

CULTURE DESK

DANCING ON THEIR OWN DURING THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

By Marina Harss

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"It's like you're floating, but you don't know in which direction," Herman Cornejo said, of taking dance classes over Zoom. Photograph by Maria Jose Lavandera

It's noon on a Friday in May, and the now-familiar illuminated squares of Zoom begin to pop up on a computer screen. A masked dancer in a studio, which is empty but for a pianist, peers into her computer's camera, calling out a cheerful "Hi, everyone! So good to see you!" In another frame, a toddler ambles by, prompting a dancer to joke, "Hey, guys, I had a baby!" (The toddler actually belongs to the dancer's sister, with whom she is staying.) More and more squares appear, revealing living rooms, kitchens where family members prepare sandwiches, a nursery, and something that looks like an airplane hangar. Almost all of the dancers are solo, with just a few lucky couples thrown in. The truly fortunate are outside, somewhere beautiful.

The dancers of American Ballet Theatre have gathered for their daily virtual ballet class, as many of them have done since March 14th, the day after the company, based near Union Square in Manhattan, sent everyone home. As news of the [coronavirus pandemic](#) grew ever more terrifying, some stayed in New York, but others, afraid of being stuck in small apartments with little room to move, left to be with their families elsewhere. Often they were returning to homes they had left at fourteen or fifteen, never imagining they would one day spend weeks, months, or God knows how long sleeping in childhood bedrooms and practicing their jumps in perilous proximity to kitchen islands. About thirty of the company's ninety dancers join the class on any given day.

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Dancers' lives are mostly spent in spaces crowded with people. They rehearse in studios where it's often uncomfortably warm and stuffy—better for the muscles—and go onstage to perform within spitting distance of dozens of other people. Classical ballets contain multitudes; the whole idea of the corps de ballet is that it should animate the stage, bringing it alive with movement. And then there's the partnering: hands on bodies, sweat, dancers breathing into each other's faces as they channel physical effort into something that looks like magical ease.

But here they are, far from each other and from the people who insure that they are able to hone their technique day after day. Carlos Lopez, who teaches this regular morning class, is what is known in the business as a "ballet master." His duties at A.B.T. include teaching, leading rehearsals, and assisting choreographers. Currently, his work setup involves a computer screen propped atop his bed, a detachable shower bar affixed to a bookshelf for stability, and a small mirror on the wall. After rolling back a rug, he demonstrates the exercises to the other dancers from a doorway between the bedroom and the living room in his small apartment in Chelsea. His roommate, who is not a dancer, has graciously given him permission to do this once a day for an hour and a half. From another location, a pianist accompanies each class. Today, the accompanist starts off the pliés with a version of "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'," from the musical "Oklahoma!" The playlist seems designed to keep people in a good mood.

It's remarkable how much Lopez can glean from the little digital squares. Every so often, he gives a correction to a particular dancer: "Release your neck," or "Toes stretched!" Over the past two months, he has perfected the art of the Zoom lesson. Lopez is from Madrid, where the effects of COVID-19 have been devastating. He hasn't seen his family in months and worries constantly about them. "Ay, sí," he told me, his voice full of emotion. "I talked to my mother for an hour and a half yesterday. I'm going to see her soon." He began offering these Zoom classes spontaneously, as soon as he heard that the studios would be closed. Then the lucrative eight-week season at the Met, the pinnacle of the company's yearly schedule, was cancelled. The dancers were at loose ends, as was he.

At first, neither Lopez nor the dancers were paid. That quickly changed; the company's private donors and corporate sponsors stepped in. Additionally, there is now an A.B.T. Crisis Relief Fund, and a federal Small Business Administration loan has provided assistance. The company sent out squares of specialized vinyl flooring to each dancer who wanted one, in order to prevent knee injuries from hard floors. None of the staff has been laid off—yet. But the situation is critical. Kara Medoff Barnett, the company's executive director, told me that the company is projected to lose approximately eighteen million dollars in revenue from ticket sales and touring fees. The dancers' salaries are only guaranteed through early July, when their New York City season would normally end. A fall season has been announced, but it remains anything but certain.

The company seems to be doing what it can for the dancers and the staff, organizing monthly company meetings and bimonthly informal kaffeeklatsches, all via Zoom, at which people can air their concerns. There was a virtual fund-raising gala to celebrate the company's eightieth anniversary, with prerecorded toasts and video. For the next few weeks, there will be online interviews and video diaries. "A crisis like this amplifies your strengths and your weaknesses as an institution," Barnett said. "Our strength is our cohesion and collaborative spirit. Our weakness is not having a library of digital content." In contrast, New York's other large ballet company, New York City Ballet, has been able to put together a "digital season," with online broadcasts of ballets from its repertory airing every Tuesday and Friday. The high-quality broadcasts are unprecedented for an American ballet company; before now, conflicting rights between management and the labor unions representing the dancers, musicians, and stagehands have made such a thing economically unfeasible. Now they seem like a necessity. A.B.T. will have to catch up fast. "I told my colleagues, the age of the ephemeral is over," Barnett said. "From now on, we must capture everything that we do, from rehearsals to the stage."

Like restaurants and travel agencies, sports franchises and car manufacturers, performing-arts troupes face a perilous future. Self-preservation is at the top of the agenda. If a company can't survive, there will be no jobs for people to come back to. There's little public funding for the arts, and the category of live performance faces some of the highest barriers to a return to activity. Before a vaccine or a cure for the coronavirus, people may be willing to get a haircut or buy a car (if they can afford it), but will they be ready to sit in an enclosed, windowless theatre for two hours among hundreds or thousands of fellow audience members? Will opera singers be able to rehearse, propelling their breath across large spaces into the breathing space of other singers? Will orchestra musicians be able to sit shoulder to shoulder? Will dancers be able to share a studio for hours and hours, as they normally do, or hurl themselves into their partners' arms at the end of a pas de deux? How long will it be until such things make any sense at all? And what does it mean to be a singer or a dancer or a cellist if you can't perform? The question is as much a metaphysical one as a practical one. As Alexei Ratmansky, A.B.T.'s resident choreographer, told me, several weeks into the lockdown, "If we can't go into the studio, what are we?" Ratmansky has gone from a managing a manic schedule and crisscrossing the globe to make ballets to weeks of enforced inactivity.

Believing in the future requires an act of faith. When I asked Barnett if she thought that A.B.T. would survive, she answered yes, pointing to the company's history. "This is a company that survived World War Two, and that almost disappeared from the earth twice, in 1948 and in 1984, when it flirted with insolvency. But this is causing us to rethink everything."

The uncertainty wears particularly heavily on dancers. Most have been working non-stop, since the age of ten or eleven, to become the high-performing artists that they are. Many have forgone or deferred college for a dance career. Like an Olympic sport, dancing requires total devotion and sacrifice. "They have to forgo much of the pleasure that others have been able to indulge in to achieve their goals," Robin Smith, a psychologist and ordained minister who was known as "therapist in residence" on the "The Oprah Winfrey Show," told me. (Smith, who refers to herself as a "trauma surgeon for the heart and soul," was invited to speak to the dancers via Zoom at the beginning of this month.) "And now the payoff has gone up in smoke. Depression and anxiety are a part of this."

"It's like you're floating, but you don't know in which direction," Herman Cornejo, one of the company's top dancers, said. From the time that he began training in Buenos Aires, at the age of eight, he had never taken a break longer than a couple of months. Even then, time off was only ever for an injury or a vacation; he always had an idea of when he would be back in action. The cancellation of the Met season hit him hard. "You start to think, Why am I getting up? To dance when?" he said. "There is no date to prepare for. I'm a dancer who dances for other people, not just for myself." For a couple of weeks, he couldn't bring himself to

take class, the absolute constant in a dancer's life, or do much at all. It was the first time he had felt this way, and the realization that he *could* feel this way made things worse. "It affected me that it affected me," he said. "Normally, I am a very positive person."

It's strange to imagine Cornejo, or any of these dancers, cooped up at home, doing the same things we do: watching TV, moping. Inactivity is contrary to their nature. And dancing careers are cruelly short. Ten years of intense training yields twenty years of performing if you're lucky. Cornejo, at least, has already had a full and rich career. (Last fall, he celebrated his twentieth season by starring in a new ballet by Twyla Tharp, made in his honor.) But imagine being twenty, just starting out. Or in your late twenties, entering your prime, ready to dance your first big roles.

But, for now, there is nothing else to do but wait. And keep training, with as much or as little space, and mental fortitude, as possible. An hour and a half of class via Zoom can't replace the seven hours a day of hard physical work that these dancers are used to. When it's all over, "Some will be more in shape, some less," Lopez said. "But, if you sit on your sofa, you won't be ready to go back, of that I can assure you."

A GUIDE TO THE CORONAVIRUS

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- The long crusade of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the infectious-disease expert pinned between Donald Trump and the American people.
- What to read, watch, cook, and listen to under quarantine.

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