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Are You Human or Are You Dancer?

by Hailey Bruce

1. What word would you use to describe a theatrical event in which dance is the main component?
 - a. A recital.
 - b. A show.
 - c. A performance.
 - d. A concert. You cringe when someone asks when your next recital is or what sort a routine you'll be doing with your dance troupe. Your company, you correct, will be performing a jazz piece in your concert this spring. (Your mother still gets this wrong, seventeen years later.)
2. What do you do in your free time?
 - a. Read books.
 - b. Netflix.
 - c. Go out with friends.
 - d. What's free time?
3. You and a friend are trying to jump at exactly the same time for a *High School Musical* style picture. How do you make sure this happens?
 - a. Count off three.
 - b. Wait, is it one-two-three-go or one-two-go on three?
 - c. Your drums march to their own beat.
 - d. Five, six, seven, eight.
4. You're antsy in class. What do you do to satisfy the urge to move around?
 - a. Click your pen. Tap your pen. Twirl your pen. Accidentally on purpose launch your pen across the room so you can go run over to get it.
 - b. Bounce your legs under the table. Cross and uncross. Kick the legs of your desk.
 - c. Doodle until you can't see your notes anymore. Hope that wasn't on the final.
 - d. Tap dance under your desk. Nothing like a run through of your time steps (a tap dancer's standard rhythm pattern – if you can't do your time steps, you can't tap) to get you focused again. *Stomp, hop, shuffle step, flap, step, stomp, hop, shuffle step, shuffle step, step...*
5. What was your favorite after school activity as a kid?
 - a. Sports.
 - b. Music lessons.
 - c. You didn't like organized activities. You wanted to play your LeapFrog, and later your Gameboy.
 - d. Ballet class. You first took to the stage at the age of three in a pink velvet leotard and a little puff of a tutu. You were not the girl that ran off stage

crying but you didn't know the choreography either. You turned your head to watch the girl next to you mouthing the words to "Happy Hands" and followed along a few beats late as she bounced and twirled and motioned to the audience. That girl would quit in a few years and you'd stop turning your head to watch her.

6. Rate your pain tolerance on a scale of one to pointe.
 - a. 1-3. You admit it. You're a whiner. A stubbed toe is cause for everyone in your vicinity to hear all about your struggle. In depth. Better check for blood or swelling.
 - b. 4-6. Minor scrapes and bruises don't stop you! A paper cut on the other hand...
 - c. 7-9. You've got tough skin. Sore muscles? No worries. Tripped down the stairs? The stairs probably came out worse than you.
 - d. Pointe. Remember that time your blister opened up inside your pointe shoes and you still danced on it for an hour? Or all the times you lost toenails? You're an old hand at pain. You've spent countless hours doing *bourees* across the floor, a movement where you continuously jam your toes into the floor at a rapid pace, trying to travel a great distance in a short amount of time all while taking the smallest steps possible. When you take your pointe shoes off, the veins in your feet are popping out, your toenails have folded over from the pressure, and the tips of your toes stay flat for another hour. But beauty is pain right? And you're all about beauty. No one wants to see a ballet where everyone's cringing from the pain in their toes. They want to see you float, so you do. You smile, you emote, you ignore the fact that your shoes are basically rocks. You ignore the fact that, scientifically, when force and gravity are combined with your own body weight, the weight of two elephants is currently resting on your big toe. Because when you dance, like Dumbo, you fly.
7. It's Saturday night! Where do you go to see your friends?
 - a. I'll be with my parents.
 - b. Pizza and movies at my place.
 - c. Meet you at the bar.
 - d. Meet you at the barre. The ballet barre. We'll stand with our feet in fifth, hips rotated open. Arms round. Soft but supported. We'll silently judge each other and ourselves, a constant competition to get our *developpe* an inch higher than our neighbors. No, a foot. Who are we kidding? Our legs don't go a foot higher. This isn't the New York City Ballet. But we'll try anyway. Just don't lift your hip to get it there. Hips flat as a table as you draw your foot up the elevator of your leg, first to your highest *passe*, then up, up, up as you extend. Shoulders open. Ribs in. Supporting leg lifted. Don't grip. Make space. Abs in. Don't tuck your pelvis, but don't stick it out either. Back straight. Chin up.

Always present to the audience. Let your arms help you balance. Turn out the supporting leg. Turn out the working leg. Press into the toes of your standing leg for stability. Don't let the lifted leg drop. Control it down. Never, never good enough. Lots of room to improve. A correction is a compliment. We'll smile at each other when we finish, because it's fun. The work is fun.

8. You just dropped your phone! How do you pick it up?
 - a. Squat.
 - b. Bend at that waist. You can touch your toes.
 - c. Just bend... and snap!
 - d. You *penche*, of course. Step forward on your one leg – conscious of which split is more flexible – and neatly extend the opposite leg behind you, first to *arabesque*, then up, hopefully until you've made a 180 degree line. Or more if you're one of *those* people. You pick up the phone and reverse the action, keeping your torso lifted, always. And you hope against hope there was no one behind you. If so... whoops. Sorry.
9. What is your most prized possession?
 - a. Your iPhone.
 - b. Your camera.
 - c. Your dog.
 - d. Your first pair of pointe shoes. You got them at age twelve and it hit you how cool this whole dance thing really was. You started asking for more classes. You "forgot" to bring home the sign up for seventh grade basketball. You wore your pointe shoes around the house to break them in, even tried slamming them in the door once like you'd heard the professionals did. Your teacher starts watching you closely in class. You could make it, she tells you. You could do well with this. You hadn't considered dance beyond an after school activity.

She tells you about a fine arts camp. You go there over the summer and find out what dance really is. Hard work. Constant soreness. Bruised shoulders and knees, floor burns on your ankles. Blisters, cracked toenails, absolute fatigue. Pure, unequivocal joy. A girl slips and dislocates her kneecap. She cries, not because of the pain, but because she won't be able to dance. You wonder how hard it would be to be told to stop.
10. In general, what comes over you when you hear a song you like?
 - a. You bob your head, maybe hang on to a lyric so you can look it up later.
 - b. You Shazam it. You'll pull it up on Spotify later.
 - c. You find out what it is immediately and play it on repeat until you know all the lyrics. When it hits the Top 20, you'll be radio ready. And sick of it.
 - d. You choreograph an entire piece. Every new song, good or bad, but particularly good, is accompanied by a stage full of dancers, or maybe just you, leaping and turning and living. It's a driving cinematic instrumental

piece with a full choir coming in at the climax. You imagine intricate stage patterns and complex partnering. You want to set this piece straight away but unfortunately, all of your genius leaves you as soon as it comes, and when you actually get to the studio, you spend two hours on the first eight counts, which are decent, and fifteen minutes on the next eight minutes, which are trash. You hang on to whatever remnants of the original imagination movie are left because those, whether physically possible or not, are the tools you'll use to redo the whole thing the next thirty times. The inner choreographer cannot be turned off.

11. What do you need to do to feel prepared for something that makes you nervous?
 - a. Take a deep breath and trust yourself.
 - b. Ask everyone you know for advice.
 - c. Ask Google for advice.
 - d. Stand in B+, left foot turned out and supporting you. Right foot pointed behind it, knees touching. You're waiting in the corner of the studio at the front of the line. The combination has just been thrown at you rapidly. You are only told once, then you must know it. In this position, you are ready. You are calm. Your weight is centered and you are free to move. The combination is sitting at the front of your head. When the music begins, you prepare your arms – use all the music, every last sixty fourth of the count – you step out from B+, and you dance.
12. Imagine the worst moment of your life.
 - a. Your best friend, parent, or other close family member dies unexpectedly.
 - b. You are rejected from a college or job that you had your heart set on.
 - c. You lose a sentimental and irreplaceable possession.
 - d. You twist your ankle just days before a dance concert. The doctor tells you to take six weeks off, but you just mark jumps and turns for two days and then get right back at it. You can think of no greater punishment than not dancing. So you dance constantly, obsessively. You stand in fifth position in line at the grocery store. You inhale videos of dancers you admire. You fall asleep in coupe derriere. You do *tendus* and *rond de jambes* at anything that could serve as a barre. You say no to everything to say yes to dancing. You make sacrifice after sacrifice because you have something better. Your mantra becomes "Sorry, I have dance," but you aren't ever really sorry. You live for those six hour evenings in the studio, are thrilled when, while your school friends sleep in, you get to wake up early on Saturday mornings to have class and rehearsal.
13. What do you plan to do in the future?
 - a. Go to college and study pre-med. You want to be a doctor someday – or your parents want you to.

- b. Go to college with no idea what to study. Wander around various departments for two years and finally settle on something you aren't sure you love because you're running out of time to complete a major. You do not want to be a super-senior. Eventually you'll get a cubicle job you aren't crazy about, but you'll make it work to pay the bills and go home to a nice house in the suburbs that looks identical to your neighbors.
- c. Skip college and go right to the workforce. You'll work your way up from secretary to CEO somehow.
- d. When it comes time to apply for college, you refuse to consider any school that doesn't have a dance program. People ask you with increasing frequency what you're going to do with a degree in dance. You think this answer is pretty obvious – you're going to dance. As much as possible. No one is ever particularly satisfied with this idea. What about a real job, they say. What about money? As a dancer, you are misunderstood. You are told you are involved in an after school activity. An extra-curricular. A pastime. You are told you will not get a job. You will not have money to pay your rent. You are told dancing is not a job at all, in fact, let alone an area of academic study. But you dance anyway, because you know better. It is not about the money, although the job would be nice. It is not about the stability or the benefits. It is about that fleeting moment when you've gotten it, not right, but close, better, your best yet. So when you finish your degree, you will try not to be upset when you are rejected over and over again. You will go to auditions and classes, conferences and workshops until finally you land something. You will not mind the grueling hours, working weekends and evenings, or the minimal pay, because you will be doing what you love. When the time is right, you'll move on to something else. A musical, or a tour, or maybe you'll be cast as an apprentice in a company. Eventually, you'll have moved from the bottom to the middle, and maybe you'll never get to the top but that's okay as long as you're dancing. When you perform you will send real, paper invitations to everyone who ever said you couldn't do it, who ever doubted that dance was a career field that was worthwhile.

14. When are you at your happiest?
 - a. When you're having a good time with friends and family.
 - b. When you're driving down the highway, alone, with a really good playlist.
 - c. When you're in love.
 - d. When you're dancing. When you really dance, you breathe beyond. You believe in beauty for beauty's sake. When you move, you move people. You tell stories without words. You do not hide behind your emotions. You exult in them. You give them as gifts. Yours is a special art. There is no material but you. No instrument but your body. You are a dancer and you are the dance.