

Dancing the Body Electric: A Tale of Transcendence in Lycra

by Emily Weekes



'The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account, / That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect.'

Walt Whitman

I'm stalking two sequined high-tops through Melbourne's Bourke Street mall. They bounce off the bitumen, wending their way around aimless retail junkies and eager suits itching to toast the end of another week. Stalled by the flashing red man, one glittery boot taps restlessly in time.

A bit older, perhaps. She's certainly fitter. I stride to keep pace. Grinning. We're heading to the same place; I'd put money on it. She stops at the Palace Theatre – the old Metro nightclub – and waits for the doors to open.

Eyeballing the old Metro's fading façade, I think back to the last time I danced here. More than a decade ago, I lived in a MUSH house, Melbourne University-speak for cheap, crumbling and soon to be demolished. It suited the eight of us fine. We headed to 'Goo' one night, the Metro's indie offering, and partied like it was 1999. Well, it was 1999.

I wore cords, a black T-shirt and Converse runners.

Fourteen years later, only the runners are the same. But tonight I'll be dancing on the stage. It's the end-of-semester concert for Bodyelectric, a Melbourne-based dance school that transforms ordinary, non-dancing professionals into body-rolling superstars. Jade Duffy founded Bodyelectric in 2007. To date, its dancers have appeared in arts festivals, dance offs and, more recently, a clip for clothing label Gorman. With a fervent fan base, Bodyelectric has been described as a cultural phenomenon. It has an ever-expanding waiting list to get into one of the nine weekly classes. Each of the classes masters a different routine, choreographed and taught by Duffy. She then produces a typically sold-out end-of-semester concert, with an overarching theme threaded through it. Generally, over 2000 people attend.

I'd first spotted a Bodyelectric troupe five years ago and tucked away the vision of adults strutting about in lycra with earnest faces and glitter-streaked cheeks. Stunned by their glam moves, I wished I could be so bold. It felt a bit like lusting after *Solid Gold* as a child, an age-inappropriate dream unlikely to unfold. But last year I learned that these fiends belonged to an actual dance school. It was time to be bold.



Bodyelectric was my first dance class in nearly thirty years. In 1983, I was enrolled in a jazz ballet class at the Mooroolbark Community Arts Centre. I'd spent hours glued to *Fame*, lost in Lydia Grant's sass as she beat her big stick to the floor and warned 'you're gonna pay in sweat'. Our babysitters had betrayed me to my parents, describing me as 'hyper' when I threw on a leotard and flung myself around the 'good' lounge room while waiting for *Young Talent Time*.

Sadly, these early classes bored me. My six-year-old hamstrings already sucked at stretching, and after the warm-up it felt like we had barely ten minutes for any real dancing. A step-and-clap routine to Wham!'s otherwise excellent 'Wake Me Up Before You Go Go' was all the fame I achieved. Certainly not what I'd seen Bevan doing on the telly.

My first Bodyelectric class shared only two things in common with those of my childhood: Wham! and leg warmers, both excellent remnants of the 1980s. In the change room before class, ecstatic voices bounced off the tiles. 'Is this your

first time? You're gonna love it!

My classmates seemed like wide-eyed evangelists. I gazed at their iridescent leggings, leopard skin shorts and gold lamé bodysuits, gobsmacked. Soft leather dance shoes reminded me of Michael Flatley's *River Dance*. I couldn't help but think that I'd worn the wrong uniform; my black yoga pants and t-shirt made me look like a lumpy ninja who'd lost her stealthy moves.

Wham!'s 'Everything She Wants' flooded the studio. I grinned in spite of my nerves. There were six or so newbies in a class of more than two-dozen dancers. We wiggled about, waiting for instructions. Standing in wonky rows before a wall of mirrors, it felt a bit like *A Chorus Line* to this unschooled beginner. The regulars chatted until Jade welcomed us and cranked the sound system up a few notches.

We started slowly, rolling our shoulders back and forth. George Michael's purr set a sultry tone for the warm-up. A stylin' male dancer slapped his bum, mouthing the lyrics to himself and anyone else caught watching. I silently thanked him and started to sway, following his lead, in mock-rock star mode.

My hips carved out figure eights, swinging forwards and reverse, lubricating my joints and reminding me of what these bodies were born to do. The evangelists had been right: I smiled like a maniac and started to work it in my ninja blacks. My hamstrings were still hamstrung, but this time I wasn't alone. They began to release as I flicked my hips, reveling in moves I'd only seen on *Video Hits*.



Sweating within minutes, I was ‘paying for it’ deliciously, grateful to see others transformed just as swiftly. We shimmied between warm-ups and belted out Beyoncé hits. I started scheming how to snaffle Jade’s playlist after class.

In the weeks that followed we worked through new sequences, building up to longer choreography. The class travelled across the studio, in groups and in pairs, through jazz runs and turns, to cheering from the sidelines. Classmates waited restlessly in line, wondering if they’d nail the move straight off or on the third or fourth go. Some could execute a clean turn, spotting effortlessly and landing with precision, others discovered that the playful body roll was trickier than it looked.

But just as each class started to build upon the last, our end of semester concert loomed and my confidence teetered. I became certain that I was slow and offbeat. The mirror only proved it. Distracted by my reflection, I seemed flustered and lagging. As the 16-week semester hurtled towards the final concert, I started to panic.

Each week, Jade had filmed us performing our new choreography. While this seemed a tad cruel at first, it taught me a much-needed lesson. When I watched our YouTube re-runs, I was usually in time, barely lagging and mostly

inconspicuous. We were a group. And often, we looked fantastic. I began to notice that each of us carried different insecurities and decided that it was time to buy dance shoes. 'You're hooked, aren't you?' my classmates chorused. As if there was ever a choice.

Our costume brief was announced a month or so before the concert: we were jewel thieves and gangsters dancing to Michael Jackson's 'Smooth Criminal' as part of a career-themed dance off. Clever classmates carved out mood boards and props in their spare time and kept Brunswick's Spotlight in business a little longer. We decided upon sequined 'hammer' pants, bodysuits and a ton of bling, and debated the merits of wet-look versus metallic lycra at our weekend bitch 'n' stitch meets.

I hung back a little, still in a state of denial about having to dance in front of thousands of strangers. Sure, I'd signed up for it. But that was 16 weeks ago. I clearly hadn't thought it through. Eventually, I invited a few trusted friends, as unceremoniously as I could. Some of my classmates invited their whole families. I still had a ways to go.

With a last minute dash to the \$2 store, I bought up on imported plastic bling, stick-on diamantes and a glue gun. I called in sick on the day of the performance, knowing that a sympathetic doctor had already written me a certificate. 'Dancing is a very healthy reason for not going to work,' she said. I wanted to hug her.

Now, concert night, there are more than 200 of us backstage, in varying states of undress. I wrestle with a pair of false eyelashes and a doll-size tube of glue. Fingers shake and hysteria seems ready to pounce. It dawns on me that I can't back out. I'm in a rock eisteddfod for adults and about to faint from hairspray fumes. I toss back a glass of champagne and feel the bubbles trickle into my belly.

The green room is on the fourth floor. There's enough time to calm down, ramp up and freak out on rotation. My legs feel like straw and I can't seem to remember a single move. A gymnasium-style roar erupts when we appear. I feel like a bedazzled gladiator. We cross a floating gangway high above a sea of watchful eyes and descend towards the stage.

Then we're on, with only the sound of crazed cheering from the hazily lit crowd. I share a wide-eyed grin with my fellow dancers and creep into position.

It's the fastest three minutes of my life. Halfway through our performance, I drift off. I'm lost. I'm back. I keep going. And once it's over, I'm itching to dance again.

We scamper light-footed, light-headed back to the green room, up the backstage stairwell, now chockas with chemical workers, office gals and medics all waiting to go on. There's a stream of high fives and knowing glances: we're high on adrenalin; they're trying to stay calm.

Once each class has performed, we're invited on stage to hear a panel of judges announce the night's winners. Our slinky-studded suits earn us best costume and we leap about the stage, whooping and cheering until we're told to sit down.

When our song is later played in the early hours of the morning, a dedicated few knock out our routine all over again. A bemused crowd watches on while we strut about, keen to capture the magic once more. I can barely recall being nervous. With my falsies still intact, my six-year-old self is finally sated.

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