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Photo: Andrea Flores

Dancing Giselle: A Family Perspective

by Julie Diana

It's been ten years and two children since I danced my first Giselle. The ballet feels like an old pair of slippers: familiar and comfortable, warm with memories and feelings I love to revisit. My husband, Zak, and I performed *Giselle* with San Francisco Ballet soon after we started dating. We then danced it in 2007 not long after we moved to Philadelphia and got married. Now, in 2012, we step into the principal roles again – as parents.

Sleep? What's that? I carry around a book entitled Sleeping through the Night and I hope to finish it one day when I can actually keep my eyes open long enough to read.

The choreography welcomes me back. Muscle memory takes over and I pick up where I left off, working to achieve more lilt, more balon, and more nuance. The character is engrained in my psyche like an old friend. Yet my big toenails look like someone took a sledgehammer to them. (Calcium deficiency due to breastfeeding, wider feet from pregnancy, or too many pedicures?) I start compensating for the pain and injuring other parts of my body, so I have my left nail removed entirely. They say it should grow back... yet I wonder if it will each time I start Giselle's long diagonal of 30 hops on that foot.

Our four-year-old daughter, Riley, tries on a new pair of my pointe shoes and flops across our living room floor. I show her my feet, hoping to dissuade her, and second-guess our decision to enroll her in a creative movement class.

Zak is four months post-surgery for an arthritic toe joint (it's the second time they cut open that spot). The surgeon was so impressed by the size of the spurs that she took pictures of them in the operating room and sent them to Zak's phone. She drilled and carved the bone, trying to stimulate growth in places where he has no cartilage. Of course, it's the foot he needs for pirouettes.

Lukas, our one-year-old, gets a cold and passes it to everyone in the house. It settles in Zak's lungs, causing him to develop asthmatic bronchitis. He relies on an inhaler to get through most rehearsals.

The day-to-day rehearsal experience has to be managed with foresight. If we do every section one day, we pick and choose our battles the next. Maybe my Act I solo needs work, maybe Zak wants to push through Act II only for stamina. We try not to run the entire ballet two days in a row to save our bodies and preserve spontaneity. The pantomime and acting feels stale if we rehearse it too much. We want it to be as natural as possible, even though we've analyzed each look, movement, and gesture.

In the middle of a full company rehearsal on Friday afternoon, I find myself thinking: Did Lukas eat a healthy lunch and nap well? Did Riley have a good day at school? Did I wash her leotard for gymnastics tomorrow morning?

Despite still trying to find life's balance, I embrace the challenges of preparing for *Giselle*. Each rehearsal is a balancing act: I work to blend softness with strength and to push for stamina – but not so much that I can't walk the next day. While I still try to conquer the technical aspects of the role, my main goal is to tell Giselle's story. I find myself drawing from both my imagination and life experience to shade her character.

Exhausted and sore, our faces still flushed from rehearsal that ended half an hour ago, Zak and I open the front door to see Chewy, our golden retriever, greeting us with my slipper in his mouth. Lukas runs to us with outstretched arms while Riley shows us a picture she'd painted. We all retreat to the playroom and settle on the toy-strewn floor. There, amidst the joyous chaos, my thoughts of Giselle drift off and dissipate into everyday life.

Giselle, Pennsylvania Ballet, Academy of Music, October 18-28, 2012 (Julie Diana performs October 18, 21 & 27 evening). Ticket information: <http://paballet.org/giselle>.

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