

## Form As Human Form: The Body

The thing about ballet is it has us all chasing an idealized version of the human form that *does not exist in mortal space and time*. When Balanchine said that “ballet is woman,” he meant a certain idealized archetype of Woman, not the woman who is you and I, the woman who wakes up sore, who sweats and bleeds and ages. Not the woman whose body has needs and desires of her own.

I’m reminded of Plato, who believed that forms were eternal, immutable essences that existed outside—or above—time. Earthbound material could somehow tap into form, participate fleetingly in it, but never fully grasp it. Form was primary; matter existed to serve the form.

Where does this leave the dancing body? Is the body form or is it matter? Does it matter?

*And: do idealized forms help us dance better?*

Here’s some of what we know:

I. Human form reflects its function.

I remember being astounded to learn that the human skeleton is constantly building more bone cells and discarding others, according to the functional needs of the present moment. If we lay in bed for weeks on end, our bones literally get less dense; when we get up and start walking around again, carrying heavy things, our bones respond by building more mass *precisely where they need it* to support those demands. Any excessive bone mass is discarded: the body bends its form, quite literally, towards function.

A woman’s body takes the shape of her child in pregnancy. Form expresses function.

We bemoan how easy it is to get “out of shape” and make it sound as if our bodies are failing us. But this couldn’t be further from the truth: we get “out of shape” *when we ask our bodies to move less*. The body responds by shedding the extra muscle that is no longer necessary. How smart.

Furthermore, the body is efficient *because* of its adaptability. The heart is said to be healthy not when it maintains a fixed “optimal” rate, but when it responds and adapts to the body’s needs: ready to speed up as stress or activity increases, and more oxygen and blood supply is needed; ready to slow down when the body is at rest.

*Could ballet class be a practice in becoming more adaptable?*

When it comes to movement, wouldn’t it make sense to align ourselves with what our bodies already do so well? What if we started with what our bodies already know? Why, in ballet, do we so often *perform* ease instead of seeking the actual *experience* of it? We could skip a step if we sought authentic ease instead of the illusion of ease.

*Is there a relationship between elegance and efficiency?*

Not one of us will ever achieve perfection in ballet. It’s such an obvious fact that I think we don’t state it enough. When we begin with an idealized form as the goal, we shoot ourselves in the foot before we’ve begun. We send the message: whatever you do, it will never be good enough. And this is true: an idealized form is by nature unattainable. *It does not actually exist.*

This doesn’t mean that we can’t teach a ballet aesthetic; it means we can’t mistake the perfection of the aesthetic as the goal. Or we can’t idealize an aesthetic at the expense of our own selves. Or we can, but we can’t expect it to go well. Striving itself is not a bad thing, but striving *with the misconstrued belief that we will ever arrive...* is problematic. We have created a culture of striving that places all the value on the destination, while our bodies live perpetually in the present.

*Can dancing bodies be functional and beautiful at the same time?*

The answer to this question depends on what we mean by beauty. The Greeks suggested a trifold model of beauty: the beauty of ideal forms (Plato), the beauty of classical proportions (symmetria) and the beauty of usefulness, as in the beauty of a knife that cuts well.

Ballet tends to lean heavily on the first two notions of beauty. Bodies with very specific, ideal proportions are said to be “ballet bodies.” Ballet is ordered and very symmetrical; we do everything to the right, then everything to the left. But we don’t talk much about the beauty of utility. Is ballet useful? Should it be?

*Asking my students: can you move like a hot ice cream scoop cutting through cold ice cream?*

Kant believed that utility was actually a deterrent to beauty! Function cheapened beauty, rendered it too ordinary to be considered beautiful. But disregarding the utility of the body runs counter to the *modus operandi* of the human form itself. Remember, the human form as a biological phenomenon excels excess! It exists *because* it functions. Without function, we have no form.

Furthermore, we can idealize bodies all we want, but from the body's perspective, lived reality could not be more concrete, could not *further* from the realm of ideals. The body simply is. We can have ideas and ideals about our bodies, we can propel them to change, but the body too has ideas. It can and does make itself known.

I teach somatic practices at the undergraduate and graduate level, in addition to dance. Somatics can be broadly defined as a field of inquiry and practice that privileges the knowledge that arises from the soma—the *body*. Somatics seek and follow embodied knowledge: that which already *is*.

*Remembering watching a lady on the subway slowly unwrapping a sandwich and me thinking it was the most beautiful thing in the world.*

Everyone has a body. It's your body. What you think about your body is your business. And rest assured, when I do tell you things about your body: I am not really teaching you about *your* body. I am teaching you *ideas* about bodies. I am teaching you *my* ideas about bodies, and *what I think is important about bodies generally*. I'm probably teaching you what I think about *my* body. I'm teaching you about the collective cultural "body," and its ideas about what is good, and right, and beautiful.

When we teach an idealized form, we risk basing our students' sense of what is right, good, and beautiful on a premise that is at best, highly subjective, and at worse entirely false. We risk creating a generation of humans who believe that the goal of perfecting their ballet technique (which isn't possible anyway) justifies any means of getting there. We teach our students that how they look on the outside is more important than how they're organizing themselves from the inside.

I think it's ok to teach beauty. It's even ok to teach idealized beauty. As long as we're clear with ourselves and others about *what it is in fact that we're teaching*. We can absolutely teach beauty, so long as we acknowledge that it's *My* beauty we're teaching,

or Your beauty, or even Our beauty. And that these are all ideas about beauty. But it's not The Beauty.

*When we teach ballet, are we teaching ballet or Ballet?*

Let's get back to the matter at hand: form. Aristotle thought that matter was mere potential until it had form; form gave matter its determination. He also thought that forms could advance and become ever more exquisitely (trans)formed. Clay is but potential until it is "formed" to become brick; brick can then advance to become wall; wall is subsumed into the form of a house, and so on. For Aristotle, form has a teleological direction; the more complex it becomes the better it becomes.

This also seems to suggest a certain amnesia, a covering up of the very substance *forming* the form. What's so wrong with clay? Why is better to be brick? And why, when you *do* become brick, must you forget your clay-ness?

II. The human form is the literal shape of its contents.

We know the body doesn't show up as an empty vessel, ready to be filled with the contents that will make it human. It exists because of its contents; it *is* its contents: no more and no less. The contents aren't simply visceral, either. The body "contains" the mind, the psyche, the emotions: it is as large and as shapely as it must be to accommodate *all* the inner contents, needs, movements and desires of its human self. Shahn writes that form is "the expression and remnant of self."

In many professional dance configurations, however, the dancer is seen and treated precisely as a vessel. As something to *be* shaped, not something that is already shaped, by its contents.

*When I'm dancing, am I the subject or the object?*

I was well into my professional dance career when I realized I had spent most of my life approaching my body from the outside. I had developed a mental picture of what I wanted my body to look like and how I wanted it to behave, and set to work attempting to "master" this idealized image of myself by forcefully rearranging the parts of my body so as to best "fall in line." I started externally and worked my way in.

That's how I was taught: if you make this shape, that means you're doing it right. If you look like this, you are good.

Despite having an active interior life, my own thoughts and feelings were never aspects of myself I thought to purposefully bring into the studio with me (of course they did come with me, but this was a source of shame and frustration: a liability, not an asset).

*What if we taught dance from the inside out? Would that change the human form that emerges?*

Studying somatics, particularly the Alexander Technique, shifted my perspective; it changed my starting point and radically reversed the outside-in paradigm: I started looking at form *from the inside out*, beginning with my own human body.

The simple task of *starting here, not there* is profound. Even more profound is starting to see how inner experiences can't *not* press outward. As our inner contents change, so does our outer form. It can't not.

When I started considering my legs as extensions of my back, for instance (rather than thinking of them as independently functioning structures levering me around in space), it changed how they started to function, on a very concrete musculoskeletal level. *This started to change their form*. My legs became less bowed, my hips stopped making that deafening cracking sound, my bones changed their relationship to each other and my muscles changed their shapes accordingly. My human form changed before my own eyes, through a process that started *when I changed my idea about what was important*.

*When we're watching dancers dance, are we watching content or are we watching form?*

Maybe it depends on what the dancer themselves believes! Are we seeing content in movement? What if the dancing body is simply content in action?

*Christine Wright in her ballet class: "Allow others to experience your experiencing."*

*What if we taught students to be humans first, then dancers? Human forms before dancing forms?*

III. The human form is not fixed; it is engaged in continuous change.

Maybe we should be talking about the human forming instead of the human form.

From the first moment of conception, a wiggly sperm finding an egg: the human form is born, quite literally, in movement and in relationship. And the story of our development continues to be defined by relationships. In utero, our cells multiply and organize, collaborate and communicate with each other *to make us from the inside*; before we even have a nervous system online, they've figured out how to grow us a heart and lungs.

Meanwhile we're nurtured and shaped by the environment of the womb and the comings and goings of our mother's lives. And as soon as we're born into the world, we come into relationship with a new external environment: we begin learning to see and taste, hear and scream at the top of our lungs. Curiosity about our environment and the desire to connect with other humans drives our cognitive and motor development; we begin to know ourselves by learning about *what and who is other*. We come to know ourselves through the experience of inner and outer relationships.

What if we considered the human form as a series of ever-changing relationships?

*A favorite adage of my childhood ballet teacher: "Practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes permanent."*

Does it, though? When not a single tissue or structure in our human body is ever fixed in time or space? By one account, our body fully replaces itself, on a cellular level, every seven years. The biological reality of the human form is one of constant change: We are never precisely the same from one moment to the next.

It seems then that when we make comments like: "She has excellent technique," we imply that technique is something that can be had, owned, mastered, complete. When nothing about the human form suggests that this is even remotely possible. But what are we teaching, then, if we're not teaching mastery? (Side note: I'm also not interested in mastering something if I can't also mistress it).

*What if ballet class was about developing a relationship to form?*

Human forms coming into relationship with forms. Could this be a working definition for dance?

*I had a dream that my pelvis was a water bath. In class the next day, I tried to follow my body not lead. The sensation was that of water running up and over my body. I let go in a way I never had. It felt like standing in the rain and dancing with the elements.*

There is a paradox to this kind of relationship, such that a letting go leads not to loss but to gain—the gain of a deeper experience of self. What was I letting go of? Muscular tension, yes. But more than that. I let go of my idea of *what I thought I needed* in that moment, *what I thought I knew*. And into that space rushed an experience of embodied understanding.

What if we trained dancers to come into deeper relationship with themselves *as a means of returning to form*?

Training happens over time. You may not achieve perfection or permanence through practice, but perhaps we could invoke a more accurate maxim: you are what you practice. Can we look to the wisdom of the human form as a guide for how we practice dance?

OUTTAKES:

**Ballet is notorious for manifesting the ideal of beauty, but even those standards have changed with time as our cultural values have changed.**

**What changes first? Do bodies reflect our cultural values, or vice versa? When it comes to ballet, if the bodies teaching and performing the technique change, does that change the cultural values we**

When we say people should be thin, for instance, it's not about thinness, it's about the belief underneath thinness. That thinness pegs us firmly as the smaller, wimpier sex. We're dealing with the patriarchy, we're dealing with submission.

We're not teaching bodies, we're teaching *ideas about* our bodies, we're teaching *values we hold* about our bodies.

The human body learns best when we leave it alone. Something about how this is also at odds for everything we know about how optimal learning, creativity and self-understanding proceeds.

Kant says that there should be no function to beauty. This places beauty and function at odds with each other.

To go back to our pie chart, there are many kinds of beauty but it seems that we have to be clear and transparent about the lens we're looking through. And not mistake Beauty for beauty.

Ballet teaches people that it's about their bodies, but it's actually about their *ideas* about their bodies. And it's about the idea of a body that's not *our* body. In fact, it's nobody's body at all! It doesn't exist!

What if we taught students to dance with their bodies? Why do we persist in teaching a fantasy of the body and not the body itself?

How can any forms in dance exist, if we don't start with the human form???