Harper's BAZAAR

Leaps & Bounds

By: Siobhan Burke

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After a year of SOLO PRACTICES *and* VIRTUAL PERFORMANCES, *dancers are* BACK ON STAGE *doing what they do best:* PERFORMING *in front of* LIVE AUDIENCES. *But for some of the field's* BIGGEST, *most* TRANSFORMATIVE STARS, *choreographing the* FUTURE *of an* ART FORM *steeped in* TRADITION *means* LEAVING *some things* IN THE PAST.

Photographs by AMY TROOST
Styling by SAMIRA NASR

This page: Dress, DIOR. *Opposite page: Bra and briefs,* DOLCE & GABBANA. *Pants,* LUDOVIC DE SAINT SERNIN.

HAIR: TINA OUTEN FOR BUMBLE AND BUMBLE; MAKEUP: CYNDLE K FOR CHANEL BEAUTY; MANICURES: AMI VEGA FOR ESSIE; SET DESIGN: JULIET JERNIGAN. SEE WHERE TO BUY FOR SHOPPING DETAILS.

Text by SIOBHAN BURKE

At the Guggenheim Museum one night in April, house music pulsed through the building. For the first time in more than 14 months, Tatiana Desardouin was performing live in public, with five other members of Passion Fruit Dance Company, the street and club dance ensemble she founded in 2016. When Desardouin looks back on that evening, she still feels elated, remembering the dancers' outpouring of joy and the thrill of sharing physical space with an audience—even an audience positioned at a safe distance, up along the museum's distinctive spiraling ramp—after such an extended hiatus.

"We were like, 'Wow, we will never take that for granted ever again,'" she says. "It gave us energy for days after and still now when I think about it."

Over the past few months in New York, dancers have been reconnecting with the pleasures of performing live: not for the two-dimensional confines of a screen, as many have now learned to do, but for in-the-flesh audiences. After a year of upheaval in a field that revolves around the physical gathering of people—a time of canceled shows and interrupted careers, of pivoting to virtual performance, of pushing aside furniture to dance in the living room—familiar rituals have started to come back.

But with the euphoria of the return to in-person performance also comes reflection on what aspects of the dance world should be left behind in pre-pandemic times. Last summer, propelled by the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, institutions across the arts professed their commitment to anti-racism in (so-called) solidarity statements that flooded social media. Many dancers hope that those pledges weren't just fleeting but the beginning of a lasting transformation. As Desardouin says, "We cannot go back to how it was."

The closure of theaters in March 2020 dealt dancers a disorienting blow, even those with the stability of jobs in large companies. "I was on the cusp of an exciting time, career-wise," says Calvin Royal III, who was then a soloist with American Ballet Theatre. (He has since been promoted to principal, the highest rank.) As part of the company's spring season at the Metropolitan Opera House, he was scheduled to make his debut as Romeo in Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet*, opposite Misty Copeland. The two would have been the first Black dancers at ABT to star in the ballet together. But by mid-April the season had been called off, and on top of that disappointment Royal was dealing with a serious ankle injury.

"It was like, the world is shut down, my career is shutting down, my body is saying, 'No, I need to take care of this,'" Royal recalls. "It felt like being hit on all sides, with trying to figure out what's happening, what's the next step."

Dance adapted because it had to, partly a matter of financial survival. But performing for a faceless online audience could be draining. "We're so used to getting feedback from the live audience," says Xin Ying, a principal with the Martha Graham Dance Company, which has sustained itself in part through the crowdfunding platform Patreon, where supporters receive exclusive access to digital Graham content. "We like that interaction, we like that attention. And suddenly none of it. I think even if you are a great dancer, you were starting to doubt yourself, like how much longer can I keep this up? For me, that was the greatest challenge."

As protests for racial justice swept the country last summer, the pause in business-as-usual allowed for a long-overdue dialogue about diversity and equity in dance. In the tradition-laden realm of classical ballet, the trailblazing Copeland—who in 2015 became the first Black woman to be promoted to ABT principal—has observed a new urgency and honesty in discussions about race, what she calls a "beautiful silver lining" to the pandemic. "I've been having these conversations, at the forefront of speaking about racism and the lack of diversity in ballet," she says. "And this is the first time in 20 years that I've seen this type of focus and response to it. ➤

Dance ALLOWS US *to* RECOGNIZE *our* SHARED HUMANITY; *the* ENERGETIC EXCHANGE *of* LIVE PERFORMANCE *can be a* POWERFUL THING.

People really want to make changes within the system in a way I've never witnessed before." At ABT, Copeland says, discussions are under way about allowing dancers to perform in tights and pointe shoes that match the color of their skin. (The status quo is pale pink or white for everyone.) It would be a small but significant shift in a rigid etiquette that, like so much in ballet, positions whiteness as the norm and the ideal. Signaling larger changes, a group of more than a dozen dance-company directors along with the International Association of Blacks in Dance came together to form the Artistic Directors Coalition for Ballet in America, whose #BalletOpenHouse program, launched this past winter, focuses on increasing access to dance education for Black students and students of color. Beyond ballet, dance artists have been organizing for systemic change through new or expanding networks like Dance Artists' National Collective, Creating New Futures, and Dancers Amplified. For some, like Desardouin, who not only performs but also leads community-building workshops, dance and activism go hand in hand. As a Haitian, Swiss-born street and club dancer whose work is rooted in Black American culture, she has seen a growing interest in her New York–based company. And while she appreciates the opportunities, she often wishes for a more informed engagement with her work.

"I feel like sometimes we are the token to look good," says Desardouin. "'Anti-racist' is a word that is used very lightly in people's mouths." One of her hopes is that those who invite her to perform, especially presenters well versed in ballet and modern dance, will learn more about the culture and history of street and club dance, to develop the same kind of literacy they have with more Eurocentric forms. And the work of true anti-racism, she adds, is deeply personal, introspective, and not just a matter of programming more artists of color: "Having me in the forefront to look good—it's not enough. Are you doing the work?"

Dance allows us to recognize our shared humanity; the energetic exchange of live performance can be a powerful thing. At another Guggenheim event this past spring, Xin Ying performed a duet with her fellow Graham principal dancer Lloyd Knight. "I could feel our energy bring everybody up," she says. It was a far cry from her experience of performing for a livestream, which she describes as sending her emotions "into a black hole—nothing bounces back."

While virtual performance has its benefits, like making dance accessible to a wider audience, many dancers feel that the theater, surrounded by other people, is where they belong. In April, tap legend Savion Glover danced for an audience of health-care workers at Broadway's St. James Theatre as part of the NY PopsUp series, his first live performance since the pandemic hit. "Just to see the stage doormen, to see a crew, to see the people in the theater, the work lights—it felt like a reunion," he says. "I felt like, this is my home, and I haven't been home in a while." HB

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