



I have been practising for 18 years. But ‘practice’ is somewhat of a new idea. My first days at VCA it echoed around the building and within me, almost mythical in its power but certainly confusing in its meaning. What was practice, and what did it mean to make one?

The ‘practice’ is practice, whether it’s pilates, an early morning gym session or five hours of rehearsal. Dance is a special breed, I think, amongst art forms. We tell ourselves we’re artists, that there’s the freedom to make choices, to explore and offer alternate visions, but it’s two weeks from opening night and the rehearsal director makes us run the same section again, and again and again and again. Practice makes ‘practice’, and we practise until we simply cannot.

I led a rehearsal recently. The ensemble took two steps before I stopped them. One had their left hand facing a different direction than the rest. A miniscule difference, that the eye is so immediately drawn to. Not even necessarily wrong, but simply a choice at a time where choice is disallowed. We practised that section for the rest of the day.

I get sick of rehearsals sometimes, craving a moment of freedom or improvisation, where I control my own story. Where I can let the body be free and explore ‘practice’ and practice in my own time, in my own way. I’m certainly fed by these moments of individual exploration, but is my ‘practice’? It can be unclear.

The body is heavy, my skull and pelvis aligned and both in agreeance to keep me firmly planted on the ground. I’m meant to be jumping, and I’m looking at myself in the mirror, willing the shape across from me to move. Will my body let me lead? Let me direct our movement? Or have I become so habitual, that even my active decisions are no longer taken on by the body. This is the problem of 18 years of practice. The body has developed its own idea of the ‘practice’, and sometimes no matter how doggedly I attempt otherwise, the body becomes its own thing with its own ‘practice’, separate to mine.

I spend a lot of hours looking into mirrors.

‘Practice’ is work. I spent many hours in the studio, enamoured by the dancers in the years above me. So individual but so together (the irony of the observation not lost on me as a first year), I saw the effort, the WORK. Amongst the ensemble and in the sweat they’d transferred from their palms and legs onto the white Tarkett, a sense of effort was clearly on display. I try now to embody that same sense of work within my own self, my own practice. Drawing on others and their expertise to inform the ‘practice’, but still very much an individual journey.

Occasionally I convince myself I’m good enough. There’s the age of ‘flashes of brilliance’. Like an exceptionally funny ad, or a line in a book you’ve highlighted and cannot stop thinking about. I see it in myself in a compliment from a choreographer, or when I catch myself in the mirror, just briefly, before I continue my movement journey. But it’s all about convincing MYSELF. ‘Practice’ is internal, and self-led. I am responsible for my own journey and my own happiness, and I am my own examiner who decides whether I am succeeding or failing.

I think there’s a common misconception when we think about dance. We watch the beautiful ballets, the large ensembles so tight knit and their sense of togetherness so profound. But for most, we chart our own course as we journey from class to class, studio to studio. Individuals float in and out, like a moon completing its orbit – or a comet. Maybe I’ll dance with someone once a week, or once a year, or like Halley’s Comet, once in a lifetime; but I move my body every day, the only constant in my practice. I push myself along, I am my own motivation – I manifest my own destiny. Perhaps it’s a mantra, perhaps it’s the truth. Either way, I am responsible. I am judge, jury and executioner myself.

And so, amongst the revolving door of cast mates and opportunities, I work. Toiling away, slowly turning up the heat with every passing day. Away in the studio, hidden from the audience, I start to boil. I start to find the magic, the ethereal, the intangible. I find MYSELF. In the mirror, I can finally recognise myself for me, and together we start to dance. Lost in a journey where habit feeds exploration, and exploration feeds habit.

The music loops. The ‘practice’ is practice. I start again.