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MAN TO MAN

BY MARINA HARSS

COURTESY SUSIE MORGAN TAYLOR

Last week, the studios at American Ballet Theatre, in New York, were an island of quiet and peace, far from the news. Most of the dancers were still away, enjoying the third week of their post-“Nutcracker” hiatus. (The company employs the dancers thirty-six weeks per year; the rest of the time, they fend for themselves.) Most of the studios were still empty, but in one room the quiet, repetitive labor of fine-tuning that is the dancers’ daily practice was in full swing.



Calvin Royal III, a soft-spoken, long-limbed dancer with smiling eyes, was practicing a passage from the thrilling—and exhausting—showpiece “Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux,” by George Balanchine. (You can see Baryshnikov dance it here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99tpTW-bxWk>.) Royal traversed the studio from left to right in a series of lilting sideways jumps—up, and over, up, and over—with his legs unfolding or beating together in the air. Then, with little time to spare, he ran toward a bank of windows at the rear of the studio and began a gradual advance, stepping into a progression of double turns in the air. The *double tour* is one of the hardest steps to execute cleanly. It always seems to wander to one side, or wobble mid-flight, or land with the feet facing slightly east or west of their desired destination. Royal’s *tours* are neater than most.

The young pianist, Ben Houghton, watched with stoic interest, chugging away at Tchaikovsky’s three-four melody—*um-pa-pa, um-pa-pa*—an outtake from “Swan Lake” that lay forgotten in the Bolshoi’s archives until the fifties. The lot of the rehearsal pianist, fated to repeat the same phrases over and over, is not an easy one. At the front of the studio sat Ethan Stiefel, a recently retired principal dancer best known in non-dance circles for his starring turn in the movie “Center Stage,” where he played the motorcycle-riding Cooper Nielson, a hotshot dancer with a somewhat exaggerated self-image.

In real life, the forty-two-year-old Stiefel gives off an air more focussed than self-aggrandizing. True, he is a demanding master. (And he was demanding of himself as a dancer, too. His performances were taut and sharp.) From his lips, “all right” is high praise. Still, the atmosphere in the studio was relaxed, hardly the fever-pitched hothouse conjured by pop-culture depictions of ballet.

Men's ballet technique, unlike women's, finds its expression in short bursts of extreme but controlled athleticism. "Now you see how puffy that section is," Stiefel chuckled at one point, after watching Royal go through a series of jumps. By "puffy" he means that the dancer is left huffing and puffing, usually folded over, hands on thighs. Royal simply nodded, smiling but unable to speak. One of the great battles for a young dancer is finding the stamina to survive a solo without falling to pieces by the end. (I've seen it happen, trust me.) There are so many things to think about at once: the position of the feet, the torque of the turns, the composure of the upper body, the shifting gaze, the placement of the arms.

Throughout the session, Stiefel pointed out moments when Royal could avoid working *too much*, by allowing his energy to flow from one position to the next without pausing in between. "Anytime you have to stop and restart, it's much more difficult," he said, encouraging Royal to begin a movement while still completing the previous one, using momentum to help him along. "I follow the philosophy that doing it the hard way isn't necessarily going to make it better," Stiefel explained later. Easier said than done. Coördination and timing are perhaps the most difficult things for a dancer to achieve. Once conquered, however, they have the surprising collateral effect of reducing exertion. They are central to ballet's defining illusion: effortlessness.

But you can't crack the code by yourself. This is why the twenty-five-year-old Royal, a member of the corps de ballet with great potential, and an African-American in a field that is still largely white, has chosen to work with Stiefel during his final vacation week rather than spend time with his family hanging out on the beach in Tampa before the gruelling season begins. Though he's been given featured roles in recent seasons, they have been mainly in contemporary works. The bigger roles in the classical repertory, essential for the premier danseur, have as yet eluded him. He knows that ascension through the ranks demands fine-tuning and the ability to exude competence. This way, when the time comes, he'll be ready.

This is where Stiefel, with his sharp eye, can help. "There are certain things about ballet that are kind of universal—it's just what the rules are," he said, wryly. With his experience as a dancer and a former company director, Stiefel can illuminate the technical complexities, break them down, and help Royal adapt them to his own physique and way of moving, which is naturally lyrical, expansive, and buoyant, but not always academically impeccable. That ineffable mix of uniqueness and precision is what makes a dancer memorable.

Royal started dancing late—he was fourteen—and almost by chance, after taking a class in his performing-arts high school (where he specialized in classical piano). He studied with a local teacher, Suzanne Pomerantzeff, who gave him lots of videos to watch,

including one of Stiefel as Oberon in “The Dream.” His promise was quickly recognized and he was offered a scholarship at A.B.T.’s affiliated academy, the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School. The scholarship was funded by of the company’s stars, Ethan Stiefel.

Now, five years after joining the company, Royal’s quest for self-improvement is being helped along by a fifty-thousand-dollar grant from the Leonore Annenberg Fellowship Fund for the Performing and Visual Arts. It’s a lot of money, particularly for a member of the corps. (Most companies don’t reveal their dancers’ salaries, but it’s safe to say that the prize represents a good portion of the yearly income of a dancer of his rank and seniority at a company of A.B.T.’s size.) It’s out of this cache that he’s paying for his sessions with Stiefel.

That’s only part of what Royal plans to do with the money. “As dancers, everything in our lives is very planned, decisions are made for us,” he said, “and this is the first time I’ve had the freedom to choose for myself.” He’s going to study with an acting coach, which will help him prepare for big, meaty roles. And he’s decided to go on a kind of balletic Grand Tour, to see how other companies do things, what their repertoires are like, and how they approach technique. Last year, he spent time in Paris and London, taking classes at the Paris Opéra, the Royal Ballet, and English National Ballet. During another break, he’ll go to Amsterdam—no, not for the cafés—and St. Petersburg. In each place, he’ll work with new teachers, all of them former dancers, each of whom will impart a few secrets. They are the tools he will use to create his own illusions. Dancer to dancer. This is how a dancer is made.

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