

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 50 – Hope Muir – The Most Incredible Thing

Exploring a New Tangent

And now a personal word,

My conversation with Hope Muir marks the fiftieth episode of *On Life and Meaning*. Like Hope Muir, who explores new tangents, who is curious about what there is to know, so every episode of this podcast is a new tangent and an opportunity for me to learn something new. Dance has caught my attention.

I've always have been amazed at what dancers can do, their strength and flexibility and stamina, how they can remember dance steps, the split-second timing and coordination of jumps, their graceful, powerful bodies. I've appreciated ballet as sport, the performance and competition of it, even if the dancer is competing with her or himself to test personal limits. I have appreciated dancers as athletes. Ballet dancers are Platonic ideals of the human form with their perfectly postured, sinewy bodies. They are gods and goddesses, separate and apart from mere mortals, from the rest of us who clap and then struggle to get out of our seats. I watch dancers on stage and wonder how I might walk through the world if I had their strength and grace. I wonder how they do it. I wonder how our entire nation might be different if we were all dancers.

Dance is a new tangent. And there are so many things about it I am finding interesting. I am learning to appreciate it more fully as art.

I am interested in its history: how ballet, as we know it today, began during the Renaissance in Italy; how the terms “ballet” and “ball,” as in masked balls, come from the Italian word *ballare*, to dance; how when Catherine de Medici of Italy married the French king Henry II, she introduced early dance styles into the court life of France; how ballet rose to prominence during the reign of Louis XIV; how the official terminology and vocabulary of ballet was gradually codified in French; how the creative center of ballet became Russia; how nineteenth century Romanticism informed recognizable heroines; how dance exploded and expanded in form and technique throughout the world in the twentieth century.

I am interested in the great impresarios and choreographers of ballet, from the classical dance tradition of Marius Petipa to Serge Diaghilev to George Balanchine to the pioneers of modern dance, from Martha Graham to Merce Cunningham to Paul Taylor

to twenty-first century choreographers, from Alexei Ratmansky to Christopher Wheeldon to David Dawson.

I am interested in the dancers, the ones who have become stars, whose names have become part of popular culture: the men, Vaslav Nijinsky, Rudolf Nureyev, and Mikhail Baryshnikov; and the women, Margot Fonteyn, Agnes de Mille, and Marguerite Porter; and contemporary dancers blazing the stage, Natalia Osipova, Marianela Nunez, and Misty Copeland. Who are these people? What are their stories? How and why did they become famous?

I am interested in what makes a good dancer and a good dance. What are the standards of the form? What is a good line? A good shape? A good turn? What are the great productions? The great roles? What makes for a good *Swan Lake*? A good *Giselle*? A good *Sleeping Beauty*? Does a dancer want to dance the roles of Odette and Aurora as an actor might want to take on Hamlet or King Lear? Once done with those roles, do dancers want to portray real life and real people, never to dance those roles again?

I am interested in the lives of dancers, how they train and prepare, how they devote their lives to their art, how they fight for it, how they endure pain and test limits, how they worry and rally, how they maintain youth in their legs and finish well, how they become something else on stage.

When my daughter was young, she took ballet and modern dance classes at the North Carolina Dance Theatre, the precursor to Charlotte Ballet. I would see her stretch at the barre, accept instruction, practice with classmates, and dance in recitals. She went about her dance diligently. I appreciated dance for what it meant in her life at the time: a discipline, an activity that would strengthen her body and help her develop poise and confidence. My daughter went on to other interests. As a family, we went on to other interests. It is an interest that we have rekindled. What I saw then and what I see now—as I look at young dancers in the studios of Charlotte Ballet and the main company on stage—are athletes and artists who are guiding the evolution of dance forward, who challenge what is possible, who tell us what is human.

The great joy of this podcast for me is meeting so many incredible people. It is the most incredible thing.

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