

AN EXCERPT FROM

LIFE BEHIND THE METAPHOR

RUDOLF NUREYEV AND THE DUTCH NATIONAL BALLET

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THE BARRE

In America, in China, in Holland, In Russia, in Australia; about ten o'clock in the morning all over the world, dancers take their positions at the barre, ready for another dancing day. *Thus, begins Rudi van Dantzig's discussion about the significance of this ritual.*

From there, hard and strenuous working hours begin. First, there is half an hour barre, then an hour center exercises: adagio movements, turns, balances, small jumps, beats, big jumps, and pointe-work.

When class is finished the dancers usually have a fifteen minute break for coffee, a giggle, or for using the empty studio space to go over some steps for themselves.

People who don't know anything of a dancer's profession usually are exhausted from just watching a class, and are astonished to learn that this is just the preparation for the real work, which, if there is no performance, will go on until five or six o'clock. The real work means rehearsing and "cleaning" of old ballets in the repertoire, and the constructing, the searching and the experimenting with a choreographer on a new piece, the next ballet-to-be.

But at the barre it all begins. Often tired and sore from the day before, the dancers need the wooden railing along the wall to slowly and carefully stretch and strengthen their tired muscles, to work on their turnout, to "oil" their ligaments, to lengthen the space between their bones, and to refine their inner rhythm; first their own, and afterwards their own in accordance with their colleagues, and to that of the teacher and not to forget: the pianist.

Working at the barre is like the violinist tuning the strings of his instrument. He produces a tone, listens, stretches or relaxes a string, and

listens again. A violin has six strings, but a human body's muscles are manifold! And muscles hurt, and get stiff, muscles ache and protest and sometimes just simply refuse to stretch as far as their owner would like...

A dancer's barre more or less sets his day. If he is in harmony with his body, with the exercises and with his fellow dancers, all seems fine. But if he cannot grasp the speed of an exercise, if his neck and shoulders hurt in a backbend or his muscles refuse to hold up the leg any longer, he is usually in for a less than pleasant day.

Sometimes, too, the teacher is in a grumpy mood, or the pianist produces melodies that give him the creeps. Or the girl in front of him keeps doing the exercises wrong and kicks her leg backward when he lifts his forward...things like that.

The barre and the whole class are like a religion, or like a therapy. It is finding yourself once again, building up your strength, your endurance, your concentration. The dancers perspire, they clench their teeth, they groan. They feel like one body, and react like one body. Sometimes it seems the whole class bursts with energy. Another day it is as if everybody is in a very depressed state of mind, and all of a sudden, it seems as if not one dancer in class can concentrate on anything. The teacher watches with a sarcastic face and suddenly growls: "Sleep you can do at home, not here!"

Sometimes the whole class watches how the seventeen year old trainee turns better and more pirouettes than the first dancer next to him. A miniature struggle for supremacy is taking place. His colleagues watch, curious, with sympathy, or indifference – they have their own problems getting the pirouettes the way they want them.

A good teacher, an experienced and wise teacher, knows how to handle a class, how to prepare the dancer's mind and body. He knows that some need a smile, or just some encouraging words, "try to lift that foot higher," while others need a cutting remark to produce better results.

When class is over, the dancers, in garments soaked with perspiration, applaud for the teacher. They know that to teach them is an effort, to please and excite their bodies is not an easy task. And they like to let their teacher know, as the audience does for them at night.

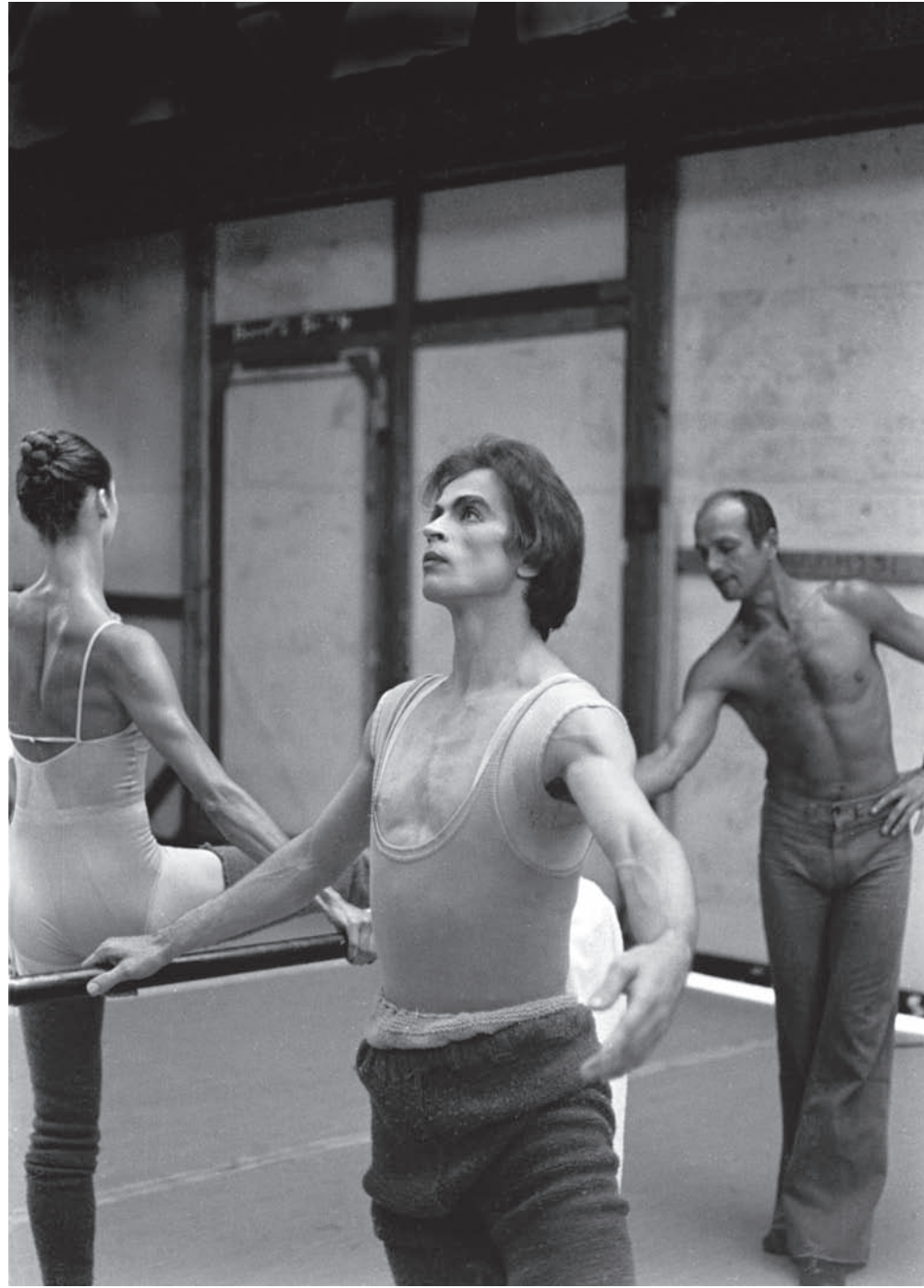
To do class in St. Louis is a different story from doing class in their own Amsterdam. Amsterdam is almost always damp and often cold and chilly. St. Louis is like a sauna, the sun burns down already at ten o'clock in the morning, burning the feet and blinding the eyes. Still, strangely enough, the dancers wear their woolen tights to protect their muscles. Nureyev even wears three: one nylon and two woolen ones. If class goes well, he slowly gets rid of one and then another as he feels his body reaching the right temperature and his muscles becoming warm and strong. But at the least little sign of wind the wool is back on, even a woolen hat appears!

His body is his instrument; Rudolf cannot afford to let it out of tune. The audiences are there for him tonight and they will watch and judge him, and Nureyev always wants to be his best. He doesn't take any risks. Over the years he has found out what his body needs; how far he can go during the day to keep enough strength for the evening.

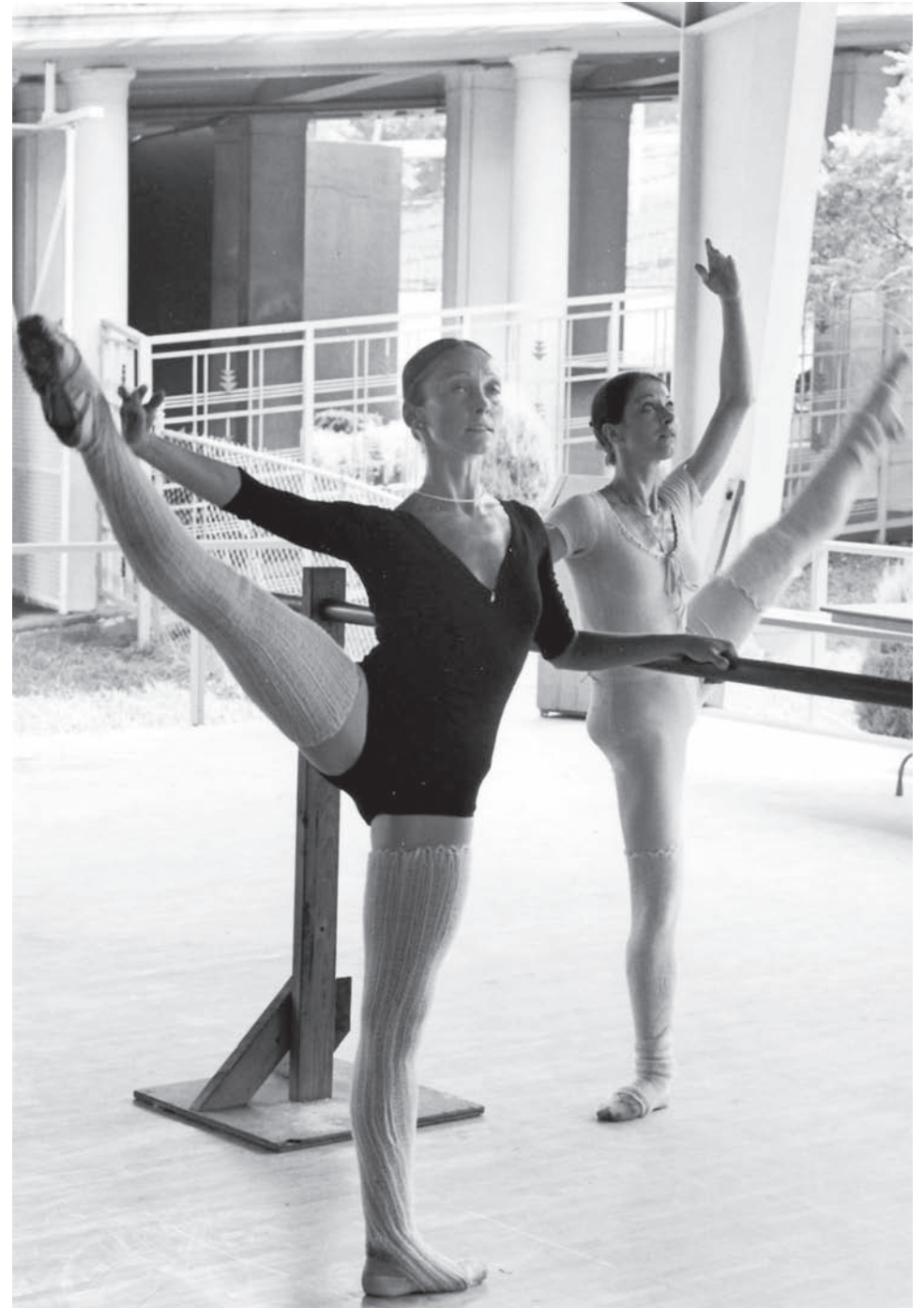
After class the dancers all walk back to their dressing rooms, towels around their shoulders, bags dangling from their arms. One girl stays on stage, she goes over some steps, over and over. Then she walks to the barre, supporting herself with one hand, and rises on pointe, her leg in arabesque, her face tense with utter concentration.

Then she goes back to the center and does the steps again: and one, two and three, four, and turn arabesque, arabesque, and slowly sinks off pointe. "That was much better," says a boy peeling an orange in the wings, "but don't strain your hands."

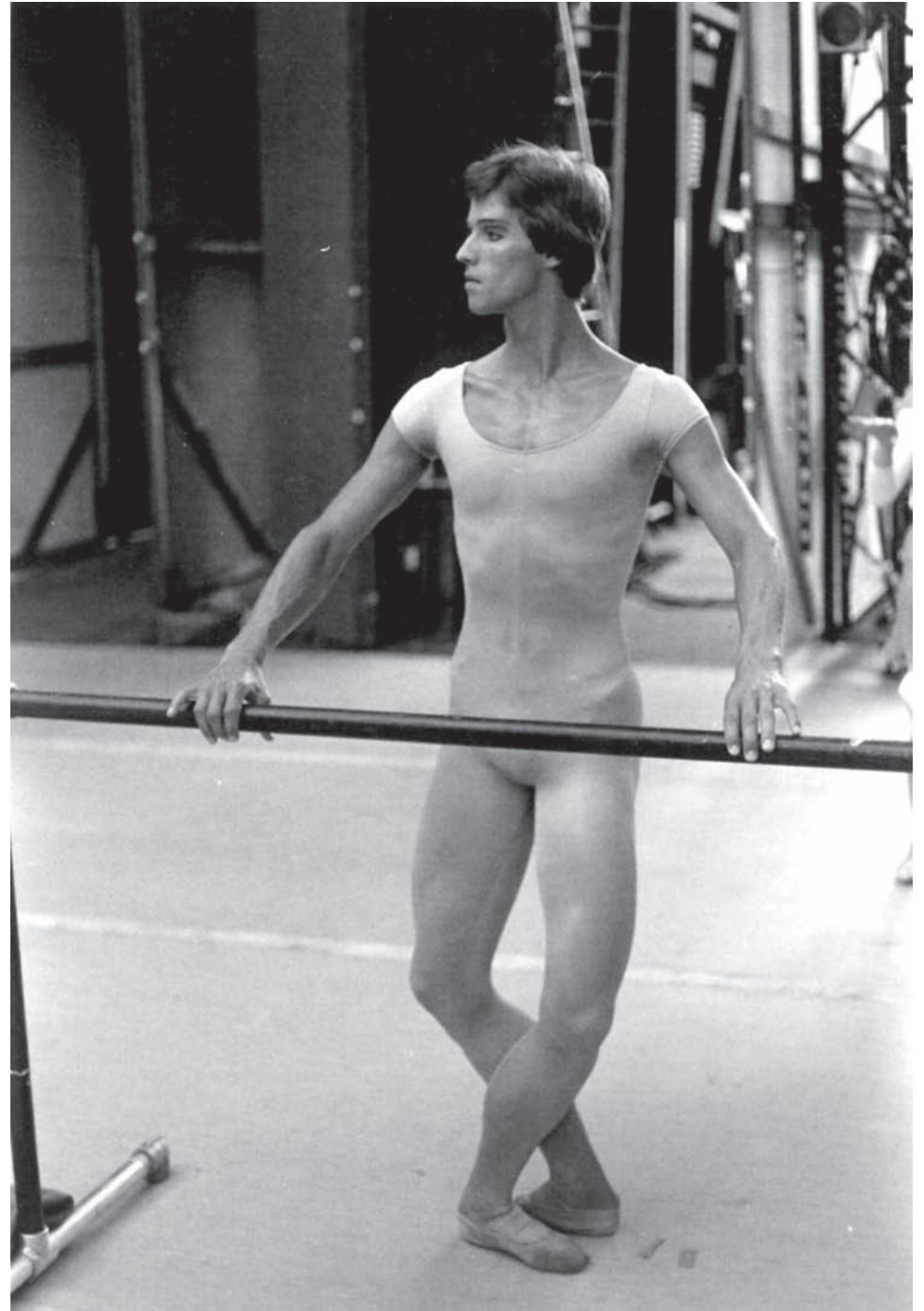
And Nureyev, all in wool, is back under the burning sun. "Not too fast, that first movement," he says to the conductor, "I want to save my energy for the end..."



LEFT Nureyev
RIGHT Sonja Marchioli, Alexandra Radius



BOTTOM LEFT Sonja Marchioli
RIGHT Jan Willem de Roo



TOP RIGHT Maria Aradi
BOTTOM LEFT Han Ebbelaar
BOTTOM RIGHT Francis Sinceretti, Clint Farha

