

# “I LOVE DANCING NOW MORE THAN EVER”

The tough reality of ballet threatened to crush Natalie Garry's passion for dance – until she discovered the joy of bringing it to others



**M**y dance journey began as a Highland dancer growing up in Scotland, wearing my kilt and doing all the competitions. It became clear that I had a talent, and I became fixated. I absolutely loved ballet, ending up at the English National Ballet School as a teenager. In those days, there were only 12 students in the whole school, and training was hard. After that, I performed a bit with Scottish Ballet and Scottish Dance Theatre – and then, suddenly, aged 21, I was out of work.

‘I was miserable and found it quite hard, but a friend convinced me that, rather than pulling pints between auditions, I should do a fitness course. I headed off to London to enrol, and that’s when the blinkers came off. I’d been so focused on ballet, despite how brutal that world is. There’s thousands of dancers for every role, and I know many people as good as Darcey Bussell who just didn’t make it. But fitness changed all that. With my background I was very good at it, and I felt inspired. I worked across the top health clubs in London, using

everything I’d learned, teaching dance fitness and Pilates, and I really enjoyed it.

‘Eventually, I moved back to Scotland, then did the same thing, teaching dance and fitness all over. I’ve got four children, so when my youngest went to school I decided I wanted something more. I’d been to a choir (I’m an enthusiastic singer, not a great singer), and I saw how much good it was doing for everybody’s wellbeing. But I also saw that they weren’t moving and were sitting quite still, with bad posture. I thought, “I can help here.”

‘So danceSing was born, which is a combination class: half of it is choir-based, where you don’t need to read music and we sing some fun, uplifting tunes, and incorporate dance fitness with that. The routines are low-impact, but they’re carefully choreographed so we’re working on balance, strength, flexibility and coordination, but with a bit of artistry. We might do salsa, maybe a bit of the charleston as a way to do interval training and get into that fat-burning zone, then we’ll do a beautiful lyrical piece. At the moment we’re doing classes over video, and seeing everyone just go for it in their living rooms is brilliant.

‘It’s good fun, and I think that’s the key. I want fitness to be fun and enjoyable. I want women to stop punishing themselves, restricting food and over-exercising. Fitness should be a joy and pleasure, and I want people to nurture their bodies rather than deprive them. If you’re not managing to sustain a diet or exercise programme two years down the line, then did it really work for you? We need to feel empowered to choose the things we enjoy – that’s what’s sustainable, as you’ll come back for more. I believe we’ve created something joyful with danceSing, as it’s as beneficial for mental health as it is physical. Of course, fitness releases feel-good endorphins, but also singing in a group is wonderful – heartbeats come together, and there’s a real sense of community, which is so important. Feeling connected is a huge part of health.

## “I want women to stop punishing themselves and over-exercising”

‘I love making people feel healthy. Dancers aren’t very healthy. They don’t eat very well, they deprive themselves, and they’re typically in that vicious circle of not treating themselves very kindly and punishing their bodies. I found ballet training pretty gruelling, and I didn’t feel that there was much love or care for our



Clockwise from left: teaching a class by video; danceSing is a fun mix of movement and music; Natalie has finally found her happy place

mental wellbeing. They were pushing us to be thinner, work harder, work longer, be more flexible. Now, with my knowledge of fitness, I can see that it wasn’t a constructive way of doing things, and it’s no wonder I crumbled. I was crushed by it all, lost my confidence and lost my spark. I think that’s why I’m so passionate about getting people to celebrate what their bodies can do. No matter who turns up at my classes, I want to instil in them a real sense of self-belief. They’ve made those first steps to move and feel good about their body, and that’s a big deal.

‘People watch *Strictly* and see people go on a journey. There’s no reason that we can’t do the same at any stage of life, and experience the absolute joy of dance. The benefits are just immense, and I see them in my 18-year-olds right through to my 80-year-olds. A huge part of my love for dance is being able to bring that happiness to other people, to share in it. My passion for dance is far greater now than it ever was, because there’s love and understanding there, too. I’m a 46-year-old mother of four kids and I’m going to celebrate what I can do at this stage of my life, and I think that’s really important.

‘I don’t want to say that what I’m doing now is a calling, but I feel that all roads led to this point. I wish I’d known this when I felt like a failed ballerina aged 21, because there’s a reason I did what I did and trained to that level. I talk about this with my kids a lot – with anything you do, you just never know when or where it’s going to crop up again in your life. And there’s a real joy in that.’

*Natalie is founder of danceSing; more at dance-sing.uk*

As told to Hattie Parish. Photographs Aleksandra Modrzejewska