

Solange De Santis

A Universe of Grace

By Solange De Santis

At first, to my shame, I thought it was a joke. I was sitting in a high school auditorium on a Saturday morning with a cup of takeout coffee and the newspaper, half-watching as one class after another of little girls pranced around on stage, rehearsing their ballet, tap or jazz routines for the yearend dance recital a week hence. Is there a parental obligation more glacially tedious than sitting through a three-hour kid revue when, let's face it, all you're really interested in is your kid's number? Well, yes there are others, but the recital is right up there.

Then, amidst the swirl of sparkly white tutus and pink satin hair scrunchies, a class of about eight girls entered from stage left dressed as nuns. The costumes were quite clever – black tights, black habits ending at the knees, black wimples with white inserts on the foreheads – and one of them was pushing another in a wheelchair. “Oh, how amusing; she's going to hop up and dance at some point,” I thought. A split second and I realized she really *was* a kid in a wheelchair.

The music started and, again, it was very clever – the old Little Peggy March hit *I Will Follow Him*, an ode to a boyfriend given a new twist by the good “sisters” on stage, similar to the number in the film *Sister Act*. The choreography was a little bit ballet, a little bit Broadway, but not disrespectful of anything, sincerely performed with just a twinkle in the eye. Of course, the kid I couldn't take my eyes off was the one in the wheelchair. She seemed to have a normal-sized torso (the girls looked to be around 11 or 12) and clearly was of normal intelligence (you could see it in her face), but her legs had not grown and were tiny things in her chair.

How could this be, in a *dance* class? Even in an age of wheelchair basketball, Paralympics and access ramps, what I was seeing exploded any conventional idea of what a dance class is or should be. I couldn't imagine such a kid participating when I took ballet lessons as a child in the early 1960s. I don't think it would have occurred to anyone and if it did occur to the parents, they probably would have been discouraged, been told it just “wasn't appropriate” or would “hold the other kids back” or, worse, “hold the poor child up to ridicule.”

The newspaper forgotten, I watched in wonder. When the girls did arm movements, she moved her arms with theirs. They delicately folded hands over hearts on the line “I will follow him;” she did the same. They did an arabesque, one arm reaching heavenward, the other back and down, on “wherever *he* may *be*;” she did also. When their line turned, she turned her chair. They moved toward the center of the stage; she wheeled to be with them. They treated her no differently and gave no sign there was anything unusual about their group.

Since I'm a journalist, I thought about how I would report it as a newspaper story. I would have done the usual things. I would have talked to the kid in the wheelchair, made sure of the correct spelling of her name, the exact term for her disorder. I would have talked to her about what it felt like to be onstage, about whose idea it was for her to join a dance class, how the experience was going for her. I would have talked to the class teacher, asking her how she choreographed for eight pairs of legs and two wheels. I would have interviewed the dance school director, asking whether this was the first time she'd had a disabled kid in a class and how she thought about it. I would have talked to the parents and a couple of other girls in the class.

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But I didn't. For once, I felt none of the restless curiosity that normally afflicts the congenital journalist. (Well, maybe some.) I was content to let the thing unfold anonymously, to wonder at the guts of the kid in the chair, at the dignity of the entire group, at the blowing of my tiny mind. They ended downstage in typical Broadway pose, several down in front, the others ranged behind them, arms out. She wheeled her way into the finale, right on the beat, and it was over. Desultory applause from the parents scattered around the auditorium and off they went. She wheeled herself offstage, leaving me to wonder how it is that we skim along in life unawares and suddenly in the midst of the most utterly ordinary event in what seems to be the dullest of settings, there it is – a universe of love and mercy, a planet of grace and an expansion of all the possibilities of being human.

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