

On finding a healthy relationship to validation



Ballet dancer Larkin Miller discusses the intoxication of performing, the joy of watching someone else discover something new, and accepting that he has nothing else to prove.

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As told to Lindsey King, 1977 words.

Tags: [Dance](#), [Family](#), [Beginnings](#), [Mental health](#), [Process](#), [Education](#).

How did you first find dance?

I wanted to get out of gym class somehow. I was into sports—baseball, basketball, soccer—but I didn't love them, and when I ran my first mile at 11 years old I immediately threw up. I loved musical theatre, but my voice would shake when I sang. Then I had a barre class and I remember thinking how hard it was—so much harder than any sport I'd tried. I got addicted to pain and precision of it.

There's a weird tension in ballet. You're constantly working the body so hard, putting it through all this pain, just to look ethereal and effortless. It's like winding up a cog of a complex Swiss watch and then releasing it so it all flows together in time. I was drawn to perfecting that, and I'm still chasing it daily.

Did you get hooked on its reward system at all? The external validation aspect?

Yeah, of course! No dancer can resist that sweet, sweet external validation. For me, it started at home. Love was conditional in my family—you had to perform, produce, be good, act mature. I knew how to say the right things before I understood what they meant. The reward system for young performers can be addictive, manipulative, abusive. But a healthy relationship to praise and to the audience can be a fuel that unlocks potential for expression. Dance lets me feel emotionality in vivid detail that I can't explore otherwise.

You've been with the National Ballet of Canada for over a decade now, and last summer you were promoted to principal. How has your relationship to dance evolved in that time?

Early on I tried to saturate everything with artistry, spirituality, and intensity. I'd go out and perform everything at a 10, and it just looked unhinged. There was one performance many years ago where I was playing a marionette puppet and I said to the director, "Can I show that I'm aware that I'm a puppet? And that I don't consent to this control?" The director sort of sighed and said, "Sure, but you also just need to perform this simple role." I had so much ambition as a young artist, which is great, but it took a while for me to learn that not everything needs to be done at the maximum capability. It's not sustainable and it will take an emotional toll.

Acting a ballet role can be destabilizing; I can lose my sense of myself. I needed to protect my personality. Artistry should envelope you, but it shouldn't erase you. After a few years I went the other way: I stopped putting all of myself into everything and I became more contained, withdrawn, numb. Now I'm somewhere in between.

I try to live at the edge, where I can tip over into vulnerability if I need to. That said, I can rarely tap into the full range of a character until I'm on stage.

Last season I danced Levin and Vronsky in *Anna Karenina*—two completely opposite characters. Levin is a sensitive, poetic farmer. Vronsky is militaristic, rigid. I couldn't embody them completely in rehearsals, which could frustrate both me and my coaches, but on stage everything clicked. I walked on stage, felt the warmth of the lights resting on me. Stage lights are a great comfort and an intoxication. I saw the specific yellow hue of a Russian wheat field and I was completely transported. I could feel myself dancing but I wasn't me. When that happens it's very otherworldly.

This feels very near-death movie montage—and you once told me you wanted to die on stage. Can we unpack that here?

It's a tightly wound knot. I have a happy, bubbly exterior but I like playing sinister characters. They're a safe way to express a dark side I try to hide away. There's a surface-level vanquishing, of conquering that character I'm trying not to be in my real life. Another side is this little death of yourself that happens by putting on a character. You murder yourself, in a way, to become a character for the performance. So dying on stage as they releases you back to yourself. You've run the course of their life; it's over now. As you picked up on, the stage feels like a sensorial afterlife for me already. It makes sense for me to have a practice-death there.

Do you have a certain practice for embodying the music?

The music is the script. When I read the sheet music, I see the structure of the notes and that translates to my body. Certain moments I'll play with my toe or my arm or another body parts. My brain hurts if the music gets detached from the body.

There's more than one "right" way to meet the music. One of my teachers used to say that if you move before the music, you're anticipating it; if you move exactly with it you're matching it; and if you move just slightly after, you're responding to it. They're all possibilities for one note and yet they all offer a completely different quality. I don't try to own or claim the music. The music takes both the audience and the dancer somewhere. Some dancers like to push the music or be pulled by it, but I like to respond to it.

It sounds like you might have an interesting relationship to the conductor?

It's a sacred bond. I try not to look at the audience but I always look at the conductor. They guide you because they're guiding the music. In a way, they're holding you.

What happens when you have time off? Do you have other ways to feed your creativity?

None really at all. I need the pause to process what's happened. I used to blow that off through partying, drinking, whatever, but I need to let the work clear out of my body. Dancers and performers often get post-performance blues, which I've definitely experienced. Last March, only a few hours after coming off-stage I dwindled fast—fever, chills, everything. The body just shuts down when it knows it's done. In between shows I try to find release in other ways. Long walks help clear the mind. If I have the energy, I'll go out dancing in a dark room to feel completely free. It's like exfoliating the soul.

Speaking of feeling completely free, what are your ultimate post-show foods? What do you spoil yourself with?

Easy answer: Sour Cream & Onion Pringles. No stopping me until the can is empty. But I also love french fries. I'm American, just give me all the fries with a bowl of ketchup. All-you-can-eat sushi. My wife thinks it's so gross but I always say soy sauce is my favorite food. I sweat a lot, so maybe it has something to do with craving sodium.

You've started teaching open, non-professional classes. You've said your favorite level to teach is beginners,

which surprises me. What do you like about teaching that level?

I want to be the people's champ too. Say something in enough ways with enough variety, and eventually everyone in the room will find a connection to some phrase. It's amazing to watch someone discover something for the first time, and it's a way for me to see movement as new again. I try to embody how a student is understanding something and then problem solve with them. It's very generative... Now that I think of it, I was the last student of many of my teachers. They'd give us exercises that had been passed down to them through generations, very much like putting on vintage clothes and feeling the lives lived in them. So it also feels like if I don't pass on what I've been given, I've done a disservice to both the art form and my teachers.

What's important for your students to understand about dance?

The leg and the arm are exactly the same. Ten fingers and ten toes. Ankles and wrists. Knees and elbows. Shoulders and hips. They're all mirrors that move the same way. We're always crosshatching the body. It's really a simple machine, and yet there's individual euphoria in every body that's worth trying to experience—not only in dance but in sitting, walking, moving the face.

I want to ask you about another mode of passing information down. You're a new father; have you felt like becoming a dad changed your relationship to your body?

It's funny, I'm wearing just one of my dad's old socks right now. The elasticity around the ankle is all busted; maybe there's a metaphor about the father-son-body relationship even there. But yes, very much yes. Being a parent has altered my relationship to my body. It's taught me that energy is limitless. I get four hours of sleep most nights now and I'm constantly shocked at how much energy you can summon when it's for your kid. It's also made me feel less important, in a good way. This little body depends on you for everything, and whatever small worry that used to take up space in my mind just doesn't make the cut anymore.

Has it changed your artistry? Has it softened or sharpened your perspective at all?

Both softened and sharpened. Dad hormones are real. When I watched an early dress rehearsal for *Pinocchio*, which we just wrapped, I cried at the ballet's very upbeat elementary school scenes, realizing one day I'll be taking my son to school on his first day. It's sharpened me, too. I've had to start thinking further ahead and anticipating all sorts of outcomes. Previously I was more of a "deal with it in the moment" type. Starting the day much earlier than I used to helps me build up into the day, similar to the way he's growing his processing.

Do you want him to dance too?

I want to teach my son to dance so badly. It doesn't have to be ballet. It could be a one-two-step-touch, or something social like the Macarena. I waltz around my apartment with him in my arms, and I like to think he can feel the relationship between the music and the movement.

It seems like you've realized so many dreams, all in six months. You got married, had a kid, and landed a top dance gig. Do you feel complete or are you still searching for something?

I don't feel like I have anything left to prove, but I am struggling with how to accept and maintain the achievement of it all. When I was first promoted, I wasn't expecting it. I suddenly had this sensation, this pressure, that I had to now become the fantasy I had for myself. When I'd picture the moment of finally making it, I thought I'd run on stage, howl, make a huge and ecstatic display. But instead I sobbed and I felt so small. Nothing was around the corner for me to run after anymore. It was like being in the open ocean. After the announcement I had a total identity crisis—imposter syndrome on three planes—but I'm starting to absorb it, finally... I'm spending more time considering what "accomplishment" could be and trying to let this new, strange dream sink in.

Larkin Miller recommends:

Reading all of John Steinbeck's novels, especially if you need to sober up

Ordering good vanilla ice cream in a cone and continuously rotating it as you lick so the ice cream becomes perfectly symmetrical

Wearing an excellent pair of sneakers and walking in the rain

Closing your eyes and listening and visualizing to "In a Sentimental Mood"

Learning to read an analog clock, and knowing that time will keep ticking

Name

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Vocation

ballet dancer

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