

Anyone can dance

Changing the way people think about body image in the dance world

BY KATIE TINKER

The row of rusty old scales in the girl's washroom at the National Ballet School of Canada made Kathryn Edgett shake.

The Halifax jazz dance teacher had just come from a seminar talking about the dangers of putting too much emphasis on body image in the dance industry.

And the scales only reminded her that the problems that have plagued the modern dance industry for years are far from gone.

The scales are left over from a time when dancers had to weigh themselves every day to prove their worth as dancers. And sometimes if you weighed too much you just didn't come back.

"It's an albatross from an old day," Edgett said. "But it's still going on."

The body-image seminar was part of a two-day conference Edgett attended earlier this month, in which dancers from around the world came together to talk about health and excellence in dance.

Unhealthy obsessions with body image still lead many dancers, especially young women, into eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

"I keep hearing from students who've been devastated by the ballet experience, or just their previous dance teachers," said Edgett. "And they hate it, they hate their bodies and they loathe themselves."

Edgett says she was encouraged by the openness with which the issues were talked about at the conference. Indeed, she says she was surprised to even learn of such a high-profile, international event, and she wouldn't have thought

there was enough public recognition of the way things were to make such a gathering possible.

"There's definitely a taboo about talking of the abuse, and the eating disorders that are rampant in the dance world," Edgett said.

"But I'm excited that the leaders in the dance world are talking about this, because it will filter down [to the rest of the industry], in a big way."

Trying to encourage self-acceptance in her students, regardless of how they're built, has been a concern for Edgett for a long time. Aside from running her own private dance school, Edgett also teaches dance to theatre students at Dalhousie. She says developing a healthy attitude toward body image is a major struggle for many of the people she teaches. In fact, being in the dance class is often what triggers a student's awareness of how deep their insecurities really go, since in that context it's something they can't avoid dealing with.

"They're still looking in the mirror, at 18 to 21, and they're telling me, 'I don't want to look in the mirror at myself.' And they're studying to be actors. So I have to help them, over three years, learn to look."

Told at age 12 that she should quit dancing because she didn't have enough coordination, Edgett has learned through experience that only she should be the one to determine what she can and can't do. She says she wants her students to feel the same kind of control; she wants to steer them away from feeling that what their bodies look like has to govern whether or not they can pursue their dreams.

"I care about my kids when I teach them here; I hate that they feel they have no power over their own lives. I want to teach them that they have so many choices with their bodies. But they're fighting a culture that I don't think has got this figured out yet."

In Edgett's third year dance class, students of all different body sizes stand in black leotards on the hardwood floor facing the mirrors that line the walls. No one looks uncomfortable with what they see; they have the acceptance of people who've spent hours studying themselves as they learned new steps or rehearsed familiar ones. After a while they dissolve into a new formation and in groups of four they take turns performing a routine across the floor. Each group is cheered on by the rest of the dancers.

"I don't know anyone in our class who is extremely hard on themselves about the way they look," said Sandra Klass, a student in Edgett's third year dance class.

"And Kathryn [Edgett] I think is a huge part of it. I remember our first dance class, she said, 'you know, you're going to be in your leotards and you're going to have to get used to looking at your bodies in the mirror, and you have to learn to love who you are.'"

For Klass, an awareness of how easy it is to be the wrong shape for professional dance — especially ballet — came at an early age.

"I did a lot of dance when I

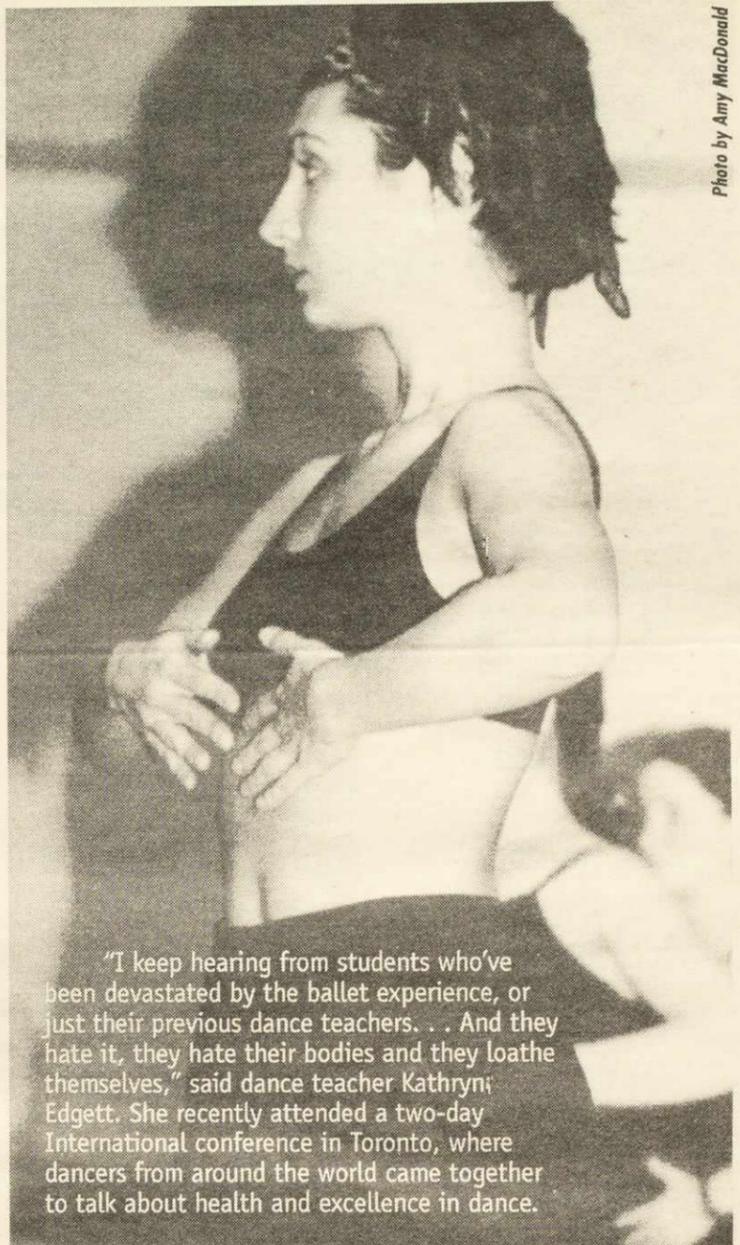


Photo by Amy MacDonald

"I keep hearing from students who've been devastated by the ballet experience, or just their previous dance teachers. . . And they hate it, they hate their bodies and they loathe themselves," said dance teacher Kathryn Edgett. She recently attended a two-day International conference in Toronto, where dancers from around the world came together to talk about health and excellence in dance.

was younger, and they always told me I was too tall. Even at the age of eight and nine, we were always told 'if you want to be a ballerina you have to be this and that, thin and a certain height.'"

Meredith Zwicker is also in Edgett's class. She says she loves dancing, but knowing the rigid requirements of the profession has discouraged her from considering it as a career.

"I know there's no way I would even get my foot in the door in the professional dance industry. And that's not something I lose sleep over," said Zwicker.

"I have a friend who's a size two, who auditioned for a professional dance school several years back and was told to lose weight. This is a girl who if she gets stressed out she drops 10 pounds and has bones sticking out, and she was told to lose weight. I'm not interested in that."

Outside of school, Zwicker teaches dance to young people at a local school. This experience has reminded her that the problems in the dance industry are just as real for kids as they are for people who make their living that way. Kids who show promise start their training early, and it doesn't take long for them to realize what's ahead of them if they decide to stick with it.

"At the theatre school, I've seen girls go from the age of 11 to 14, and I have to watch them go from being out there and wanting to do everything, to pulling back and learning how to be a young lady," Zwicker said.

"Then come the eating disorders. It's so scary."

Both Zwicker and Klass danced as youngsters, but drew away from it as teenagers for various reasons. Both have experienced a renewal of their passion for dance since beginning their studies with Edgett, and say they know now that dance will

always be a part of their lives. But they know that if they were to consider doing it professionally it would mean a lot less enjoyment than they know now, and a lot more stress and perfectionism.

"You have people [in the theatre class] who are here just because they love it, and it's so great because it totally rubs off on you," said Zwicker.

Anuschka Rose works at the National Ballet School of Canada, and was a member of the steering team that helped put the Toronto conference together. She says the image of professional dance as a breeding ground for eating disorders and low self esteem is something she'd love to see change. She says that while these problems certainly continue to be very real, there are many institutions that have done a lot to overcome them.

"There's a stereotype that lots of suffering has to happen before you can get artistry out of anyone," said Rose.

Dance teacher Kathryn Edgett says she came out of the conference with a renewed awareness of how much of a difference she could make personally to the lives of the students she teaches, simply by practising what she preaches.

"The kids see me at 46 [years old] get up on the dance floor with my dance tights on; I've got to learn to stop saying I wish I didn't have this fat around my hips. I have to watch my words now, because they take it on board pretty personally if they're sorting out the issue themselves."

Edgett says if everyone that attended the conference went out with the same awareness she did, than she's positive it will do some good to the industry.

"This was a huge event. It wasn't just another little conference... I [think it will] change things; but it's not going to happen all at once."

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