ballet dancers. A herniated disk does not have to result in the termination of one's dance career, however, once a joint in your body has been compromised, it is forever at greater risk of reinjury. As it turned out, I did end up with a reinjury within a year. And while this initiated the end of my dancing days, it was also the beginning of a paradigm shift affecting my mental and physical perspective of life. After the injury at Sadler's Wells Theatre, I knew that I had to be careful, and being careful was opposite to the type of energy and joy I felt as a child in my Johnny Jump Up. There is a big difference between the power and grace that appears to be achieved with great ease on stage and the grueling reality of having to maintain almost no body fat while committing to a rigorous schedule of demanding dance training and performance for more than 40 hours a week. Unlike various sports my parents may have envisioned for their jumping child, dance is not a seasonal endeavor. Dancers truly have no season off and few free days. While injured dancers may be forced to take time off in order to recover, a working dancer is required to stay in top form the entire year.

Being careful meant spending time with physical therapists and taking pain-management and anti-inflammatory medications. The first year I attended a performance of my former company (Les Grands Ballets Canadiens) at the beautiful Place des Arts Theatre in Montreal, I remember sitting there with tears streaming down my face the entire time. I was not in physical pain, but I was mourning the death of an invincible physical self, one with a body and spirit that could spend eight hours in the studio and still be ready to perform that night. Then, as my career evolved from dancer to teacher, I gradually realized that the body which had quickly led me to a career as a professional ballet dancer was no longer resilient and able to quickly recover from injuries, or daily overwork. In fact, in order for me to feel good physically, instead of spending time in the dance studio, Pilates matt classes and trail hikes allowed me to keep fit and feel energized, productive and pain free. Continuing to teach, there were still days when the music and movement swept me up into a joyous state of mind and I would attempt to perform a jump full out. I always paid for this after, and the payments gradually became more than I could afford.

Then, last year, after spending a year crawling up the stairs to our 2nd story bedroom after a day of teaching, I decided to see an orthopedist. During this visit, I discovered that, in addition to the damage done to my lower back, I had substantial arthritis, with my left hip socket bone on bone. For a year, I tried to deal with this through physical therapy. I even got a cortisone shot guided by x-ray into the hip socket. I met with another orthopedist spine specialist who ordered an MRI in order to determine the relationship between the condition of my lower back and the deterioration of my hip joint. Collectively, we arrived at the understanding that a full-hip replacement might enable better physical movement and with proper therapy I might avoid a future operation to fuse two vertebrae. My surgery was scheduled for March 16, 2020.

Full of anxiety yet resolved to my course of action, I counted down the days. Meanwhile news reports were filled daily with stories of Covid-19, a world pandemic becoming a major concern now in America. The day of my scheduled surgery, the governor of Ohio ordered a hold on all elective surgeries. I cancelled. Then, I waited. In May, I was informed that calls would be made to reschedule starting with the earliest cancelled surgeries as soon as the Governor lifted his ban. Two weeks later I received my call and June 5th was chosen. Soon, instead of bone on bone, my joint would be comprised of a porcelain ball in a hard rubber socket.

In my mind, I wrestled with disappointment and self-criticism. How did this happen to me? What did I do wrong? As I discussed my angst with other dancers, including mentor Robert Barnett, who replaced two hips at over 90 years of age, I realized that I was joining a little-known club of sorts. Several dance friends came forward with stories of successful hip replacements. As young dancers, we never consider how the injuries we appear to recover from remain part of our physical degeneration until such a point as the one I now found myself in. Determined, I decided that pivoting my perspective, would help me find my way back to the joy within me. I have been happiest when creating and expressing. As a child this joy came out as continuous jumping. As a dancer I learned to refine my jump to be graceful and articulate. As a teacher, I would strive to inspire my students. And now with a new hip I was learning to adjust the way I teach and choreograph in order to motivate, educate and create.

According to medical literature, the risk of dislocation after total hip replacement is approximately 2%. This is something I learned during my pre-surgery consultations. In the weeks following my surgery, I was reminded that I needed to stay away from posterior extension and rotation and to gradually progress through a series of exercises meant to build strength prior to exploring my joint's range of motion. The reason for this precaution is posterior extension and rotation is the method used in surgery to take one's femur bone out of the socket when performing the anterior approach to total hip replacement, the surgery I had chosen because it involves no cutting of muscles. Ten weeks of physical therapy flew by prior to the start of Fall semester. I was gradually increasing what I was able to do, but on occasion felt something very strange in my hip. It felt like a shift or sliding of porcelain in rubber, especially when I tried to stand in 5th position (the position in ballet where standing on two feet with toes are pointed outward, the heel of the front foot touches the toe of the back foot).

At this point in my recovery, I thought that focusing how I demonstrated exercises when teaching via Zoom (because of COVID) would replace my continuing with physical therapy exercises that were gradually becoming based on ballet movement anyway. Then, on September 23rd at 1:20 pm, I experienced something I hope none of my readers ever do. What I will now describe, happened while I was demonstrating a simple *tendu soutenu derrière*, which for non-dancers is movement where you bend the leg you are standing on with outward rotation while your other leg is stretched and pointed (also rotating outward) straight back. Teaching on Zoom, especially after a total hip replacement, I wanted my students to feel and understand concepts I taught even though I could not demonstrate any significant leg extension to the back. And while my back foot was touching the ground, the combination of rotation and extension to the back was enough for my newly designed femoral head to come completely out of the hip socket while I was remotely instructing my students. What took place next, the ambulance, the shock of my university dancers and colleagues, the 911 call and the emergency room were all part of an unreal horror movie I was the unfortunate star of! When this happened, it was as if someone pulled the plug on all logic. Close to blacking out, I managed to hang in there until an hour later, when I woke up, whole again after the emergency room doctor had put me to sleep and gotten my leg back into its socket. I had become a member of the 2% club, a club made up of hip replacement patients unfortunate enough to completely dislocate their new joint.

With this new membership, one gains a new status. One out of three patients who dislocate a new hip will re-dislocate that same hip. How amazing, an upgrade from 2% to 33%. Having one's leg "fall off" is not something to repeat. My paradigm shift prior to surgery did not prepare me for the patience required going forward. Prior to my surgery, I heard the success stories of friends who had the same procedure. Having generally good health and an ability to heal and recover, I never

expected to be part of the small percentage of people who have the surgery and end up with this extended vulnerability. My hypothesis of mind over matter was further challenged. With Thanksgiving days away, plans were in place to join family via Zoom. I was directing a virtual dance concert to be streamed via the internet on the same dates originally planned in the theatre, but for an at home audience. In my recorded Artistic Director address to the audience, I applauded the passion and commitment of dancers who overcame obstacles and created a virtual dance concert during a world pandemic. In celebrating the brilliance of those I directed and collaborated with, despite what I had experienced during this process, part of me was still that little boy in my Johnny Jump Up, full of the joy that jumping brings to the body and soul. And then I realized, passion lives where we place it and jumping for joy takes many forms. I had learned to jump my way into a professional dance career and many decades later, I was learning to land.

Biographical Introduction

Jeffrey Marc Rockland began his performance career playing Sasha in the MGM classic *Dr. Zhivago*. As a dancer, he performed with Bristol Ballet, Atlanta Ballet, The Scottish American Ballet Universal Ballet, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal prior to his taking his career in a new direction as both professor and choreographer. Rockland now lives in Ohio with his wife and children. As Dance Division Coordinator at Kent State University, he works with a talented group of colleagues and students.