# A dancer's lot

1 All across London, they emerge from underground stations and buses; bags slung over their shoulders and taut stomachs beneath thick winter overcoats. Nobody recognises them, as they head for freezing upstairs rooms in tatty gymnasiums or slink into backstage theatre doors, even though they appear regularly in sold-out musicals and favourite television shows. They earn precious little, even those who perform live with famous singers, and have no real prospects, doing what they're doing, despite having hustled and sweated themselves to the heights of one of Britain's most demanding professions. But still they go, every morning, to their grim upstairs rooms in gyms and their backstreet, backstage doors, to dance.

2 Most have left behind worried parents in faraway towns and villages; made repeated promises to look after themselves and taken trains, in their late teenage years, for London. There's much to despise about the city, where talent and a reptilian grade of resilience, although prerequisites, provide no guarantee of success. Even auditions are becoming rare. Conscious of deadlines and financial constraints, choreographers call in talent from the blessed pool of their own chosen. If you aren't the right height, don't have the right face, hair or sartorial style, then don't expect a look in. Although choreographers occasionally seek out the beautiful, they're mostly instructed to hunt the bland: those least likely to outshine the stars. And, as many dancers will tell you, it's getting to the point where mediocrity is acceptable; there'll be someone over there out of sync, someone over there who can't hold her arm still.

3 And if they get a part, increasingly dancers are turning up for jobs where the choreographer just stands there and works them endlessly, fingers clicking: 'Again, again, again'. As one dancer, Melanie Grace says, 'You dance for the love and the passion, and keep your mouth shut because you don't want to get a reputation.' It's not always easy, though. You think the television shows provide changing rooms? For dancers? Even the big budget ones have them disrobing in a corner of the canteen – and the pay's lousy. But you have to ignore it, keep your head down. You're in London now. You're one of many; one of nothing. The sooner you accept that, the better you'll get on. Of the fleets of talented dancers who try, only a quarter make it, the rest simply can't process the ruthlessness – to dance in London is hard on the soul.

4 Yet most of the dancers have agents, who you might think would negotiate a better fee or conditions for their dancers, but no. You'll never meet a dancer who thinks their agent deserves their twenty percent cut of the fee. Mostly you'll just get a text or email notifying you of an audition and a single agent might have as many as two hundred dancers on their books. As Melanie says, 'It's catch-22, because you won't hear about the auditions without one.' Here's the job, take it or leave it, and if you leave it, they'll just hire someone straight out of college and pay them even less.

5 Oh, the annual churn of the colleges. The dancers hear it constantly, the sound of the machine in the distance, its ceaselessly grinding gears that, with every coming year, push out hundreds of new dancers, each one younger and hungrier and less jaded than you. And with every release of fresh limbs into the stew of the city, things get harder. The worst thing the kids can do is accept a job for no pay. They do it all the time. One website has become notorious for television and pop-video production companies scrounging for trained people to work for nothing but 'exposure'. And if the youngsters are fresh out of dance school, despairing of their blank CV and craving the love of those ranks of sparkle-eyed strangers, they'll leap at the chance. It's the reason things are getting harder. How to describe the London dance scene today? The word Melanie chooses is 'savage'.

1 In the first paragraph, the writer paints a picture of dancers who are

A careful not to be recognised by fans in the street.
B deserving of the fame they have achieved.
C unlikely to be making further advances in their careers.
D hoping to find work on stage alongside established stars.

2 What do we learn about auditions in the second paragraph?

A Increasingly higher standards are expected of dancers.
B The best dancers do not necessarily get the jobs on offer.
C It's difficult for dancers to find the time to attend very many.
D Dancers with family connections in the business get invited to more.

3 What is implied about choreographers in the third paragraph?

A They expect dancers to do as they are told.
B They dislike it when dancers criticise each other.
C They are intolerant of dancers who make mistakes.
D They are sensitive to the pressures that dancers are under.

4 What point is made about agents in the fourth paragraph?

A Dancers are largely satisfied with their service.
B Most dancers recognise that they are essential.
C They tend to represent only the less experienced dancers.
D They make every effort to get the best deal for dancers.

5 The writer uses the image of a machine in line 53 to underline

A the attitude of training institutions.
B the dubious activities of a website.
C the constant supply of new talent.
D the exploitation of young people.

6 In the text as a whole, the writer is suggesting that dancers in London

A should demand much better pay and working conditions.
B have to regard the experience as useful for the future.
C should be rewarded for dedication and perseverance.
D have to accept the realities of a competitive industry.



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