

Paper Project #2: The Word:

“How Can You Possibly Have A Standing Leg?! Don’t We Stand On Both Legs?!”

Have you ever noticed how a ballerina carries herself? Your first thoughts may be that she is haughty, imperious, snobby, pretentious, cold, and very unapproachable. She walks as if she commands the world, and exudes self-confidence to the point that it is blinding and all else ceases to matter. She is the only being worthy of acknowledgement, and everyone else barely deserves a fleeting thought. Yet, this is all a façade. In fact, a ballerina is incapable of looking any other way. From a very young age, all ballet dancers, male and female alike, are rigorously trained to carry themselves in a very specific way. Hours of practice, sweat, tears, and blood results in the posture that is simply second nature, yet is misinterpreted by many as an attitude problem. Ballet, in itself, is unnatural to the human body, and that is why many individuals who are unfamiliar with this performing art possess misconceptions about the art itself and those who partake in it. A crucial goal of ballet is to create the illusion of elegance, poise, ease, and gracefulness, but that is exactly what it is – an illusion. Many are deceived by this, and believe that ballet is far from grueling and painful. This illusion, however, is achieved by the meticulous training that every dancer undergoes, and each body part is given particular care and instruction. One body part, more so than others, is crucial to the glorious illusion – the “standing leg” is a dancer’s best friend and his or her worst enemy. There is no greater love/hate relationship than that of a dancer to his or her “standing leg.”

For many dancers, they are not often confronted with the task of defining and explaining the terms that have become so familiar to them. There are so many slang, original, and condensed words and phrases that it seems impossible to even attempt at explaining any of them to the average individual who is an “outsider” in regards to the ballet world. So, for me,

exploring the meaning and origin of the word “standing leg” seemed more exhausting than actually dancing. After interviewing individuals within the ballet world, I have come up with a fairly simple, concise definition of what a “standing leg” actually is. The “standing leg,” essentially, is the leg that supports your body while the other leg is moving. The origins are still vague, but one of my ballet teachers proposed that it might have come from the modern lineage of dance. Whatever the roots of the term are, dancers must pay attention to the “standing leg” at all times because it is the leg that allows them to, in essence, dance. Without that support and stability, there is no hope of maintaining the correct posture required in ballet, and, thus, all of the movements are incorrect and horribly unsightly. The “standing leg” is a crucial factor in determining how well the dancer is “on” his or her leg that day in class, and if one cannot get the “standing leg” to obey then most of the day will result in mediocre dancing that leaves the dancer unfulfilled and frustrated. Yet, that is the nature of dance. It is filled with highs and lows, with days that you nail every combination and with other days in which you continuously fall flat on your face. Ballet is cumulative, and everyday is a learning opportunity to grow.

Ballet teachers are aware that every concept builds upon each other, and they spare no expense in reminding dancers every chance they get to focus on their “standing leg.” They are continuously critical about every little detail because one imperfection can cause a domino effect that will create problems in the grand scheme of things. My ballet teachers are always reminding me to pull up out of my standing leg, to lengthen as much as I can, to stop sinking into my hip, and to refrain from twisting, among many other things. These words are our life - we live and breathe them. They may seem foreign and complicated to those who are the “outsiders,” but, to us, they are the most simple and concrete terms we can use that say exactly what we want without causing confusion. I have asked others, friends and strangers that are considered

“outsiders,” if they know what a “standing leg” is, and they just look at me with a blank stare and respond with nervous, flustered laugh. Some people may try to apply experiences from their own lives to try and understand the subject I am talking about, but, because they are not fully immersed in the group I belong to, they cannot fully grasp the concept and are, at times, left with more questions than answers. It may seem like an incomprehensible language to individuals unfamiliar with ballet, but this is just a part of our everyday lives. Yet, no day is like the one before, and we are always surprised to find that nothing stays the same. The one thing we perfected the day before has just become the most difficult and aggravating movement ever attempted. But, perhaps one of the most vexing and ironic aspects of ballet is that even “insiders” of the same group disagree with the meanings and uses of terms. Even though there is a generally accepted vocabulary of terms, ballet is still influenced by subjective opinions, thoughts, and preferences. It is, after all, a performing art that revolves around personal creativity.

“Outsiders” rarely receive an “insider’s” thoughts concerning ballet, and are usually amazed to find that it is much more complex and arduous than they could ever imagine. Yet, it is also amazing to dancers’ to discover how “outsiders” view ballet. Understanding the social worlds of others brings great insight and creates for interesting conversation. Rarely do we step back and observe the world we take for granted, and, upon doing so, we are flooded with new ideas, opinions, and questions.