

Limit

By Rita Soares

Limit. That word had always surrounded my life, like prison walls. I felt limited about my choices, about what I wanted to be and how I wanted to live my life.

I guess I have always been a dancing soul imprisoned by limitations. First time was in prep, wearing tutu, leotard and ballet shoes. I was excited wearing the gear, but after the first class, I hated it. Other girls were always better at doing the French sounding steps the teacher wanted. I always came last, always in the back row. One day I cried so much, telling the teacher how much I hated ballet, my mum took me out of the class.

Second time was in primary school, because mum thought I was “becoming a chubby girl” and needed some form of physical activity. Knowing how I had hated classical ballet, she enrolled me in modern dance. It was better. I loved using props, dancing with flowing fabrics, sticks and masks. I liked this type of dance: being barefoot instead of squeezing my feet in tiny pink ballet shoes. I still had to move according to set steps, though. I learned again about “order” and “hierarchy” and about being the “best” and “worst”. The best students were always in the front row. I was placed in the back row, along with another chubby girl and a mentally ill girl, who, I was told, joined our class for “rehabilitation”. I didn’t understand what that word meant but soon I found out the girl was “dumb”, like the others called her. I will never forget the name of the disabled girl in that class: Nadia. Because she couldn’t follow the teacher’s directions, she was always given the sticks or fabrics to play with. When we performed at the end of the school year, Nadia and I were in the back row and she finished the dance show running around the stage with some fabrics. I thought it was so special! I never saw Nadia again because next year I didn’t come back to dance lessons. I started being too self conscious of my developing body and didn’t feel I belonged to the rest of the group of flat-chested, toothpick-legged girls.

The years went by and I became a teenager that only let go during outbursts of free dancing to 80’s and 90’s music with my gay brother, when mum and dad weren’t around. My gay brother was over 21 and could go into the magic world of discotheques to dance all night long. I couldn’t. So the only dance space I had was the living room on the weekends when mum and dad went to their country house. My brother used to get his hits of George Michael, Pet Shop Boys, Tears for Fears, Madonna and La Bouche and we would dance all Saturday afternoon. That started becoming a regular, so we incorporated Sunday late mornings as our dance routine as well. I learned how to spin like a maniac while my brother brushed his newly learned disco steps. We would also do modelling of clothes, pretending we were on a catwalk, and re-enact scenes of our

favourite movies and TV sitcoms. That was also the time I went to the Arts Centre of my hometown for the first time. So fancy! My brother got free tickets: one of his gay friends was a dancer in a contemporary dance company. I was 11 or 12 and never forgot when the curtains opened up to those beautiful bodies dressed in corporate clothes dancing to Mozart's Mass of Coronation. Wow! At the end, my brother and I were invited backstage and I saw all the sweat, costumes, lights and cables in a maze of creativity. That scene stays forever imprinted in my mind.

At 14 or 15, I enrolled in ballroom dance classes with mum. I wanted to do some form of dance, and that was the only class I could enrol that did not have a pre-requisite of a perfect body and weight. In fact, I was the youngest in the class; all other students were over 30. The instructor was a very sleazy man and the music was so old fashioned, but it was good to dance on a proper dance floor. Later, dad enrolled as well and he completely ruined the atmosphere. He told the teacher "I'm not going to wiggle my behind like that!" I didn't feel comfortable with him in the same class. It was all over after a few months.

At 16, I thought I could learn to dance "contemporary" and maybe one day join some modern dance troupe in my country. I tried getting into the Academy of Dance of my hometown, but I didn't have a lot of "formal" dance experience and I was told 5 feet was too short and 50kg too heavy for a dancer. So I starved myself to anorexia and when my parents found out I had missed my periods, I was taken to hospital and made promises never to do it again. I resigned: I could never be a dancer because I would never have the perfect dance "body". I blamed and cursed my family genetics.

Then came the time when I could be accepted into nightclubs. But I never enjoyed dancing in those places as much as I did in the living room with my gay brother. Nightclubs were always crowded and a place to be weary of sleazy guys, cigarettes too close to my clothes and slippery floors of spilled drinks.

My last attempt at dancing was in Latin and ballroom dance classes just before I got married. For the first time I could follow steps and I became one of the best of the class, dancing in the front row. But bliss only came when I danced with my teacher for a few minutes. Other guys didn't want to let go and melt in the floor with me. They were too uptight. I felt limited again. I could only enjoy that form of dance with a good male dance partner. And that was hard to come by. After two years of dancing, I quit, disillusioned.

After marrying, I stopped dancing all together. Not even in the living room. Well, I tried, but my husband would yell at me every time I swirled around to music. He would say things like “you are annoying the dog!” or “you are annoying the cats!” or “stop being silly, let me watch TV” or “you look like an idiot” or “put some clothes on, the neighbours will see you”. So I stopped dancing.

A lot of things happened after that. I delved into dark nights of the soul, separated, retreated from the world and spent a long time on my own. I learned that healing comes from within, that everything in my life comes from within. And I rediscovered how to love myself dancing, unlimited by steps, partners, weight or body shape. I started dancing in my living room again and I discovered a dance class that is free... Free of preconceptions, pre-requisites and limitations. It is called improvisation or “Alchemy”. I am not placed in the back row, I am not told to diet or to tuck my tummy in, I am not told to follow steps or try harder. The only thing I was told was that I could be myself and connect to what I was feeling. Last class was a beautiful experimental session inspired by love. Everyone danced their hearts, baring all the innocence, hope, passion, tenderness, strength and openness of their souls. I never felt so connected to people I don't really know.

I never felt so connected to myself. I have finally found unlimitedness. My dancing soul is free.