

DanceView Magazine

THE BODY DOES NOT FORGET

by Janis Brenner

There is a body I would like to believe that I own, but the truth is it owns me and always has. This body rules my sleep, my work, my play, my dreams. Every morning before a clear thought can be formulated, it wakes me to its callings. My “forty-something”-year-old dancer’s feet take their first hesitant, weighted steps and message me right up through the ankles, up the Achilles, inside the calf muscle to the back of my knee and around the inside to the patella. Some days the little calls for help manage to stop there after I have taken a full stroll around the living room. Then I begin to hear from my neck and shoulders, the left side testing to see if I still remember 1975’s rib crunch when the Freed twins, Morris and Oliver, were figuring out how to lift all ninety-five pounds of me in a leap combination by digging their fingers in under my left breast and underarm until I could no longer breathe. Somehow the crunch traveled up my side, set up house in my shoulder socket, and has lived there ever since.

There is the ritual twist-to-the-left crack of my lower spine that needs to happen before breakfast which sometimes determines whether I gather the motivation to get myself to dance class or just get back into bed. If the dull ache at the base of my skull goes beyond a 2.5 on the throb scale, I choose to give in to taking the two Tylenol or to calling Drs. Castro, Calvano or Cai for the never-ending, expensive and only temporary Chiropractic healing.

Then there's the slightly less mobile right thumb from 1983; broken from smashing into Danny Shapiro on stage while wearing an Alwin Nikolais-invented, black-mesh netting over my face that my eyelashes were entangled in, preventing me from seeing where the hell I was going. I still picture the costume designer of the show chiding me only the day before the thumb smash for complaining to him about the face encasement, assuming I was just being a prima donna who had long eyelashes. Perhaps breaking my thumb was my perverse, masochistic way of saying "I told you so".

There's the torn-ligament-of-my-left-foot reminder from 1984, incurred while on an outdoor stage in France with the Dave Brubeck Quartet in what was meant to be my final performance after seven years with the Murray Louis Dance Company. In the opening minute of "Glances", a dance I had performed at least one hundred times before, I jumped up to push Rob McWilliams' chest and came down onto the outer rim of my sickling, left foot. Not able to even remotely stand back up, I crawled off the stage between Rob's upright legs, his state-of-shock face watching me peddle off underneath him like a wounded puppy. As I dragged myself into the wing, Dave Brubeck yelled out sympathetically, "Are you going to be able to get up, Princess?" "I don't think so, Dave", I managed to blurt out before realizing the agony I was in. That fall was a direct and swift punishment from the Dance Gods. Having shown up late to the theater, I did not have time to warm up properly before the show because I had been "busy" with someone I should not have been busy with at 5 o'clock in the afternoon...or at all.

And then there is the hidden, little crevice in my forehead--the "il dento piccolo"-- from the Italian bus crash of '78. Traveling to Florence, the final destination on my first and the company's longest European tour in its history, our tour bus skids off the highway into the on-coming traffic. It topples over onto its side, is slid into by a Semi-truck and miraculously, all twelve of us manage to hobble out through the shattered front window. Three of us have cuts, including Murray, one has bruises from having all the luggage fall on top of him, the rest are severely shaken and disoriented and I have a concussion.

Whenever I am still made aware of the little dent, occasionally on rainy days, I think immediately of Shakespeare. I'm right back in the Florence hospital having electrodes wired to my skull for an EKG. I am so petrified the doctors will discover brain damage that I'm literally reciting, "To be or not to be...that is the question..." outloud, so they'll notice I can still make thoughts. Much later on, after everyone in the company has made it home, it occurs to me that reciting Shakespeare soliloquies outloud in an Italian hospital ward no doubt made me appear even crazier.

Right next to the dent is the bump and memories of my head, Halloween and helmets. We're dancing Murray Louis' work "Proximities" in some theater in Queens, N.Y. on a rainy Halloween night when Rob, whipping around at break-neck speed, accidentally does a front battement kick straight to my forehead. I have no recollection of whether I fell, stood frozen in time or somehow continued with the steps. But I do remember being helped back to the dressing room where Murray has run in carrying a long, shiny object. "Here, doll", he says, "put this spoon on your head right away!" I am nauseous, disoriented and drained of any

energy even to ask why, so I sit there holding a metal spoon against the bump, which is next to the dent, probably reciting Shakespeare.

Following this incident, the company chipped in and bought me a custom-made, navy-blue football helmet with “BRENNER” emblazoned across the front in embossed, red letters. For a while I wore it at the beginning of each rehearsal day, partly as a joke, but also as a warning to all to pay attention and stay away from my head.

It was back in 1974 that I left college after two years and moved to New York City to study with Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis. Three weeks into the fall term at their school, I fractured the right foot’s metatarsal while jumping sideways across the studio floor with the rest of the class. For the next three months I came to the studio every day to observe and take notes, but also to bemoan my sorry state and wonder if this less-than-auspicious beginning of my life as an artist in New York was a sign of things to come. Once or twice a year now, when I jump off the foot, the cracked metatarsal again yells up at me, for no reason I can immediately understand. But what I have come to see, almost appreciate, is the momentary flash of recognizing that 20-year-old girl again; in the throes of learning to jump sideways, to plie better, to move more deeply from the inside--all the things I am still working on twenty-three years later. This makes the momentary foot re-crack strangely comforting.

When I left the Murray Louis Dance Company in 1984, my helmet went with me. It took me years to finally discard that possession because I knew it had come to represent all those accidents and injuries as well as memories of times, people and places I wanted to hold

onto. The associations had become emotional souvenirs or even trophies. All of those incidents altered my daily life, and my dancing life, in some way--whether minutely or momentarily--and for that reason I had needed to think of them as keepsakes. My life had become housed in my body.

Martha Graham once said, "Movement doesn't lie." To which I would add, "The body doesn't forget."

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