

A Work in Progress

By Penny Thornton

If someone had told me when I was a little girl that I was destined to become an astrologer, I would have stamped my pointy little foot in disbelief. I was going to be a ballerina. And I'm sure if my parents had been informed of my calling, instead of banning all the spindles from the kingdom, they would have burnt all the astrology books. But while *Sleeping Beauty* could not escape her fate, I eventually walked confidently into mine.

And so, when I was seventeen, recently graduated from White Lodge (the Royal Ballet junior school) and in the top senior class, Ingrid Lind wandered into my orbit. The founder and president of the Faculty of Astrological Studies had been asked to interpret my chart as a birthday gift. It proved to be a life-changing experience. One of Ingrid's remarks was particularly prescient: "In five years, you will be asked to make a sacrifice; you will have to give up something dearly prized." I couldn't imagine what that might be. After all, I was in a golden period of my life, with a bright future ahead of me. Five years later, I broke my contract with The Royal Ballet company.

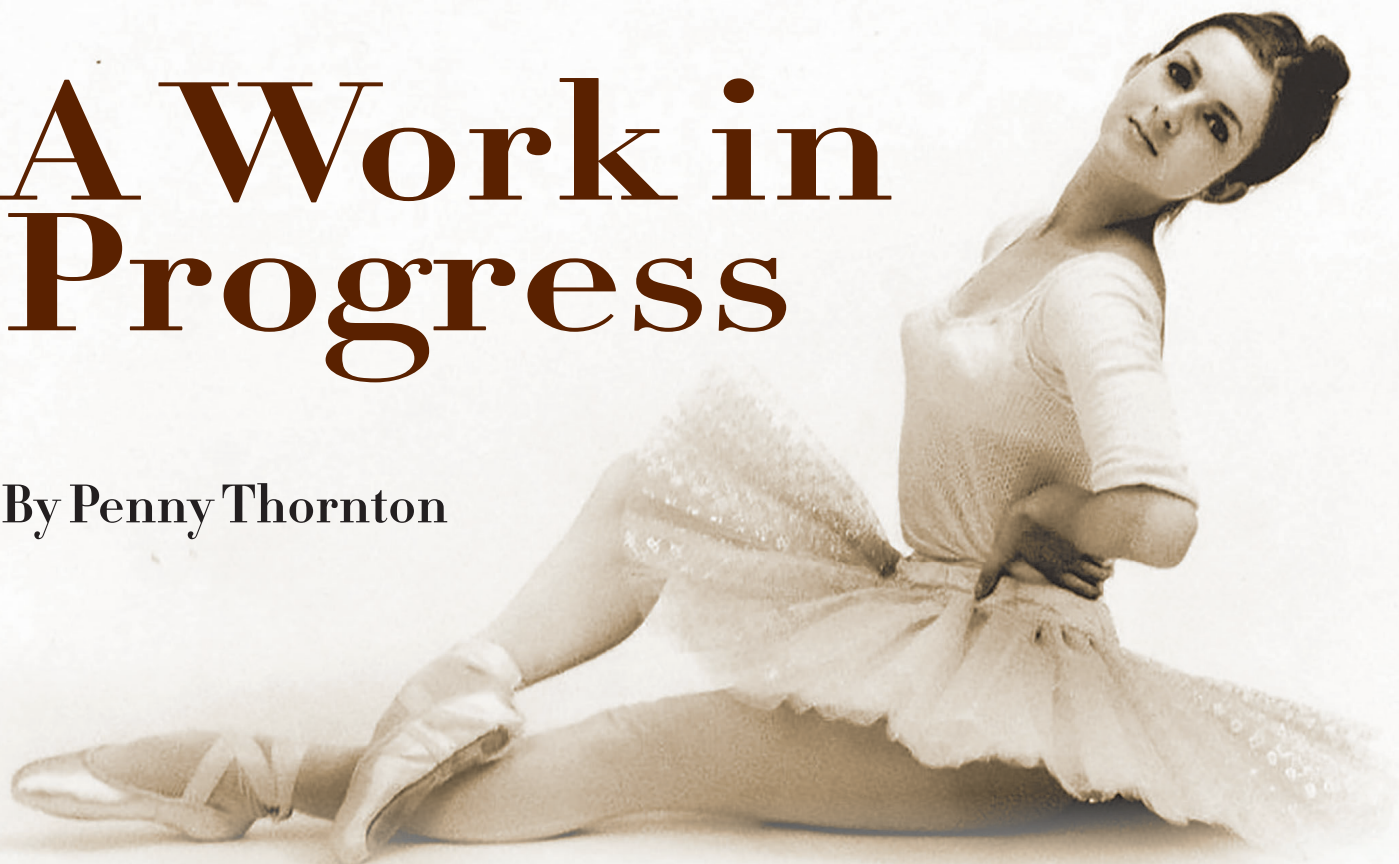
At the age of twenty-two, I walked out on a career I loved and had been in training for since I was five. Leaving the company office on Floral Street

that cold and sleety January night, I could hear the strains of *Giselle*, Act II coming from the Opera House. It was the last piece of classical music I would listen to for almost a year.

Now, I'm sure you're wondering why I would give up such a stellar career. Why, if you're good enough to get into one of the greatest ballet companies in the world, would you leave?

Artistry and technique are prerequisites for a professional dancer, but what is equally important is the ability to cope with the psychological pressures of a highly demanding career. I did not inherit the toughness gene. When my charismatic director bullied me, instead of standing up for myself, instead of being spurred to greater heights, I ended up broken. That meeting on Floral Street was the proverbial final straw. I could take no further punishment. I didn't care what lay ahead; the *beatings* had to end.

While the rupture of my ballet career posed solvable practical problems, repairing the damage to my heart and mind would take far longer. Leaving the company, an entire way of life, all I had known since I was eleven, was akin to leaving a religious order. When the door of the convent closed behind me, that was that. I was excommunicated. Other



people might have continued to dance, joined another company, taught or choreographed. But not me.

A week later, I presented myself at the St. Paul's Employment Bureau. I was trained for nothing but dance. I couldn't type; I had no university degree, no discernible skills. They found me a job as a filing clerk in the offices of Legal and General Insurance in Piccadilly, a short distance in miles from the Royal Opera House but as far away as Pluto in terms of my previous existence. There, for the next six months, I sifted, sorted, boxed, filed and foraged piles of paperwork. In the anonymity of my surroundings, I began to heal.

Clearly, this was not the end of the story. I lived to fight another day. And although I never returned to ballet, I did go back to the stage. In fact, the experience ultimately made me. In retrospect, I realized I had allowed myself to become a victim. Instead of shrinking, sulking and beating my breast, I should have practiced, practiced, practiced until I turned my weaknesses into strengths. I should have allowed my passion for dance to drive me, not my fears to consume me.

Fifteen years later, a graduate of the Faculty of Astrological Studies, I was able to help another person

who had slipped into the role of a victim. Diana, Princess of Wales, was in a puddle of despair at our first meeting in 1986: hurt, powerless, rejected, lost. By understanding that she could use her pain to relate to others who suffered, she was able to turn her passive, helpless situation into an active and fulfilling career.

What *losing everything* taught me was that I am a survivor. I have resources. My practical inclination kicked in and dealing with the everyday realities of earning a living and finding my bearings in a strange, new land made me stronger. I discovered that the younger you are when a life-changing event occurs, the better equipped you will be to make big changes in later years. I became fearless. Since then, I have made life-change after life-change, all with the knowledge that I have what it takes to survive. I have taken risks and won rewards.

Was the end of my ballet career the worst crisis of my life? No, but its impact was greater because I had no experience to draw on. The rug was pulled out from beneath me before I had learned to dance on a moving carpet. Each crisis teaches me something new. I continue to learn. I am regularly humbled. I am, as are we all, a work in progress.

HERE IS WHAT I LEARNED SO FAR:

- If you cannot master your circumstances, they will master you.
- Work with what you've got.
- The moment you believe you have it all is when you're about to lose it.
- Change your perception and you change outcomes.
- Strive for excellence, never for money or fame.
- Finding your soulmate doesn't mean you'll live happily ever after.
- The hard decision is usually the right one.
- Realizations made at three in the morning need to be revisited after breakfast.
- Humour will get you through the darkest days.
- Kindness is more important than the unvarnished truth.
- Everything changes.
- Be fearless.
- The universe is always right.

Penny Thornton has been an astrologer and writer-broadcaster for over thirty years. She has taught and lectured in Europe, Australia, and the US and works with clients across the globe. She became the subject of media interest in 1992 when her six-year association with Princess Diana came to light. Penny writes for magazines in England, Poland and Australia and appears on TV. Her mid-1990s daily segment on the US Food Network focused on sun-sign based menu planning and entertaining. In 2000, she established *Astrolutely.com*, one of the top astrology sites in the world. Penny has written ten books, including *Suns and Lovers* (1986), *With Love from Diana* (1995), *The Zodiac Cooks* (2017) and *Astrology in the Workplace* (2018).

