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**'Where are the Margot Fonteyns?'**

**Jeffery Taylor, former dancer turned dance critic, says PC attitudes towards touching children are ruining British ballet.**

Josie Appleton

I am sitting outside a Starbucks in Ealing, west London, talking about the decline of Britain's classical dance. 'We have lost a generation of dancers', says Jeffery Taylor, a former dancer and now dance critic for the *Sunday Express*. 'There has been a huge erosion of standards with political correctness.'

Changes in the teaching regime have crept in over the past decade or so, leaving British dancers floundering next to their international peers. 'The top half of any British ballet company is now occupied by foreigners. Royal Ballet is going through a golden age at the moment, but the top dancers are Romanian, Spanish, Ukrainian, Danish and Cuban.'

This isn't for lack of young British talent. 'The raw talent in junior schools is staggering. So where are they?' Taylor gestures at the empty wall opposite us. 'Where are the Margot Fonteyns?'

One problem is the virtual ban on teachers touching students. Child protection policies now mean that male tutors touching female dancers is 'virtually prohibited'; students need a letter from parents in order to permit limited touching in certain circumstances; and classes must be observed 'to make sure that there's no indiscretion'.

Taylor is horrified. 'Touching is essential! The classical ballet technique is one of the most unnatural physical regimes ever invented by man.' Ballet positions confound our natural habits and instincts. 'The first thing you learn is how to stand up straight. The human frame is not built to stand up straight: there is a natural curvature of the spine, natural position of the pelvis and the legs and hip sockets, which have to be straightened out.' Children cannot be coaxed into these positions by words alone: they have to be shown. 'There is no way a child can understand how you straighten out your lumbar region, how you tuck your hips underneath you.'

His hand becomes a child's foot, as he demonstrates the difficulty of teaching how to place an arched foot *flat* on the floor. 'Place your foot flat.' The hand resists and he forces it down. 'Relax.' After persuasion, the fingers relax. 'Now stretch your toes out.' He pushes the fingers apart. 'There – do you see? Your foot is flat.' The teacher should be 'on their hands and knees', moulding children's bodies 'like plasticine'. Only by guiding, supporting, pushing, can young dancers discover the positions into which their body can be placed. 'Not being able to touch a student cuts out about a third of the potential of that child.'

It's crazy, says Taylor, that touching in dance is seen as physical abuse. Touching is 'a very natural part of the human process'. Teachers are touching not for perversion, but for art, to bring out the expressive possibilities of a child's body. Taylor knows this from bitter personal experience. He lowers his voice, and his normally fluid sentences become more hesitant. 'As a child I was unfortunate enough to have an upsetting family life, and by the age of 11 I found people touching

me to be unbearable. When I started dancing, and my ballet tutor started to place my body in position, I found it extraordinarily comforting and confidence-making. Far from being a threat, I actually knew what real physical abuse was, and this was a comfort, this was something that was being given to me freely and with positive motives.'

Another of Taylor's laments is the non-judgemental current creeping into ballet. Just as touching is now banned, so too are the physically punishing regimes that were once the mainstay of ballet training. 'Today it's almost official: you never tell a child what to do unless they are willing to do it.' This just doesn't work. 'There comes a point [in ballet] when you have got to do as you are told, whether you understand or approve. You feel that you cannot do it, you cannot move in this new shape. When I was a child either they would scream at you, or sit and look at you, or say "I am going out for a cup of tea; if you manage to jump let me know". If a teacher did that today they would be arrested.'

Every person has a sense of their own limits that is below that which they could actually do. It is in the zone where things seem uncomfortable and impossible, and there is an element of struggle and of pain, that we improve ourselves. A good teacher will take their pupil into that zone, 'beyond what you think are your limits'. This isn't cruelty, says Taylor: 'It has been the seed of creative and physical attainment since Adam and Eve.' If kids are worked hard by their ballet teachers, it is not for fascistic kicks but to show them what they can do.

The pressures of a classical ballet regime leave an indelible mark on individual character. 'Most dancers I know are able to pursue any career – they have self-discipline, determination, belief in themselves.' Taylor seems to have transferred his control over the movement of his body to his control over words. His language is exact. 'Precisely', he nods, when you have understood something; 'that's not the word I would use', he corrects. He seems to control the emotional pitch of his points, too, rising in passion gradually and then becoming more reflective. And he is pained – absolutely pained – by what is happening to ballet.

'Political correctness' is such an inadequate phrase though. 'Poison' is another phrase Taylor uses, which perhaps is more accurate. This is about the poisoning of the relationship between generations of dancers. Teachers no longer mould and develop their students as they themselves had been moulded and developed. The right-wing press sometimes caricature PC as just about being soft, but it's about more than that: it's about the corrosion of a relationship of shared artistic purpose and trust. 'The trust aspect is very important. You have got to trust that teacher who just says to you, "now jump", and you know damn well that you can't move a muscle.'

The punishing and the tender aspects of the ballet relationship should go hand in hand; teachers push pupils just as they care for and inspire them. Now, instead, suspicion of teachers goes along with phoney affirmation of students. Taylor says that young dancers are often told that they are all as good as each other, which does them no favours at all. 'This is extremely cruel to children. You have a child doing a five-year course, and you tell them that they should be proud and that they are good. But then after three years they are asked to leave because they won't make it. It's a very important part of growing up in any area that you learn your limitations and learn your potential.'

The interview is over and the tape recorder is off, and Taylor is trying to impress upon me again the importance of touching in ballet. He sweeps his arms, talks about pulling your leg into your hip and holding your arms so, and head so, and back so. He builds to a crescendo: 'Do you understand?!' I nod. Well, no actually: I can't imagine what it would be like to mould my body into such positions, which is the whole point about the need to be *shown*. Thankfully, he doesn't offer to show me.