

Center Stage: A Fable of Career Change

By Cathy Goodwin

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I won't claim that Center Stage is a great movie (the reviews were very mixed), but I enjoyed the behind-the-scenes realism and the fable of career transition.

Jodie Sawyer, the heroine, has "bad feet" and poor "turnout." These flaws are grounded in her body structure and she can't do much to change them. Still, her enthusiasm gets her accepted into a prestigious Ballet school. Her good looks probably don't hurt either.

From the beginning, Jodie's status is marginal. In every class, she hears, "Work on turnout, Jodie." The director encourages her to think of other careers.

Jodie does get some support from her classmates. But what transforms her career comes from her own willingness to take risks and seek out her own life purpose.

In what I see as a turning point, Jodie defies school policy to take a jazz class. She wonders aloud why dancing feels so good here and so bad in the ballet company. And she begins to listen to herself, not her teachers, not even the "bad boy" superstar who is her romantic hero.

Some critics compare the ending to a fairy tale. Jodie wins the lead in an avant-garde ballet and, subsequently, an invitation to join a new modern dance company. She tells the head of the ballet school she doesn't want to know if she would be selected for the elite ballet Company. She will never be more than a member of the corps if she stays here. She needs to find a climate where she can grow.

To be sure, events move faster and easier in the film than in real life, but I see a lot of parallels. Jodie's whole life has been geared to the purity of classical ballet. For some members of the ballet world, the new modern dance company will be viewed as a place for people who couldn't make it in the real thing. Walking away from an old dream can take real courage, especially when everyone you know respects the object of that dream.

A best-selling career author described the horrified reactions of her former colleagues when she turned down lucrative positions to live on credit card debt and start her new life. Other people have turned down prestigious options for study, work or living because they knew what they wanted. The experience of being in a comfortable, supportive place where they could shine made them successful in the long run.

And once you realize who you are, opportunities often do appear as if by magic.

Of course some people belong in the stratosphere. Their challenge is to recognize and honor their talent. Jodie's roommate, Eva, has to overcome a rebellious attitude and then take risks to show that she belongs in The Company. She'd be miserable in a start-up jazz ensemble.

If you really hate the movie, you may not linger for the fable. But if you've ever worked in a world that has a well-defined elite group, and you tried to find your place in that world, you may get an extra layer of meaning as you watch Center Stage.

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