

Après la Danse: Review of Renée E. D'Aoust, *Body of a Dancer*. Wilkes-Barre: Etruscan Press, 2011. 176 pages. \$15.00.

Review by George Held

Renée D'Aoust is a writer who was once also a dancer. Her first book, *Body of a Dancer*, is one of the better books about modern dance. It's a worthy successor, a quarter of a century later, to Gelsey Kirkland's *Dancing on My Grave* (1986), while dealing with a less-exalted world than Kirkland's when she was a principal for George Balanchine in his prime. D'Aoust's story also differs from the addictive Kirkland's by lacking a roster of dance stars with whom she slept and the inevitable descent into cocaine abuse. Most important, whereas Kirkland wrote her book with the help of master ghostwriter Greg Lawrence, D'Aoust wrote her book by herself; she retired from dance to write, while Kirkland retired to teach dance.

In her opening pages D'Aoust focuses on a dancer's body with such acute observation that she hooks a reader to follow her on her necessarily peripatetic tour of dance venues in New York City for the rest of the book. She knows a dancer's body in general and her own body in particular so intimately that we trust her analyses of and anecdotes about the dancers she encounters and the stresses she puts on herself. For a dancer, "herself" is her body: "There is absolutely no difference. Her body is the instrument, and she is the instrument." But unlike a metal instrument, the body is animal and thus vulnerable to strains and tears and must then undergo healing and rehabilitation. However, the dancer has no time for such necessities and must soldier on, so she lives with and in pain. She is heroic but typical: a young woman with a biological clock who must exploit, in D'Aoust's case, her "placement and turn-out and good arches and musicality and presence" in the decade or so available to make her name and perform until she loses her body to the ravages (no dead metaphor for a dancer) of trauma or time.

She suffers dings, twists, sprains and tears of the main parts of a dancer's body: the legs, the feet, and the back, but she also mentions her breasts, which are inconveniently large for a dancer. And then there are the mind, the spirit, and the heart, so critical for an artist's success, no matter the medium. In D'Aoust this organ is also inconveniently large, for she admits to its vital role in dance and in romance; she's not afraid to suffer for her art or to fall in love. In *Body of a Dancer*, she writes as a physiologist, referring, for example, to the L4 (lumbar) vertebra that's paining her. And she writes as a sociologist or ethnologist of the dancer subculture, a psychologist who in one chapter duels with her part-time employer, a psychiatrist, but always D'Aoust writes as a dancer, not a choreographer or a director. Hers is a report from the trenches.

After the "Overture," D'Aoust calls her chapters "acts" — twelve of them — and then ends with a "Coda." Having given up hope of becoming a prima ballerina, she begins Act One, subtitled "Graham Crackers," as a scholarship winner at the Martha Graham Center, dubbed "Martha's House of Pelvic Truth," because of the rigors of Graham technique on that part of a dancer's body. "Survival of the fittest is taken to new heights in the Graham School," D'Aoust writes when dancers spill blood on the

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

floor, for “art isn’t authentic if it doesn’t bleed,” one of many caustic views the author adopts at Graham. Dancers go home after a day’s training with their nerves “on fire” and “too tired for sex.”

Eventually cast adrift by Graham, D’Aoust auditions widely for up-and-coming choreographers, such as Kevin Wynn, with whom she clicks for one performance, but she is now one of hundreds of talented dancers striving for a very limited number of places. *Body of a Dancer’s* final chapters reveal how she changes her life radically by retiring from dance, underscored by the time she enters a theater for a dance concert by the front door, no longer the stage door. In her Coda, “Ballerina Blunders & a Few Male Danseurs,” she catalogs memories of performance highlights she has witnessed and provides thumbnail sketches of a few famous dancers (“Kirkland, Gelsey: At height of career weighed eighty pounds. Had injections in lips to create voluptuous and pout-like quality.”).

D’Aoust is one of the lucky former dancers, because she goes back to college, earns a degree and then becomes a writer of articles on modern dance, book reviews, and essays. And now this book proves how well prepared she is to excel at writing. Will there be a sequel, called *Mind of a Writer*?