



# Mitya Staev.

**You have been dancing since you were just three years old- originally ballroom and then later found the pole when working with the circus. How has dance impacted your life?**

My very first memory was a déjà vu. Second, my grandmother’s funeral, and at the same age. Third, my reflection in a mirror, wearing black classic pants and ballroom shoes with an extended left leg and pointed toes. From the moment I remember myself I have been dancing, and the ballroom has been my second language after Russian. However the post-Soviet Union people kept one of the communist sports slogans of “*Faster, Higher, Stronger*” within their minds, and 15 years of ballroom dancing became more about sport than about dance, for me. I think for only the last 5 years I’ve begun to grow as a dancer, exploring myself, my inner freedom. Now it continues.

**Male pole dancers are to some a rare breed. Has this affected your own perceptions of masculinity?**

I started practicing pole dance at the same time as studying at the Academy of Art and Culture, within the Ballet Masters faculty. At the same time, I was already formed in some sense. I had my own perception of femininity and masculinity. A year later I participated in the Russian National Pole Sport Championship. The audience in this community is used to seeing a man, who comes to the pole dance from parkour, acrobatics or working out, though not from the dance world. After my performance, I received hundreds of comments on the video, mostly that ballet on the pole is “for wimps,” and that it is not about sport at all- “not manly.” Now, I am grateful for that opinion. This experience gave me an understanding, that I am not interested in sports. It brought me to my present time, to accept myself as I am, to realize that I am an artist. And I do not care how my dance is determined visually, as masculine or feminine. The main thing is that it is honest. And I choose bravery, to be heard by my own voice, without masks, without fear of being unpleasant. And it seems to me that this bravery is the true masculinity.

**Do you think pole dancing can ever fully be separated from its sexualized connotations?**

I think everything will turn in to history. 100 years ago nobody knew about the pole dance as it is now. There was only Chinese circus pole and Indian gymnastics of Mallakhamb. And I don’t know how it will change within the next 100 years. I don’t know why a lot of people are finding something wrong and in a sexual context of strip dance or exotic dance. I think it is a great dance discipline, and it is absolutely respectful. I think it is our nature, and why should we resist that? How do we come on this Earth? It is a great thing between a man and a woman, to love each other and to have a love with each other. For me, a still pole is already a completed piece of art. It is a mirror. And I believe that everything that surrounds us is a mirror. For a little girl who practices 6 hours per day with the pole, she may find a space and a tool and a friend in this, as a swimming pool for a swimmer. For someone else it may be just a pipe to get a 6-pack of abs. For another person this object could reflect some uncomfortable memory, but it is still the same mirror. It reflects you.

**Your ‘Tango with pole’ workshops are highly regarded and had run exclusively for women. What was the reasoning behind that?**

Being brought up in Russia, where in the 90s any attempt by a man to be feminine was punished, a little boy named Mitya Staev played Latin American music and danced Samba. While mom was at work, he danced woman’s choreography. Since childhood I’ve liked watching women in a ballroom. Their choreography seemed to me much more expressive than the male, more interesting and deeper. Despite the fact that I was really enjoying dancing the male choreography I was used to, I was enjoying dancing the female as well. I could not share this with anyone, even with my family. I was afraid, I knew that they would judge me. All these things accumulated for a long time. At the age of 20, I experienced tremendous inspi



ration from the Argentine tango female dance. I integrated this with pole and ballroom dancing and through this fear, shared it with everyone. The next morning, I woke up famous in the whole pole community. It was the first step towards accepting myself, and the things that I like. But the patterns of masculinity and femininity remained in me along with a bit of fear- it did not allow me to accept all of this entirely. Accordingly, I did not accept it in other people. So I positioned Tango with Pilon for ladies only. Now I am 24, and I accept myself as I am. All different people come to my master classes. Women, men, professional dancers, beginners, everyone. Now I am happy to share what brings me pleasure, openly and freely.

**Tango is traditionally a partner dance where the intense chemistry between a couple is key. What does it mean to erase the body and dance with an inanimate object?**

In the Argentine tango, the lady plays the follower's role. She is ruled by a gentleman, he directs her movements. A woman in tango is like flowing water in a river, and a man is her riverbed. In the tango with pole you are left to yourself. You are responsible for your own trajectory and quality of movement. You become a full-fledged river, you become a single decoration of this space. All the professional tango dancers work out their own technique with the ballet bar. The pole is almost the same bar, albeit a vertical one. It reveals other possibilities in the use of your body. This is extremely different from what you can feel from a Milonga, cheek to cheek with someone. For me, the same dance with the pole is more about confidence and self-control, about the aesthetic feeling of your own beauty and self-presentation, the synchronous refinement of the body with music, and the pleasure of movement. About the pleasure!

**You found a fame dancing on the Russian television show “Dancing on TNT. ” How had that altered your relationship to your art, if at all?**

I think this project was the starting point for me, as it was a window I looked through towards different horizons. I was born and raised in the Ural region, in an industrial city, where there was no Museum of Modern Art- where people have never ever heard the word performance. I paid all of my attention to ballroom dancing and music school, and after that, I was swallowed up by a pole. I was completely immersed in my small world. Before this project, I did not know anything about the culture of *Vogue* dance, about Krump, all of the street styles were far away from me. At the dance show, I met people who introduced me to them. By way of the same TV show, I became closer to visual arts. The mentors gave a sense of direction to performance art. It was the beginning of knowing things, which have been always somewhere close to me but hidden. And about fame, I think that it provided me a huge lesson. By one day I was a bit blinded by my greatness, fascinated by the crowd of fans shaking our bus, breaking tables and chairs to receive an autograph. Over time, it all turned tasteless. I stopped feeling appreciation of my audience's attention, and the stage turned into a routine. The ego, like a heartbeat on a cardiogram, soared up sharply and fell down as a rock. At the 67th concert of our tour, I broke my shoulder blade. And it was this moment when I was laid on my back to better look at the sky. I am very grateful for this. It made me much more aware and attentive to what's inside and outside of me. A sense of the value of the present moment is with me up to till this days.

**As a multidisciplinary artist your work spans dance, photography, and moving image. How much do you see these as distinct to you personally?**

I do not have a definitive answer to this question. I can define all the listed mediums as auxiliary, and at the same time divide them into separate disciplines. For me, they could all reflect many things. All of them are tools of knowledge, creation, observation of changes. Their processes and results are different, but they can be combined by a common meaning. I think the time that we live in can be characterized as neo-eclecticism. During an overabundance of everything, everyone becomes the curator of his own life, using the ability to combine stand-alone mediums for a specific, unique result. Now they combine photography with psychotherapy, dance with neuro-engineering and VR, sculpture with astronomy, a huge number of interesting consonances. Now it's easy to de-focus attention and surf upon the surface with such a colossal freedom of choice. The other side follows from here- restriction. To restrict attention on one thing and go deep. In my practice I try different things, the searching process is permanent. Ideas as seeds naturally lead to ways of their realization, to disciplines and their possibilities. And curiosity is often the soil for them.





**There is no doubt that you've dedicated the vast majority of your life to dance. At what point did you start exploring other mediums?**

That broken shoulder blade story became a catalyst for this process. I could not dance for at least four weeks. It was the first break in the 18 years of my dance career. The endless race for prizes stopped at once. A period of deliberate misunderstanding of who I am, why I am here and other existential things. The body was restricted in movement and so I began to try myself within other disciplines-directing videos, writing music, and photography. After, I began to discover experimental dance, performance, and other ways of self-expression and knowledge. This happened naturally, as a child who learned something new, trying it on his own experience.

**How has your relationship with your work changed with the ad-**

**vent of social media?**

I was 14 when I had signed up to my first social media site. I remember when I was posting my work on the Internet, it was extremely important for me to get a positive rating. To be 'liked' was what I wanted. It gives a lot of joy, but the race for this feeling brought disappointment as well.

I believed that feeling joy was good, and feeling sad or angry was bad, and I blocked it. This comfortable feeling of joy from new likes and creamy comments, like a drug, had started to become controlling and demanding, and a lot of things I've done have been to please my viewers. It limited me in the creation processes.

Now, social media is the same, life is the same, but my attitude towards everything has changed. Now I believe another thing. I am the way, I am observing the way and I allow the natural flow that streams through me.

