

Lucy Gray photography

Balancing Acts

or a title given the project by Gloria Steinem: No More Red Shoes: The Art of Ballet and Motherhood

Artist's Statement for exhibition at Stanford University April 8, 2005

I photographed this collection of pictures of prima ballerinas who are mothers from 2000 to 2003. I also recorded interviews with them in 2003 – 2004. The purpose in making these pictures and the interviews was to celebrate human potential. These were the first three American prima ballerinas competing at the top of their profession, in the world, who became mothers. They all dance for San Francisco Ballet and they all say that their dancing has improved since they became mothers. They each report that dancing for someone more important than they are has made the difference. The press agrees.

What I wanted to capture in these pictures is an interaction between people. I wanted to help turn porcelain dancers to flesh and blood women. I wanted us to appreciate them for their myriad accomplishments beyond the usual photos of ballerinas in arabesque. I wanted to use photography in its classic form to reveal the reality in a profession that had not been seen before. Like most people, I once believed dancers were too skinny to menstruate. I didn't know they weren't permitted to have children. Ballerinas are at the apex of so many prejudices about women, about sex, about art, about money, about talent and these women add to that list our narrow mindedness about raising children. And worst of all, they are dismissed as rare. So why pay attention to their actions? I see them as a perfect sociological study precisely because they have not been looked at personally, because they are doing something for the first time and it's not like they thought anyone was paying attention.

One of the last names I could ever have imagined calling any of the soft spoken, hyper trained ballerinas is a *rebel*. But these three women are advancing social change. They are prying open a vault in the labor movement that would sooner not have been opened. Women are not necessarily held back by their children's needs and children will not wither without a mother's care 24/7. It is the rules at work that hold women back to a standard by which they will fail. It is the cultural meanness that dictates against women working and having children. Should we have a law that only rich women can parent? Of course not.

There is a book that came out a couple of weeks ago that gives my point a foundation. It's called "Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety." The author, Judith Warner, has long been a political writer and here she lays out the excessive care given to our children and why. She is making an eloquent plea

for support for mothers so that they can have some of their own life and not be so put upon with perfection in the unreliable field of child rearing. All the more amazing that ballerinas, the most obvious strivers for perfection we see on stage, should be the ones to risk breaking the code. It is the ballerinas who extol freedom from selfishness as the means to better performance on the job. In Warner's account, most American mothers today have themselves in a panic and depression over their drive to be selfless enough with their children. She says for these mothers to really give to their children they need somewhere outside the home arena to perform as well.

Ballerinas are such unlikely rebels because although theirs is a profession that is dominated by females, they are still not paid as well as male dancers. And they allow that the one artistic director, the sole person who will decide their fate, is almost invariably man. Worse still, those company directors come primarily from the New York City Ballet, the company founded by George Balanchine. He was the genius choreographer/director and draconian manager who told his ballerinas that they may not marry if they wanted to remain in his company. He told the women that if they went with a man he would have to dominate, they would lose their professionalism. Balanchine never said the same to the male dancers. He preferred the look of a turnout that gave most dancers hip replacements. He gave performers drugs so that they could dance through pain. His managerial style was of an era. Nothing puts that era in its place more squarely than these three dancers achievements.

In this exhibition there are forty pictures of the three dancers and their families. Katita Waldo, her husband Marshall and their son James Crutcher are in the first two rooms. She is shown in a period of her life when she was terrified she was losing her job. What else could she do to support her family? All she'd ever done since she was a six-year-old in Spain was to dance. Her expatriate parents had to come home when Katita was an adolescent. Her father became a supplier of janitorial products. Katita is their success. She had watched as two others had children at San Francisco Ballet and they thrived afterwards. So she'd taken the huge risk for her body and tried to get pregnant. It didn't work the first two months so she had to wait until the following year. That time it took. She was ecstatic. But here you will see the toddler holding his breath until he turned blue. He would do so until he passed out. Katita was miserable. If I were to take her picture now you would see a family that has worked things out. Katita no longer looks bulimic. She worked through a back injury and relearned how to plant her toe en pointe and that has given her new grace. She takes a minor relaxant for stage fright (not for pain!) and that has given her the confidence to hold onto her place and her pirouettes. Her husband, who was feeling overwhelmed as a composer *and* a dad is exploring much more in music now that James has begun school. And James loves school. He's a smart boy with

some very good friends. The family still teases that “Mommy might get fired.” They are worriers. That hasn’t changed.

In the hallway are pictures of Kristin Long and her family. Before the photographs Kristin was bulimic and worried that she’d done so little else in life than dance and she met a guy on the phone. She went to meet him in New York and after a few visits she stayed. She told Helgi Tomasson, the director of San Francisco Ballet, that she wanted a break. “How long?” he asked. “I don’t know,” Kristin told him. She moved in with Michael Locicero in New York. She got advice from a nutritionist. She went to classes with modern dancers. She relaxed. But Michael worked on Wall Street and he hated it. So when the SF Ballet called to see if she was coming back for the next season, Kristin said she would. They’d move together back to San Francisco.

By the time they got there Kristin had to be the first Principal dancer at the company to tell Helgi she was pregnant. Until the late 1980s Kristin would have been fired. But a pregnant dancer at San Francisco Ballet filed a lawsuit when she was dropped by the company, along with her health insurance, a week before she had her baby. She lost her case in court because ballet companies had such rights. George Balanchine had set the mold and it had never before been challenged. AGMA, the dancer’s union, was moved by the case to put a leave-of-absence clause in their base agreement from which all companies negotiate. So Helgi couldn’t fire Kristin and when she came back after having had her child she had the figure he’d always wanted her to have and she had newfound poise and purpose. She was dancing for her son who was usually in the audience with Michael.

Still, Kristin often feels she is under great strain. Her father lost the family trucking business her first year back. Her husband missed New York terribly. He couldn’t get used to living on a poor artist’s salary and being a stay-at-home dad. Kristin got injuries in these pictures. Today, her dad has a new job. Michael has adjusted to San Francisco and has become a physical therapist at SFB. Kristin has blossomed as a dancer. But she still gets injured. Their seven-year-old son, Kai, who watched his mother dance every day as a toddler, will begin classes at San Francisco Ballet School this fall. He is taking it very seriously.

Then in the conference room there is Tina LeBlanc the dancer. She is the most famous of the three, the most successful. When Tina decided to have a baby, she was pregnant in two months – both times. Tina thought she was the first to be pregnant at the company. She was about to gather all of her strength and tell Helgi when she heard someone scream that Kristin had just done the same. Tina said, “Yeah, how’d he take it?” In the back room of this building are more pictures of Tina. There she is having her second child and she returns to the stage a much better dancer than ever. She’s acquired an ease that makes what

she does look simple and clear and fun no matter how arduous the movements. Audiences go wild in appreciation for her now. And she comes to them after an extraordinary performance knowing she deserves their praise. She is a realized woman, a deeply satisfied achiever. Brave enough to be the first romantic star in any profession to allow pictures of herself giving birth. Do they make less of her appeal on stage? I think they make more. The more responsibility Tina has taken on, the better she performs. Tina is so much an example to young women who may worry about how to have a career and be mothers.

For me, these three ballerinas show us how, with a bit of nerve, they overcame a lot of silly ideas. According to a recent story in Dance Magazine, there are now ten prima ballerina mothers in this country. It must be appreciated that Helgi Tomasson allowed me the access to tell their story knowing I intended to tell it like it has never been done in ballet before. There has been only one other showing of half of these pictures at the San Francisco Public Library and at the opening there were hundreds of working mothers curious to see the inner workings of this formerly closed occupation. Those who love to watch ballet tend to want to keep the dancers in a bubble. They don't want to know the truth. But it is possible that there is a larger audience for ballet built on people like me, who never had any interest in it before *because* it was airless. I now see every amazing leap a dancer makes with fear for the risk and joy for the accomplishment.

I think ballerinas as moms bring up more arguments, more conflicted feelings than women in any other vocation. That is why I think it is essential to give their full measure, so we can air all of our grievances. And lastly, you may wonder about the title of this exhibition. It was given to me out of sheer generosity and wit by Gloria Steinem. It is taken from the title of the movie "The Red Shoes" that was directed by Michael Powell. He was a dear friend of mine and he deserves an homage here. Gloria's title refers to the story in the film which was about a dance whose director made her choose between her talent and her love. She kills herself. The essence of that tale is in a dance the ballerina, Moira Shear, performs in which her beautiful red shoes don't allow her to stop the steps. She dies trying to end the dancing. The red shoes go back to the shop where they wait for their next victim. The intention of the exhibition and the title is to extend our sense of a woman's potential.