

The Balancing Act: Ballet Dancer By Day, Law Professor By Night

By: Marlo Jappen

Khiara M. Bridges thinks dancers are superheroes. If Khiara were, in fact, a superhero, her special power would be balance. By day, she's a professional ballet dancer; by night, she's a law professor and scholar.

At the Boston Ballet in Boston's South End, Khiara attends class five days a week. Dressed in a pinstriped Adidas track jacket and black sweatpants, her hair is pushed back by a headband and piled into two buns. Khiara's class is held in Studio 3, a spacious room equipped with all the trappings of a typical ballet studio: barre, wall-length mirrors, and piano. The dancers—who range from teens to whitehaired men and women—station themselves at the barre. A sweet-mannered instructor with a European accent blurts out steps while a woman plays a classical song on the piano.

Standing tall, a soldier prepared for combat, she keeps a focused gaze, gently swiping the floor with her bare feet. As the class progresses, she slips on her pointe shoes and sheds her sweatpants for mesh shorts. Pointe work is some serious business. It requires years of training and mastery of technique. Since Khiara started dancing at age three, she aspired to dance en pointe so she'd be like the older dancers. On her twelfth birthday, her dream came true: she received her first pair of pointe shoes. "When you first start it's excruciating," she says. "But, you get stronger and you're able to do things that you weren't able to do before. I love it because it's a sense of accomplishment."

As Khiara shuffles her weight onto the tips of her toes, she remains poised and steady like a beautiful sculpture. On the surface, ballet looks easy. "People just think it's pretty," Khiara says. "They don't understand the discipline, strength, and commitment involved. If you're struggling and everyone knows it's hard, then it won't be fun for the audience."

She applies the discipline she learned from ballet to her academic career. After eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork at Alpha Hospital in Manhattan, Khiara wrote

Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization, which exploits the negative discourse women of color face during pregnancy. She has an upcoming book on privacy rights in the works, for which she follows a regimented routine of writing a chapter every month and a half. Despite her busy schedule, Khiara is able to find stability. “On a daily-basis, dance puts everything in perspective,” she says. “It helps me focus on myself.”

Khiara’s appearance stands out amongst the other classical dancers in the room; she’s 5’8 and decorated with tattoos—a hibiscus on her ankle and calves, peacock feathers on her back, and law casebooks on her arms. Her role model is Misty Copeland, an acclaimed ballerina who was denied from dance companies because of her unconventional body type. Undeterred, Misty went on to break barriers: she’s the first African-American woman in the history of the American Ballet Theatre to be promoted to principal dancer. Like Misty, Khiara navigates through a predominantly white space as a Black woman and, also like Misty, Khiara has experienced rejection and believes it’s the most brutal part of being a professional dancer. “It’s not just that they’re turning down something I created,” she says. “But, it’s that they don’t like me—my body and the way I express myself. It’s a rejection of who I am at my very core.”

When Khiara faces rejection, she knows she can find acceptance as a scholar. “I can get shot down eight times a week in respect to dance, but I’m always able to go and be in academia,” she says. On the other hand, when she doesn’t get an academic job or her work doesn’t get published, she finds comfort in dance. “I could turn around and go to dance and feel beautiful and have someone tell me that they want to hire me and see me dance,” she says. “It’s a nice balance.”

She leaps across the parameter of the studio and lands lightly on her feet. Her movements are swift and precise; her kicks are so sharp they could cut diamonds. The music begins to fade—a cue that class is almost over. Khiara exits the studio and dashes to the dressing room so she can change into her teaching clothes.

She once choreographed a ballet about the duality of her life as a professor and dancer. “I always feel amazing when I leave the stage,” she says. “That’s probably why I perform. I get all my emotions out. I feel invincible.” Khiara, who is in her thirties, knows she’ll have to give up performing someday, especially considering the average retirement age for professional dancers is 29. But, she can’t imagine her life without dance. “Once it’s in your body, it’s always in your body,” she says.

Khiara transitions into professional attire before she teaches a criminal law course at Boston University. She wears a sleek black dress, metallic high heels, and a cardigan. A pair of planet-sized hoops swing from her ears. These earrings hint at her fun, personal style; she feels naked without them. On her T ride to work, she stands graceful and confident. She doesn’t need to grab onto anything despite the rumbling movements of the train. Her attention is directed towards the notes she prepared for her lecture; she absorbs herself in each page. Khiara describes her first year of teaching as terrifying. “Every day before class, I would be a ball of nervous energy,” she says. What if her students knew more than her? She wanted them to like her, but also respect her. “It’s hard to get respect when you’re young and you wear big earrings like I do,” she says.

But, ballet helped her to become more at ease in an environment that once seemed unknown to her. “Before I taught, I was in dance class - an environment that I knew and that I was familiar with because I’ve been doing it since I was three. It helped me feel confident.” Now, Khiara views teaching as another aspect of performing. “I like to make jokes,” she laughs. “I have more fun than my students do.”

Khiara’s busy schedule doesn’t allow time for lunch. She sits in an empty classroom and eats a spoonful of warm yogurt before her students arrive. Since most of her professional life is spent in front of an audience, she savors any moment she has to herself. “I love being alone,” she says. A perfect night, by Khiara’s definition, involves Thai food, Riesling wine, a pack of Twizzlers, and lots of reality television. “I haven’t been able to do

that in a while,” she says.

Now it’s class time. Positioning herself behind a podium, she addresses a room of eighty first-year law students. She grabs a piece of chalk and scratches words on the board. In the classroom, Khiara doesn’t shy away from difficult topics. Professors from other law school had advised her not to cover sexual assault because it’s “too risky.” Khiara teaches it anyway. The discussion she leads today is about the liability of statutory rape.

“What if the defendant believed the person was over the age of consent?” she asks.

As a routine, Khiara cold calls on two students per lesson. “Miss Straus, please tell us what you think,” she says. Khiara instructs everyone to open their textbooks. When she lectures, she’s upbeat and vivacious; she makes pop culture references and pokes fun at her herself, particularly her voice, which sounds like a mere croak due to allergies.

Khiara wanted to study law since she was seven years old, though, at the time, she wasn’t quite sure what that meant. After working at a firm while she was a law student, she realized: although she wanted to continue studying law, she wasn’t interested in practicing it. Her pursuit of this field, like her style, reflects her proclivity towards standing out. Khiara comes from a line of doctors. “I’m like the black sheep,” she jokes. “I’m pretty sure I’d be a doctor if everyone in my family were lawyers.”

When she graduated from Columbia University School of Law in 2002, she was offered a job at one of the biggest corporate law firms in New York City. “I would be making a ton of money, but I wouldn’t have time to dance,” she says. “I just couldn’t do it.”

Instead, Khiara continued her education at Columbia University by pursuing a PhD in anthropology. This allowed her to be on the path of teaching at a law school, while still pursuing dance. “I think I’m just being greedy,” she jokes.

Every weekend, she takes an Amtrak to New York City where she rehearses with a ballet company for more than six hours on Saturdays. She has landed coveted roles including the Sugar Plum Fairy in a production of *The Nutcracker*. Khiara returns to Boston on Sunday nights so she can teach on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays.

Her boyfriend, Gert Reynaer, thinks Khiara is different from how he imagined a law professor to be. “She’s very focused and disciplined, but there’s kind of a playfulness about her,” he says. He attributes this to the fact that she travels between academia and ballet. “Dancing is her way of balancing herself out,” he says. “She’s kind of a chameleon in the way she can be very focused when it comes to academics and very outgoing and exuberant when it comes to art.” Gert recalls going to the House of Blues with Khiara for their second date. He was impressed with how she interacted with her students who were also at the concert they were attending. “As an outside observer, there’s no way you could tell that she was the professor and they were the students,” he says. “That never really changed. She’s still very modest and down to earth.”

Even after Khiara ends class, she doesn’t have time to waste. She heads to her home in Boston’s South End so she can give an over-the-phone recommendation for a student, work on her book, and then write her course’s final exam. The following day she has a conference in Ohio. As Khiara hikes up a mountain of stairs with her high heels, she never once forfeits her poise. “I’m used to it,” she declares. Khiara approaches her hectic life with the same attitude. She makes it look easy—seamless and graceful—like a ballet. But behind each step is hard work and discipline. That’s what she means when she says all dancers are superheroes.