



*learning
to* fly

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A JOFFREY BALLERINA

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The bouquet is huge; from the audience, the profusion of lilies wrapped in pink tissue and tied with fluorescent ribbons appears half the size of the ballerina receiving it. The crowd at the Auditorium Theatre claps as the Joffrey Ballet's Allison Walsh accepts the flowers at center stage, her due for her featured role in the company's spring show, "American Moderns." Small and thin enough to be described as pixie-like, Walsh gestures to the cast in a way that means, in the graceful non-speech of the ballet world, "Let's take another bow." Her earrings flash in the stage lights as her body droops with practiced poise.

his is what center stage looks like. But what about all the days of a professional dancer's life where there is no stage? Those days, after all, outnumber the former.

Walsh, 23, has danced professionally for five years, four with Joffrey, a world-class dance company that moved to Chicago from New York thirteen years ago. The company's artistic director Ashley Wheeler praises her technique, musicality and versatility.

"She's a really great talent," he says. "She's a great person to have in the company . . . She has a very bright future."

If the future is bright, it is because Walsh has worked for it. Because what many people fail to grasp about professional ballet is that beneath the makeup, away from the stage lights, far from the flowers—it's a job.

DAILY PHYSICAL THERAPY

It is a sunny Tuesday morning in the Loop, the day before "American Moderns" is scheduled to open. Soon after arriving at Joffrey's State Street studio, Walsh heads to the physical therapy room. A Pilates machine sits along one wall, the low rectangular frame looking distressingly like a medieval rack. Nearby is a canister filled with hot pads. Dancers stretch on the floor in contortions that are apparently possible, but nonetheless highly improbable, as they compare notes on what hurts.

Walsh is on the table talking with physical therapist Katie Lemmon about her IT band; the perpetually tense fibers in her thigh are making her foot hurt. But she's lucky. She's never had a major injury. The worst ones can end a career.

At 10:30 a.m. the leotard-clad dancers file into the biggest studio for company class. Unofficially, everyone has their own place at the barre, the rail that dancers grasp to steady themselves during the first half of class. One wall is covered with mirrors, another dominated by huge windows that look out on the Chicago skyline. The Joffrey Tower is visible; come fall, it will house the company's studios, offices and a black box theater.

Class begins with pliés, as it does everywhere for every dancer, from the 6-year-old in pink to Mikhail Baryshnikov. It progresses through a set order of exercises that move from small, simple movements to more complex ones requiring greater exertion. The dancers shed legwarmers and T-shirts as they begin to sweat.

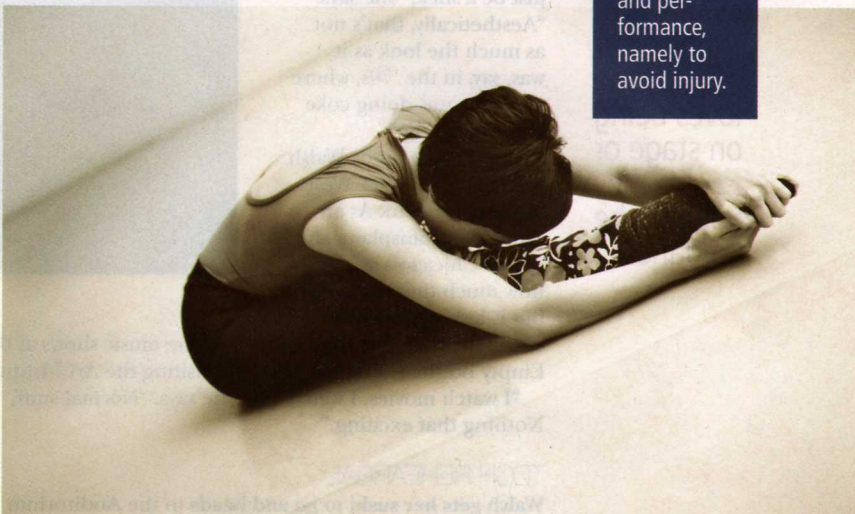
After 45 minutes they move to the center of the room. Between exercises, Walsh sews the ribbons and

elastics onto her pointe shoes, the pretty pink satin torture chambers which pulverize a dancer's feet into a mess of corns and calluses. They cost between \$40 and \$70 a pair, and dancers can break them down in a single performance. Much of Joffrey's budget goes toward keeping its dancers shod. When Walsh was growing up in Bethesda, Maryland, her parents used to encourage her to make a pair last for a month.

Walsh started dancing at a municipal center at age 5. She had lots of energy, which she channeled into soccer and gymnastics, too. "Whenever someone put music on, that was just a natural inclination, to start moving around and bopping to the music," she says. "I used to choreograph in the living room on the carpet, and I think my mom just didn't want me to break anything."

Her parents enrolled her next at Maryland Youth Ballet Academy. They chose it because it happened to be nearby, but the school possessed a record of producing professionals, including American Ballet Theatre principal dancers Julie Kent and Susan Jaffe.

Preparation begets more preparation. Walsh stretches thoroughly before every class, tech rehearsal and performance, namely to avoid injury.



By high school she had arranged to finish academic classes by 1 p.m. so she could head to the studio. But her devotion to ballet meant she could never try out for plays or the track team. "I feel like that was the turning point, where if I'm going to make these sacrifices, I'm going to work really hard, where my ultimate goal is to get a job," she says.

Now attending class is part of her job. The Joffrey dancers

pirouette and piqué across the floor, but ballet master Graca Sales is not impressed. "I don't want to see your eyes everywhere," she says. "I want you to focus. I know that you're tired. Everybody is tired. But still—wake up!"

They do, performing the exercise with noticeably more energy. When class ends, in keeping with ballet tradition, they clap for Sales and the accompanist.

OFF HOURS

After class, Walsh walks south to a Michigan Avenue sushi counter to grab lunch. Joffrey dancers are generally healthy, Walsh says, and most eat normally because they burn so many calories. Choreographers and artistic directors want muscle tone, not anorexic waifs. "You can't just be a stick," she says. "Aesthetically, that's not as much the look as it was, say, in the '70s, where everyone was doing coke and not eating."

On the weekends Walsh likes to cook in her West Town apartment. As an East Coast transplant, she enjoys Chicago's size and how much there is to do, but is less appreciative of the weather. She likes going to indie music shows at the Empty Bottle, riding her bike and visiting the Art Institute.

"I watch movies, I watch TV," she says. "Normal stuff. Nothing that exciting."

TECH REHEARSAL

Walsh gets her sushi to go and heads to the Auditorium Theatre. This afternoon is the technical rehearsal for "American Moderns." The all-contemporary program includes Paul Taylor's *Cloven Kingdom*, Lar Lubovitch's *Smile with My Heart*, Mehmet Sander's *Inner Space* and Twyla Tharp's *Waterbaby Bagatelles*. Walsh loves the lineup; she prefers modern works to classical standards like *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

A rabbit warren of dun-colored hallways runs beneath the stage. The dancers' names are printed in gold picture frames which hang outside their dressing rooms, indicating who



"You have to appreciate that you're on stage. This is what you're working toward your whole year . . . Everyone loves being on stage or else they wouldn't be a dancer."

prepares where. A rack outside Walsh's room has her *Waterbaby* costume on it, a pale blue leotard with a knee-length skirt and filmy cap sleeves. Inside is a counter where the three dancers assigned to the room apply their makeup. It's warm, and will grow warmer still when the marquee-like light bulbs edging the mirror are turned on.

Finding the way to the stage is impossible for outsiders without asking directions. Backstage is painted black, with ropes and lights everywhere. The stage manager rules here, running everything through her headset. "You guys, keep it down out there," she tells company members watching from the front of the house. "We can hear you."

Cloven Kingdom precedes *Waterbaby* on the program, but the company rehearses the Twyla Tharp piece first. Dancers wait in the wings, bodies pulsing to the music, fingers in the air counting off the beat, eyes locked across the expanse of stage, until their mutual moment arrives and they explode

