

Forever on Pointe

Agota Gabor

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Chapter 1: Ballet Rat

On a normal day, our first class began at 8:00 a.m. Our morning ballet class lasted an hour and a half, six days a week. Daily class is the root of ballet. It is essential for learning and improving technique, but the purpose is not just repetition and training. With the time-honored progression from simple plié at the barre to complicated combinations with big jumps and turns, each class is also an ongoing audition. It is in this forum that you show your strengths and potential, how you relate to your classmates, and whether you have what it takes to be chosen for future parts. It is in *class* that a dancer's career is decided.

There is an order to who stands where at the barre. Your spot at the barre is your rank, according to how good you were the day before. Rats are very competitive; it's in their nature. Our ballet master, Ferencz Nádasy, was a famous dancer who was well known across Europe. He knew all about how competitive we were, and he thought this was as it should be.

As far as we were concerned, Master Nádasy was the King of Ballet. Our future was in his hands. He was a short, athletic man who wore a uniform of soft gray cashmere pants, a black T-shirt, and a gray wool vest or a gray sweater. He carried a stick, which he used to correct us. He would lift our leg a little higher with it, or he would gently push at our knee to straighten it. He was strict but not punishing. He motivated us by complimenting us liberally for what we did right and ignoring us if we failed. Every move counted. If your plié, battement, or arabesque was the best that day, you might be moved up at the barre the next day—and that move would escape no one's notice.

Classes were hard. One and a half hours doesn't sound like a lot, but when you are being pushed to your limit and you're eight years old, it can be quite exhausting. It hurt to hold a pose, and Master hurt us when he pushed our legs behind our ears and told us to stay that way. There was the physical pain, and then there was the fear. You were always afraid that the girl next to you would be better. You wanted to be the best.

The girl ahead of me at the barre was often my best friend, Koko. She was born in France; her parents lived there for a few years but came back to Hungary when she was a baby. She told me her mother didn't like France.

Koko and I were the best dancers in our class. We knew this from the attention we got from Master and because one of us was always picked to interpret the hand gestures Master gave, which were a sort of sign language for the combinations he wanted us to practice. For nondancers, these hand gestures might look like someone fidgeting or knitting without wool in the air, but to us they spelled out the various steps of a dance combination, which we then demonstrated for the rest of the class.

Koko and I were best friends and competitors. We both aimed for the stars. We were ambitious—I perhaps even more than she. Even though I couldn't help it, my drive to be the best sometimes bothered me, since I loved her.

We were as opposite as two kids could be. She was blonde, shy, and pretty as a doll. I was olive skinned and dark haired, with high cheekbones, hazel eyes, and a quick temper. She was better at jumps and I was better at turning. Her dream was to dance Maria in *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*; I wanted to do the part of Zarema. We both dreamed of being the Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*.

After our morning class we went on to rehearsals, where we children were taught our parts in various operas and ballets. Then we had lunch, which we brought from home and ate in our dressing room. At two o'clock we went to school.

Our schoolroom was a large dressing room on the fourth floor, one room for all grades. We were in school from two to five in the afternoons, six days a week. Our teacher was a large-bosomed lady, Mrs. Tuba, whom we all loved. She had a great laugh and never seemed to get mad.

We had little free time, and when we did, we loved to explore the House—and what adventures we had. The Hungarian State Opera House, as the Budapest Opera was then called, is a neo-Renaissance gem. Designed by Miklós Ybl, Hungary's greatest historicist architect, it was commissioned by Emperor Franz Joseph for the millennium celebrations in the nineteenth century. It is said that the emperor's directive was to make the opera house grand in every way, but to make sure that it was smaller than Vienna's. The emperor didn't want it to outshine the landmark of his hometown. Our opera house had statues of great composers, including Mozart and Beethoven, adorning the facade, and seated statues of Franz Liszt and Ferenc Erkel standing sentry at the main entrance. Next to them were imposing stone sphinxes that guarded the finely carved wooden doors. On the left was a carriageway and the entrance to the Royal Staircase, and on the right, on Hajo Street, was the artists' entrance.

When you approached the porter and he said hi, you knew you were special. You belonged. This was the entrance for those in the know. We were very proud as we walked into the building through this door every day. After we climbed the few steps leading inside the large building, the first thing we'd see was the orchestra pit on the left, and a little

farther in we could glimpse at the entrance to the stage. The opera singers' dressing rooms and the costume rooms were upstairs, on the second and third floors. The fourth floor belonged to the professional dancers and to us, the rats.

This building was our universe and our home. The rehearsal halls and dressing rooms were as familiar to us as our living rooms and bedrooms. The whole building was imbued with the smell of sweat and the sound of a multitude of pianos being played at once—sound pouring out from everywhere.

Exploring the fifth floor and above was not allowed, but of course we did it anyway—and oh, it was fun. The sets for seven different performances, both ballets and operas, were stored there at any one time. Walking among them on the thin rope walkways was dangerous, but it was one of our favorite pastimes; it was also good balancing practice! On nights when there wasn't a performance, we'd sneak out to the front of the house and play among the plush red chairs, each shining with seven kilograms of gold used as ornamentation. We'd pretend that phantoms and villains were hiding behind the huge crystal chandelier. Simply put, we were in heaven. Being a ballet rat was truly magical.

