



STAGE FRIGHT: EVELYN HART (PICTURED) IS ONE OF THE WOMEN KELLY EXPLORES IN HER BOOK (RIGHT), AFTER BEING DEEMED TOO OLD TO PERFORM, THE LEGENDARY CANADIAN BALLERINA IS DESCRIBED BY KELLY AS "A GHOST OF HER FORMER SELF"

dancing AND THE DARK

In a painfully riveting book, Canada's dance critic DEIRDRE KELLY sheds new light on the private struggles of ballerinas

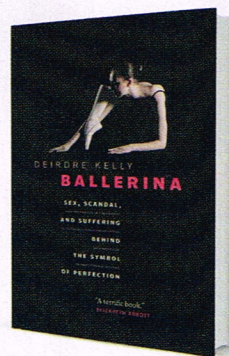
BY RYAN PORTER

THINK OF THE GAP ADS featuring ballerina Yuan Yuan Tan, her pointed toe jutting inhumanly over her head. Or the juxtaposition of a ballerina corps' performance with the rapping of fashion aficionado Kanye West in his 2010 art film, *Runaway*. Even a house as iconic as Yves Saint Laurent selected Black Swan choreographer Benjamin Millepied, Natalie Portman's husband, as the face of its fragrance *L'Homme Libre*. The fashion world has always idolized ballet. In some ways, they are twin disciplines—both demand sacrifice to achieve perfection. But the fashionista must concede that the ballerina's devotion goes a stretch beyond.

Intimate autobiographies such as Gelsey Kirkland's *Dancing On My Grave* and Karen Kain's *Movement*

Never Lies have given glimpses into the extent of the sacrifice, but in *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection*, Deirdre Kelly, dance critic for *The Globe and Mail*, *Dance Magazine* and the *Dance Gazette*, is the first to offer an in-depth view of this exacting culture, tracing the history of how the art form developed an impossibly rigid ideal, where expectations blur into exploitation.

Ballet in the 19th century was often linked with prostitution, something that is symbolized in the paintings of Edgar Degas. How important was his work in your research? It was very important for me. Beneath the frost and the pastel palette you can see the sinister underbelly of the ballet. Sometimes it's kind of scary—little



dark figures literally in the wings, hovering menacingly and behind the scenes. He's pointing to this backstage threat that is constant in the lives of these young dancers. It should be emphasized that he adored them. He befriended them. There is no evidence whatsoever that he was exploitative of them in the way that a lot of his peers were.

Was that sexuality present onstage?

The sexual aspect of the ballet wasn't the content of the storyline or the music or the sets: It was the costuming. It reveals bodies that at the time in everyday dress were predominantly concealed. Marie Anne de Cupis de Camargo—the first to lob inches off her skirt in order to show off her fancy footwork—sparked a sexual mania. Audiences, largely male audiences, really didn't get opportunities to glimpse a woman's ankle in public.

19th-century ballerinas refused to coat their costumes in flame retardant because it made their tutus look stiff and discoloured, even though they would frequently catch fire and burn to death onstage. It's almost as if ballerinas have been complicit in their own oppression. Scores upon scores of young women were dying as a result of the exposure to the live flames that then illuminated the theatre. One reading of it would be: They had this [solution] at their disposal and they steadfastly refused. However, the ideal of the day for the ballerina was to appear lighter than air. She had to resemble something unnatural, something above and beyond her mere flesh and mortality. It was almost like taking a diaphanous creature and putting her in chain mail. That standard is what you are being measured against as an artist. It's like telling the painter you need to paint with one hand behind your back. >

In addition to dance, you have covered style for *The Globe and Mail*. Where do they overlap? Ballet has always been a huge influencer on fashion. The silhouette of the tutu—it's so iconic. We see it in our wedding dresses, we see it in our prom dresses. Anytime a woman wants to be princess for a day, she imitates a ballerina.

How do you feel about fashion designers who design for the ballet? If you do not know or appreciate that this is a theatrical art form and the body's got to be able to move in your costume, then you're out the door. Paul McCartney scored his very first ever ballet, *Ocean's Kingdom*, and Stella [McCartney] did the costumes, which were a flop. They tended to draw more attention to themselves than to the choreography. [Marc Happel, costume director for the New York City Ballet] told me, "Fashion designers want to use the ballet as a runway."

You write that ballet dancers have the highest prevalence of anorexia and bulimia among women (according to the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*). What other extreme examples of self-deprivation did you find in your research? One ballerina told me that you go to the dressing room, and all you see are botched boob jobs. All their boobs are sliced off, nipples are not where they should be, horrendous scars. I cited the example of Kim Lighthart. She was very va-va-voom,

and she was literally fired [from the National Ballet of Canada] because she wouldn't cut them off.

How do you think Canada treats our dancers? I can say that Canada is really progressive. [Canada's National Ballet School co-founder] Betty Oliphant started that. But Betty is also guilty of being very old school. In the '50s, [the school] had notorious weigh-ins. She would go, "Okay, everybody on the scale." That's why there were crazy epidemics of eating disorders. But Betty also brought therapists, social workers, dietitians and nutritionists into the school. However, the minute a dancer steps into a professional company, the rules change instantly. I happen to know dancers in this country—I won't name the company—are on probation for having a little arm jiggle.

No one should be subjected to that. On the other hand, ballet comes with certain expectations. It's a very demanding profession. Maybe it's not bad to be putting it in the context of the Olympics. We feast our eyes on these magnificent bodies accomplishing superhuman feats.

In your book you suggest a turn toward healthy athleticism in ballet, but when you look at the culture as a whole, there is more emphasis on unrealistic beauty standards, from ultra-skinny celebrities such as Alexa Chung to cartoonishly curvy ones such as Kim Kardashian.

THIS YEAR'S FASHION/DANCE CROSSOVERS: (RIGHT) CHINESE BALLET DANCER YUAN YUAN TAN MODELS FOR GAP; (LEFT) CHRISTIAN DIOR SHOES, \$810.



Can the dance world change when there seems to be more extremes than ever? Yes—an unhealthy ballerina is a wasted ballerina. She can no longer keep up with the athletic demand of today's choreography. [Choreographer] Alexei Ratmansky, formerly the director of the Bolshoi Ballet and now artist in residence at the American Ballet Theatre—he's the new, hot thing. His work is based on hyperkinetic athletic movement. And if you don't have the calories, you can't sustain the movement. If you don't have the muscle and bone mass, you are going to get injuries. I know ballerinas in their 20s who step off a curb and they break their ankle.

What advice do you give to aspiring ballerinas? You know what? I have a daughter—and I've got her in ballet! She's only 9, but I had a little chat with her, because she said, "I have to lose four pounds," and I flipped. You can't obsess about the calories, you can't obsess about the food. Keep active and you enjoy the activity and you will always have the right body. □

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MODEL PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF GAP (YUAN YUAN TAN); PRODUCT PHOTOGRAPHY, DANIEL HARRISON (SHIRT, ARM WARMERS, DRESS); FASHION EDITOR, REGHAN MALHEED; FOR MORE TO BUY SEE ENQUIRE

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