



*A
Midnight
Dance*

JOANNA DAVIDSON
POLITANO

“*A Midnight Dance* is an immersive read set in the glittering world of the Victorian ballet, where nothing is as it seems and even the familiar echoes with secrets. With an ability to create characters who twirl right into our hearts, Politano has written a story that is at once deeply atmospheric, yet grounded in the universal ache to belong and be loved. A gently charming romance seamlessly weaves through Ella’s quest to unravel the mystery of her past. And underscoring it all is a hymn of praise to the One who spins beauty and art with a wave of his hand. A book I plan on reading again and again.”

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Booklist

“*The Love Note* is a passionate, faith-driven novel that incorporates a beguiling tale of loss and redemption.”

Foreword Reviews

Other books by Joanna Davidson Politano

Lady Jayne Disappears

A Rumored Fortune

Finding Lady Enderly

The Love Note

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JOANNA DAVIDSON
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To my sweet daughter,
the little ballerina who dances with her whole heart
and often to her own rhythm.



The most beautiful moments of any ballet are the unscripted ones, yet we often waste these fleeting experiences by resenting their intrusion.

~Delphine Bessette, Craven Street Theatre

1

COVENT GARDEN, LONDON, 1833

He was so very *blue*. That was all my scattered mind could gather as he sailed past the window of Craven Street Theatre. Blue and sparkling under the glow of streetlamps that shone down the alley. I ended my three-point pirouette in demi-pointe with a soft landing in the quiet of the old abandoned room of the theater and stared again out the window, but he had vanished. Curiosity drove me to abandon my solitary practice as the second act carried on below, and I ran to the window for a better look.

Breeze from the broken window cooled my skin, rolling in pleasant waves over my too-warm body as I stepped out onto the balcony and looked down upon him, straining to see. He was a shining streak in the night, halfway down the alley, gauzy cape billowing behind him. A dancer, in full costume. How curious!

As the muffled music crescendoed below, several colossal ogres of men barreled around the corner of the Lamb and Flag Pub, jeers trailing them in the night. They cornered him with

harsh, echoing laughter that vibrated off the walls. They meant to rob the man. I crouched out of sight behind the doorframe, hardly breathing. A man with one suspender holding up his dirty trousers smashed a gin bottle on the brick, advancing with playful thrusts like a sword. I shivered, anticipating the plunge of glass into flesh, but I could not look away.

Run!

But that dancer was trapped as a cornered pig, poor fool.

Why wasn't anyone coming? Another dancer, a passerby, a confounded bobby, for pity's sake? But everyone around was safely cocooned in the theater, and there was only me, way up here. The Almighty possessed a sense of humor, he did. Ella Blythe was not one for high places—especially approaching their edges.

I stepped out onto the balcony and forced myself to look down as I clung to the rail, my breath coming in thin gasps, prickly panic climbing my skin. I yanked off one beloved scarlet ballet slipper that had been my entire reason for sneaking in here tonight and held it up, but the men were too far away. Climbing upon the low brick railing, I poised myself and focused on the stair landing a little to the left and a few feet lower. One glance down and my vision blurred at the sides, the familiar panic cinching my ribs. Moisture tickled my skin.

Fear be hanged—it had to be done. I sprang and crouched into a soft landing, still gripping the precious red slipper.

I rose, and with a final goodbye squeeze, I whipped the shoe at them, satin ribbons rippling behind it. It struck the face of a pursuer and crumpled in the street. The sloshed assailant stumbled back, bracing for an unseen attacker in the darkness beyond the streetlamp's reach, then lurched off. The others hesitated, and in that brief uncertainty, the blue wraith slipped into the safety of the shadows.

I sank hard onto the stair landing and exhaled, trembling as I shoved hair off my face. Drunk as they were, it hadn't taken much to scare them off—just one of the enchanted red shoes. I slipped the other one off and clutched it close, then stole back inside to the forgotten old materials room, where I could be alone until I'd collected myself.

I pressed my face to the window glass, half afraid to see, but no one moved about in the alley. Only the strains of the *Nymphes des Bois* sounded from the ballet performance in the main auditorium, all the familiar sights and creaks of the old theater surrounding me, and my tension began to unspool.

The rest of London may have forgotten about this old room hidden away in the theater's side wing, with its dust-laden crystal chandeliers lying on their sides and silk faille draped over painted wooden clouds, but to me it was a sanctuary. A haven for my own private dances.

But there were footsteps in the corridor, echoing over hard flooring outside the room. Heart fluttering like a million trapped butterflies, I leaped behind a silk-draped ladder and crouched, barely daring to breathe. The door squealed open and there he was, filling the doorway, filling the room, his crepe de chine cape fluttering against his solid frame.

I didn't know anything about men. I seldom spoke to them. His presence here in my private sanctuary was unsettling.

He strode in like a lion, glancing about for his prey. Awed at my close proximity to him, I looked into his magnificent face from the shadows, the sculpted and dimpled features highlighted in the dim light. The grease paint tried to cover the ruddy glow of his skin, disguise the deep vibrancy of his expression, but it could only do so much. He moved on, then turned back, his roving gaze resting on me cowering like a little fool

behind that ladder. I hadn't any idea what one was supposed to do with oneself in such a moment. Should I go to him? Smile and make introductions? How vulgar.

Well, I *was* in a theater just now. The rules were a bit different here.

He moved the silk aside like a curtain and smiled down at me. I wasn't prepared for the glorious sunshine that radiated from his masculine features. I rose, eyes still on him. Merciful heavens.

"Ah, here's my gallant rescuer." Rugged and warm at the same time, the man stood before me, my rescued shoe close against his chest.

My poor heart. It thrummed like a drum about to pop.

"I wanted to come up and thank you . . . and perhaps defend my masculinity." But his deep voice proved it aplenty. "I was in desperate need of a small drink before my part comes back in the third act, you see, and the theater's supply sprang a leak this morning. I hated to run into the pub this way, but there is nothing for it when one is dying of thirst and every spare hand is needed. Not unless I cared to scrape up what's leaked onto the cellar floor, which I didn't."

I worked my jaw as his voice echoed about the room, but my head was a scatter of random letters that refused to form words.

"That, of course, left me in the rather awkward position of dashing to the pub in costume during my off time in the second act, falling in with a pair of men deep in their cups, and thus being rescued by a . . ."

"Girl."

"Ah, you *can* speak." He folded his arms and looked intently into my face, his presence softened by dark, glossy hair that all fell over his forehead in one boyish twist. "So tell me, dear rescuer,

what brings you so boldly into this haunted part of the theater?
And how ever did you learn to spring and land like a cat?"

"I'm a dancer."

He raised his eyebrows in a way that somehow wasn't mocking, bless him. "Are you, now? That explains this." He held up my rescued shoe—that precious red slipper I desperately needed back. My hand itched to snatch it close. "I might have known it with a mere look, though. You wear dignity like a royal cape, even when you're afraid and hiding. Like an exotic wild animal, perhaps."

I had no answer for such a response. No one had ever looked at me and labeled what they saw as *dignity*.

"Which company do you dance with? Who is your manager?"

I stiffened. "N-no company. No manager." So many questions. I hated questions.

"You're a *petit ra*—forgive me, a member of the *corps*."

Miserable, I shook my head again. I was not even one of the lesser dancers onstage.

"I'm curious, then, what makes you call yourself a dancer?"

I looked at him solemnly, chin edging up. "Is art only validated by the presence of an audience?"

His eyebrows shot up, eyes flashing, and I knew I'd won his admiration—and that I was in trouble. One good look into his compelling eyes, I couldn't stop staring, couldn't keep my composure. They were magnets at the soul level. He moved closer, as if drawn, and I backed to the wall.

He slowed his approach. "Forgive me, but I simply don't know what to make of you. I've never heard of anyone willing to take on the label of a dancer without any of the spoils of the trade."

“I’ve never admitted it before.”

“But you practice.”

“Every day.”

“Hmm.” He shifted down onto his right knee, gaze still holding mine. “May I?”

I nodded, and he slipped the shoe onto my foot. Butterflies—oh, the butterflies. How beautifully that red slipper fit. It struck me again as his solid hands wound the laces, the small kindness wrapping itself around me.

I looked away. “Why must you stare? Haven’t you seen enough?”

“It’s just that . . . well, these do resemble a rather famous pair of slippers. One might wonder how you came to have them.”

“Oh?” I focused my gaze on the floor beside him. He knew these shoes, of course. He had to. They were legendary.

“I’m speaking of the missing ballet shoes of the extraordinary Delphine Besseau.” He watched my face.

“Oh.” I tried to act properly astonished, but he’d gotten it wrong. It was *Bessette*.

He looked at me as if I’d stolen them, which I hadn’t, thank you very much. Not exactly. Three weeks of extra wash I had done for the pleasure of having her slippers, my hands rubbed raw just so they could hold the gleaming satin shoes at last.

Mrs. Boffin, Craven’s laundress, had scrunched up her face as she handed them to me only an hour ago, jamming a hair cloth back over her wiry wisps. “What do you want these for, anyway?”

I paid the woman my extra wages to filch them from that old underground dressing room long since abandoned, since everyone seemed to have forgotten about them, so that made them more mine than anyone’s.

“Ain’t none of my nevermind, but you ain’t no dancer, Ella Blythe,” she’d declared. “You’re a regular churchgoer. A good girl, you are.”

Good, indeed.

Supremely *good* was precisely how I felt as I slipped my foot into that other shoe, heart beating the rhythm as if it was already inside me, tapping away. Was dancing truly so divorced from God that they could not both be woven tightly into the fabric of the same girl? Something inside me resonated so deeply with the immensity, the vibrant beauty, of both. I had quite a weakness for beauty. Such as this man—the sight of him pulled at the core of me.

He tied off the slipper and rose, gaze still searching. “Did you know, she died in a tragic gaslight fire in this very room, a dozen years ago or so.”

I knew.

“The room has been gutted and rebuilt, of course, but it used to be her private practice room, and was the place where she died. It’s where people have claimed to see her ghostly figure, which is why you’ll seldom find anyone in it.”

I shuddered. “How awful.” I knew the story, of course, but it still affected me with every telling. All but the brick shell had been pulled down and rebuilt throughout the entire theater, yet I could still sense the uniqueness that remained in this room. I always had.

“It’s said she’s looking for her famous red satin ballet shoes . . . and for poor Marcus de Silva.”

“Marcus *who*?”

“De Silva. The man who supposedly killed her, of course.”

My heart skittered, mind turning that name over. “How do you know all this?”

He laughed. “How do you not? Everyone in the ballet world, especially at Craven, has stories about being haunted by poor Delphine’s ghost. She is known for her tragic end, and for her red slippers.” He sobered, something odd flickering over his features.

He went back to studying me again in that terribly unnerving way. “Ones that look exactly like these.” His gaze dropped toward the shoes, then at me, head tilted in question. Our gazes tangled and held, and I couldn’t breathe. He lifted one hand as if to poke me. “I’ve never seen her, though. That is, until . . .” His fingertips brushed across my face, a whisper-soft movement.

I shivered again, then ducked away, flustered and speechless.

“Very well then, you’re not a ghost.” He continued to watch me, a sparkle of wonder dancing on the shiny blue surface of his face. “Care to try the shoes? I hear they’re special—the secret to her legendary success.”

Normally I’d refuse, but moonlight softened my reasoning. It cast an intoxicating glow over this man who saw the ballerina in me, melting my insecurities. He moved so close, his breath warm on my cheek, and I felt suddenly, for the first time, that I could not fail.

The evening’s encounter with this stranger was brief but significant, sinking deep into my memories to remain forever bottled there—a most precious experience that would never quite seem real once we left this place. “All right, then.” I took his hand and we moved toward an open space. He pulled me directly toward his solid frame, hands resting on my waist, and with a thrill I finally understood why the finer set of London declared dancing immoral.

I could smell whatever made his glossy black hair wave so perfectly across his forehead and feel his breath across the part

on my scalp. I felt his heart beneath his shirt. The moment was dreamlike, separate from my fruitless days in the washhouse, and I could not turn away from the gentle frame of his arms, the promise of my first *pas de deux*—a partner dance that, for once in my life, included a partner.

Yet the minute we stepped into the muffled rhythm, moving through the familiar paces—*relevé*, *attitude* leg lift, *cambré* to the right—my defenses melted in the cool moonlight. This was not carnal—it was art, and it was sacred. My feet arched easily into tiny *pas de bourrée* steps forward, propelling me into a spin with foreign hands bracing my waist. He was self-assured but in an easy, gentle way. I became aware of my every curve in a manner that made me feel more alive, more comely, than I ever had before.

We danced through discarded scarves, thick cobwebs, and broken chairs, then he spun me with a lavish release, and the distant music of the second act twirled me up in its magic. I arched my back and glided into the familiar precision of ballet, feeling that glorious stretch again in my calves. I lifted the warm air with my arms, and I was off, spinning and gliding, my patched skirt flipping against my legs.

I twirled over and over, the world fading easily away around the face that held my focus with each turn. As the music below crescendoed and faded in its finale, I finished with a small spring, folded down, and rose with a gentle curved back, chest high, arms overhead. When my vision centered on his painted face, the astonishment there was absolute.

And utterly gratifying.

His clap split the silence as I caught my breath. A giant smile broke over his face and he stepped toward me, glancing at the shoes. “Perhaps they *are* enchanted.”

I pushed stray hair away from my eyes. “As I told you, sir, I am a dancer.”

That gaze was back on my face, studying. Assessing. “Indeed.” His reply sank into the silence.

I sat to remove the slippers and replaced them with my well-worn work boots, wondering how I could possibly return to the washhouse at five the next morning.

He crouched before me, face vivid as if wanting to say more but not possessing the right words. I wasn’t about to offer any information—he’d already gotten more out of me than most anyone ever had.

“You’re quite blue.” I nodded toward his costume, desperate to divert the focus.

“As the North Wind should be. Come to think of it, they’ll be expecting me onstage with the third act, so I should take my leave. Such is the life of a dancer. It’s a terrible flurry of—”

“Of wonderfulness.” The words slipped out on a breath.

He paused, eyeing me. “Would you care to see it?”

My mouth hung open. “The *ballet*?”

“Come.” Grabbing my hand, he pulled me out the door, into the dark corridor, then up narrow steps that led high into the rafters. “The third act will begin presently.” He stopped me in a narrow passage and pushed open a tiny peep that looked down over the lavish royal-blue and ivory auditorium glinting with gold trim and muted gaslights, over the upswept hair and top hats and smartly glittering jewels in the audience.

I’d never seen it this way, so full and alive. “It’s magnificent.”

“I used to watch from up here at times. Just keep quiet and no one will know. And watch out for Delphine’s ghost.” He winked.

“*North Wind!* Get your sorry hide in here.” The harsh whis-

per jolted through our quiet moment and the dancer sprang up. I cringed at the way the manager spoke to the stranger who'd been so kind to me, even though this level of rudeness was far too common in theater.

He paused and cocked a half smile, seeming to sense the longing he'd magnified in me. "How's about this? I'll put in a word, and we'll see where it gets you. One day we'll be dancing together on that stage. I vow it. Keep that focal point as you spin through your days, and don't stop dancing." With a salute, he spun in a whirl of sheer organza and crepe but quickly turned back, grabbing the doorframe. "Oh, and keep those shoes close, love. Wouldn't want anyone else knowing you have 'em."

Then he was gone, lighting like a gazelle down the stairs.

I stared down at the red shoes in my hands, fingering the perfect stitching along the soles. *Enchanted*, he'd called them. But as I flexed the tingling hand he'd squeezed, I wondered if maybe it wasn't the shoes.

Settling noises sounded throughout the auditorium as the intermission melted away, musicians cuing up, then the orchestra eased gently into the third act. Two callboys parted the heavy blue curtain, and I plastered my face against that little peep, my nose pressed into the rough pine-scented wood around it. The music thrummed and so did my heart, matching beat for beat, then the dancers leaped onto the stage from both sides, two by two, trailing flowered ribbons and spinning pirouettes. Color. Beauty. Artistry. Symmetry and grace. My heart unfurled as a blossom in spring.

The lead ballerina in bright red twirled into the center, her skirts whirling into a filigree flower around her. Amalia Brugnoli, favorite of the great choreographer Armand Vestris, had captivated my imagination since I'd glimpsed her through

a window one day in the rehearsal room. Now here she was, dancing before me with acrobatic bursts and the most complex footwork I'd ever seen. I squinted at her tiny slippers—how was she doing this?

Everything about her was strength and perfection, from her smooth chestnut hair to her paces. Astonishment and jealousy wound in equal parts through my veins, thick with angst. With desire. When she landed in an *arabesque* and tilted to the right, the music rose to dizzying crescendos, and suddenly *there he was*—leaping with bold precision onto the stage, springing forth and spinning in the air, his powerful legs propelling him across the stage again and again.

His legs scissored above the other dancers, and he landed with a double spin on one knee, arms overhead, and swept back into the air with an effortless leap. I sucked in my breath. If ever I'd imagined that ballet damaged a man's masculinity, he disproved that notion in three beats of my heart. He was all muscle and control, skill and artistry—and such *power*. It oozed from him as he overtook the entire stage, the other dancers merely a background to his stunning performance.

And to think, I'd been in his presence—dancing alongside him.

I withered to the floor when the curtain shut, siphoning off my view of the most magical sight I'd ever witnessed, its intensity still sitting hard against my chest. Ballet was so much more real, more stirring and magnificent, than I'd ever realized. I was alight with more happiness than any devout member of St. Luke's Church had any right to feel inside a theater, but I couldn't help it. I straddled two worlds, my heart evenly divided.

I danced my way home through Covent Garden's crowded

streets and up the Strand, clutching the soggy program I'd managed to rescue from the gutter outside Craven. When I reached our home on dirty old St. Giles, I paused amidst distant shouts and banging doors to look through the paper for the name I desperately had to know.

North Wind principal dancer, **Mr. Philippe Rousseau**

I gasped, cold fingers over my mouth, and read it over and over. Principal dancer. I had danced with the *principal dancer*.

I looked up at the tiny square window with its four panes of greenish glass, the wealth of moss slicking the walls of our building in this little Covent Garden side street that clung by a thread to respectability. A single errant flower dared to grow between the building's stones, and I plucked it, spinning that rare show of color between my fingers—beauty amidst poverty. “*One day we'll be dancing together on that stage. I vow it.*”

Impossible as it seemed, I ached with a crushing desire for that promise to be true.

When I climbed the stairs, barely remembering to skip the broken one, dear Mum's warm smile greeted me, then Lily's sisterly scowl.

Poor Lily was a pretty, dimpled thing two years older than I, who'd been built for a life of pleasure and amusement, but fate had stolen her real mum years ago and left her stuffed with us in this little flat, a life that snuffed her dreams of men and gowns and coquetry. Her mum, a longtime costume designer who'd worked in the theater when mine was dancing there, had once dressed her daughter in fine leftover ribbons and paraded her about London. I was seven when her mother died, and Lily nine. Now here she was with us, stirring her specialty—*soup*

de scraps—in a pot over the fire, charging me with her look for every minute of work she'd had to do in my absence.

I pinched back a grin as I clutched the precious shoes and program under my cloak. I met Lily's stare with a smile and spun her around with my free arm before bending to kiss Mama. "Happiest of birthdays, Mama. I'll finish that cake, I promise. But first, a gift for you."

Grinning so hard my cheeks hurt, I knelt before this gentle woman and placed the sacred shoes in her lap, ribbons spilling down over her knees. Weeks of extra work and secrecy . . . all for this.

And it was worth it. She blinked, mouth falling open and hands framing her face as tears swelled in her eyes. She dabbed them with the corner of her apron and lifted the slippers as if they'd been the crown jewels. "Oh, Ella. Child. Are they . . . ?"

"The very ones."

"Oh, but how—why . . ."

I shrugged with a little smile. "Merely returning them to their rightful owner."