

Up and
coming Author

The Last Arab

The hopes and dreams of children never die, and, as one woman finds, it's never too late to realise your ambitions...

By Jessica Duchen

Let me keep this moment for ever and ever, I think to myself. I am in the back row of the amphitheatre at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Tchaikovsky sizzles through my ears.

On stage, Lesley Collier is dancing Princess Aurora. Her prince holds her round the waist, her magical friends surround her, and the Lilac Fairy blesses her as she descends into a final *arabesque penchée*, one fine foot probing the air, a hand like a bird's wing, almost stroking the stage near her anchored toe. *The Sleeping Beauty* is over.

While the ballet lasts, the marvel is heady and overwhelming; afterwards, it's gone.

I am 13 years old and in love with this extraordinary world. I have stepped into a fairy story made real; I want to be Lesley Collier when I grow up.

And I want to pickle my ballet with pink peppercorns and sugar, and keep it in the cupboard to taste at future times that might otherwise be less beautiful than this.

Dancing *en pointe* is another matter. I'm preparing for my elementary ballet exam and I have bought my first blocked-toe pointe shoes. The pain is indescribable.

After class, I hobble home with blood soaking through my school socks. My father is cynical, my mother horrified. The injury is useful because it releases me from hockey the next day; but dabbing on the Savlon and clamping on the cotton wool is far removed from my little fairy tale.

JESSICA'S THOUGHTS

"This story is drawn from my own experiences. I'm fascinated by the theme of healing via the arts – vital in my new novel, *Songs of Triumphant Love*."

Read more about Jessica on her website www.jessicaduchen.co.uk

My ever-practical mother decides to help. She discovers a dance teacher who holds contemporary classes where the pupils are bare-footed. *Dance Joy in Happy or Testing Times*, the leaflet reads.

I attend. I decide I'm through with classical ballet. Besides, I'm too fond of my mother's home-made currant buns to look good in a leotard, let alone a tutu. Ballet? Masochism! I set out, barefoot, to dance joy.

Fast forward 30 years. My mother is dead, my father, too, both of cancer, both in their sixties. The memories haunt me in tides that swell and recede: the day it began, when my mother fell ill – the commotion, the ambulance, the silent house, her blood on the abandoned sheet.

Today, like most of us, I muddle through. I am neither fat nor thin, neither young nor over the hill. I work, I see my friends, I have a lovely husband but no children, and I miss my parents every day.

My childhood couldn't be pickled any more than *The Sleeping Beauty* could. I continued with my dance classes until I was almost 28. But I have not danced since my mother died. Eighteen months after the funeral, I was about to venture back to the class when my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. These times were testing, but I had no more interest in dancing joy.

So what on earth am I doing here, in a leotard and legwarmers, heading with a bunch of women I've never seen before into a studio over the local swimming pools? I am going back to classical ballet, because if I don't do it now, I will never do it again.

Of all things, though, it was the mulled wine recipe that clinched the decision. Just before Christmas, we spent one of the most miserable birthdays I've ever had, snuffing away my lost youth in a stupidly expensive restaurant, with Charlie, long-suffering and patient, making continual bad jokes in a valiant effort to cheer me up.

What most represents "lost youth"? One thought sprang to mind: *arabesque penchée* and glittering Tchaikovsky. And dancing.

As they always say, everything is beautiful at the ballet.

At one am, some internet searching for the words *ballet class for adults* plus our postcode led me to email, in a semi-drunken stupor, a strange man named Leslie.

I read his response in the cool morning, by which time I was wondering why I'd bothered to write. Me? Dancing? Now? I might as well try to become an astronaut.

Yet Leslie, the ballet teacher, sent kind words as well as the timetable of his classes.

Most of the students are just like you, he wrote. *Many of them used to dance, and now they're in their forties, fifties and more and want to exercise. Of all my teaching, this is the class I love the most, because everyone's there*

The marvel is heady
and overwhelming...

esque



The sequences are poetic, imaginative, and slightly teasing – there’s a trick in each one...

to have fun and the atmosphere’s great. No need to sign up for a whole term – just come along whenever you like and give it a try.

He added me to his mailing list, and soon round-robin emails began to arrive, inviting the whole class to a group lunch after the Monday morning session, plugging someone’s son’s theatrical production and presenting a recipe for mulled wine with extra cinnamon, almonds and a dollop of brandy for good luck. This was a ballet class?

“This is the best mulled wine I’ve ever tasted, dear,” Charlie’s mother remarked in our kitchen on Christmas Day.

Almost two weeks later, I slunk into the ballet shop on the corner of the high street while its more typical customers were safely confined to a classroom.

“I never thought I’d find myself saying this,” I half-whispered to the assistant, “but I need some ballet shoes. Size thirty-seven, please.”

It was almost a shock to discover that they existed; that there was no state regulation to prevent me from buying them; that they were cheap; and that they fitted.

“You’re Vicky? Darling!” Leslie greets me. “How lovely to meet you, I’m very glad you’re here. Now, enjoy the class and don’t you worry

about a single thing.”

And here I am indeed, padding in my new pink ballet slippers towards the wooden barre by the wall-length mirror together

with 19 other women of assorted shapes, sizes and ages.

I feel mean when I realise I’m glad to be neither the oldest nor the fattest. Some of them are young and wonderful, though – some ex-ballet students or maybe lapsed professionals, with backs as flexible as ivy.

I pick a spot in the middle so that I can follow the others, then introduce myself to the girl beside me, who wears a black catsuit and a little chiffon skirt.

I manage the *pliés*, but there’s a peculiar cracking sound that I soon twig is my right
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knee. As for "turnout" – that wasn't easy even when I was 13.

My next mental note is to try to remember the difference between right and left. Leslie invents "enchainements", stringing steps together in eight-bar phrases; we must memorise them at once, and it's a tall order. His sequences are poetic, imaginative, and slightly teasing – there's a trick, such as a surprise contrast of leg and arm, in each one.

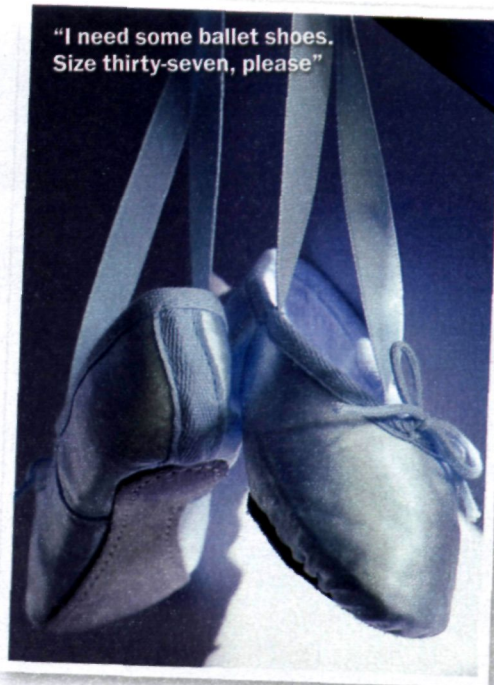
The French expressions sound as beautiful as the movements should look (they're suitably elegant on my neighbour, who's preening herself in front of the mirror like Odette, the swan queen). Terminology I haven't heard in decades sails back to me, the apple-sweet flavour of words like *battement tendu* and *rond de jambe en l'air*.

"Un, deux, trois!" Leslie counts beside the CD player; a track of piano music spurs us on towards poetry in motion. "Eins, zwei, drei! Akhat, shta'im, shaloshi!" I laugh at Leslie's fondness for beating time in twelve languages.

Soon we're in the centre of the room, trying to pirouette. Never mind staying upright; I have to spin in the right direction. Someone's knee, going anticlockwise, bruises mine going clockwise – it's like the dodgems.

More French – *Grand adage. Balancé, attitude, arabesque, penchée...* oops! As for the fast sequence to close the class, I'm sweating, despairing; my efforts are futile.

Grand jeté – one leg extended in front, the



The next day, I write to Leslie, after waking up to rediscover muscles in some very extraordinary places.

I'm sorry, I type. I made a pig's ear of your lovely class. Things came back to me slowly. Things I used to know so well. Believe it or not, I was quite good at ballet when I was 13, but that's a while ago; I'd forgotten how difficult it is! I do hope I didn't injure Maggie when I crashed into her. I'm not sure whether I'll be along next week. It depends whether I can move by then, and whether I have enough courage. I don't know that I have.

Leslie writes back. *Not at all, dear Vicky. You did very well in class. And, you know,*

round a tray of snacks, so he calls it *Pas de canapés*. And now...

"We don't charge extra for you to use your head and arms!" he encourages the puffing women bending and stretching at the barre. "Enjoy the music, express it! Imagine: you are at the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo and if you are wonderful enough Sergei Diaghilev might choose you to dance the Firebird! That's the stuff, ladies! Beautiful..."

And the connection is there, somewhere. The current of energy from floor to fingertip. You incline your head, raise your arm, stretch out a toe; and there's a sliver of a moment in which everything balances. You're a pinprick in the flow; not creating beauty, but living it. Beauty, sleeping or otherwise, is perfect poise, bringing together time with motion and sound with vision, putting raw physical energy into balance. I used to know this feeling, but I haven't sensed it since before my mother died – when I danced joy, but not in testing times.

I didn't dance for years because I lacked equilibrium. Not that I have it now, but for the first time I'm wondering if maybe it'll be there, waiting for me, if I just give it a chance. I shall never dance the Lilac Fairy, nobody need make me wear pointe shoes and I am never going to be Lesley Collier. But I can still dance if I only make the effort, and if I can still dance, I am still me. Pink peppercorns keep their flavour extremely well over the years.

"One more go! Different music now, in four, not three!" Leslie instructs. "Groups of five, crossing the room! Vicky's group next... Good! Very good! Uno! Due! Tre!"

I am dancing to different music. But I'm dancing. *Arabesque... penchée...* oops!

Leslie holds out a hand and helps me to my feet. I brush myself down, laughing, and start all over again.

I know this feeling, but I haven't sensed it since my mother died

other behind. With a quick prayer I throw myself upwards, try not to hear the thump as I land, and hope that nobody's foot will be underneath mine.

Leslie encourages from the side. "And a one, and a two, and a yakka-takka boom!"

He's the only man in the room, and the most graceful of us all: fifty-something and flamboyant as a friendly pedigree cat. He used to dance leading roles at the Opéra de Paris.

What's he doing teaching us?

And why does his name have to be Leslie?

That name, in its feminine version, belonged to my favourite ballerina; the one I wanted to be when I grew up; the one who made me dream of pink peppercorns and sugar. And with it goes the heartache. The pointe shoes, the currant buns. Blood on my toes. Blood on the sheets. The looming death and dislocation. No joy left to dance.

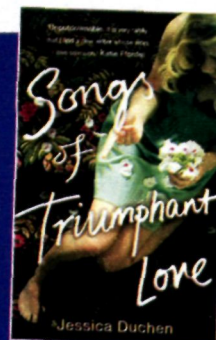
everyone finds it a bit of a shock the first time. Of course, it's your decision, but why not come along once more and give it a fair run? It's lovely to have you on board. You brought a wonderful positive energy with you. You were game for anything and there was something joyful in your dancing. That's very valuable to the whole group – in case it helps!

Easy words to say, kind sentiments to email. But kindness, these days, seems in short supply. I read with a slight lump in the throat – and the following Monday I take a deep breath and go back to the class.

I still can't tell left from right, it appears, and though I'd expected the same exercises week after week, as if preparing for ballet exams, this isn't the case. Leslie sets new ones each time – except for his favourite, an arm movement he's invented to open up the back and shoulders. It faintly resembles handing

BOOK OFFER

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