

CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE FIELD OF DANCE STUDIES



Network of Pointes

Credits L-R: RJ Muna (photo), Robert Rosenwasser (costume); Rick Guest (photo)

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Dear Reader,

Contemporary ballet in 2015 is undoubtedly a recognizable genre for most dancers: bare legs, leotards-as-costumes, hyperextensions, drags and slides in place of overhead lifts and partnered pirouettes, parallel positions, side attitudes, and a look that is assured but not in that enthusiastic way that many of us grew up understanding to be *de rigueur* stage presence. It is identifiable. It appears to be flourishing. It has a bit of an “it factor.” It piques our students’ interest. But, what IS contemporary ballet? Does it need classification and definition so that we can historicize this moment in dance? Is it too much to suggest another label when there are variances in looking at ballet worldwide? Expanding the scope of our own research on Mauro Bigonzetti and Alonzo King—both choreographers who are identified (by critics) as working in this genre—we formulate questions here about the shape of this developing discourse. Does redefining the form require a new name? If so, how does contemporary ballet distinguish itself? Do dancers who work in this genre view its differences, or, has contemporary ballet simply *become* ballet? If the latter is so, at what point did it happen and is the term used uniformly across the globe?

In the September 2014 issue *Dance Magazine* Editor-in-Chief Wendy Perron asked five dancemakers (one of whom, Helen Pickett, is profiled herein by Gretchen Alterowitz) “what exactly is contemporary ballet?” (34-36). Perron introduces the short responses with the explanation that contemporary ballet is a “style that remains ambiguous” and is seemingly more focused on possibility over perfection. Pickett understands the form to be about the “fully investigated body” while Christopher Wheeldon states “contemporary ballet means any ballet choreography made today.” It is apparent that personal definitions aside, Perron puts forth this question in recognition of a perceived shift in ballet choreography and an interest in the work of these artists and others like Benjamin Millepied, Justin Peck, and Liam Scarlett who embrace a redirection of ballet. The fact that this appeared as we were collecting submissions was anything but serendipitous to us, rather it was confirmation that something is going on, and that there is a desire for a clearer, more codified understanding of its emergence. At the same time, the lack of proposals in response to our call for this volume of *Conversations* from countries beyond the U.S. and the U.K. thwarted efforts to cultivate a global sense of contemporary ballet, and left us to ask if (despite seeing such ballets around the world) perhaps the need to converse about the genre could be less relevant internationally?

A word from the Guest Editors

The essays and interviews included in these pages are intrigued by the rejuvenation of ballet. Taking its cue from classical principles, contemporary ballet has a defined vocabulary and iconography; however dancers and choreographers explain that there is much greater liberty, a new understanding of space, and closer camaraderie than exists in other eras. Perhaps as an homage to ballet's past there is an overt respect for the technique, still the genre is driven by an urge to disavow narrative, to tweak form, and to shift representation. These changes in perspective, design, musicality, and relationship among dancers have consequently transformed ballet's core elements—so much so that many young dancers today do presume ballet is contemporary ballet.

Pioneering choreographer William Forsythe's viewpoint has served as a guiding path for contemporary artists to follow. By placing Ann Nugent's essay on Forsythe at the start of *Conversations* we recognize his role as a (if not "the") progenitor of contemporary ballet and use Forsythe's work to set the foundation for the exchanges to follow. Moving between choreographers, practitioners, critics, and theorists, we found, ironically, that most people understand contemporary ballet through ideas of difference. Whether it is on the part of the dancer who feels he or she is moving contrary to the codifications present in classical technique, or the imagery highlighting askew balances over pristine arabesque lines, there is something people in the dance community are seeing that is not romantic, classical, or neoclassical. The second essay by choreographer Julia Gleich narratively examines her own transitions within ballet at various stages of her life while asking if labels like "contemporary ballet" might be detrimental to the choreographers' and the form's identities.

Several of the included contributions bring forth further questions about diversity—in terms of race, but also method, body image, and gender. For instance Gretchen Alterowitz contends, in highlighting the work of Helen Pickett, "woman" choreographers are few and far between. Are Pickett and others unrecognized because they are women? Does contemporary ballet stop breaking rules when it comes to ballet's male-controlled organizational structure? Is it possible to reallocate gender roles within the form, and if so what will it take?

It was especially imperative for us to include dancer testimonies in this issue. Although we presumed to have cast a wide net, we once again received few submissions from countries other than our home bases (the U.S. and the U.K.). Commentaries by Alonzo King LINES Ballet Master Meredith Webster and the Royal Ballet's Eric Underwood are positioned centrally, as they provide glimpses into the protected ballet space. Webster writes of "curiosity" and "wonder"—showing us that her practice has not been one of the traditional ballerina, while Underwood speaks

about differentiation in approach, understanding, and presence. With the chance to perform a myriad of roles, Underwood found that his experience working with contemporary choreographers like Wayne McGregor provided opportunities to "explore" the "structure" that is ballet vis-à-vis a contemporary process.

Alongside these questions about form, we wonder whether there is a story to contemporary ballet. Granted, choreographers have mostly strayed from overt storylines and linear narratives, nevertheless, what might appear to be plotless usually is not, and the belief that contemporary ballet is exclusively concerned with movement and technique forsakes what stands to be a vital aspect of the genre. To this we find that many choreographers have sought to reinvent archetypal characters and ideas about ballet—believing the contemporary milieu can suggest reinvention in all aspects, narrativity notwithstanding.

The juxtaposition of and correspondence between the images of Meredith Webster and Eric Underwood on our cover propose that there is a network of pointes uniting these dancers across the globe. After setting the cover, we learned that Webster and Underwood had actually danced together several years ago with Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle, Washington. This coincidence solidifies for us the need for further exchange about contemporary ballet's connections, scope, range, and identity. As we watch the proscenium to see ballet's next move, we hope that this issue of *Conversations* will prompt further explorations of these ideas internationally.

Jill Nunes Jensen & Kathrina Farrugia-Kriel



Herman Schmerman performed by Nadja Saidakova and Federico Spallitta (Staatsballett Berlin)

Photo Credits: Jack Devant, 2013

Spirit of the New: William Forsythe and the Disruption of Ballet's Structural Organization

Ann Nugent

Ballet is an artificial construct, with precise structures, sequential laws of movement, and a history and tradition that position it as a totalizing system.¹ In the popular imagination it is usually thought of as classical and beautiful. Yet if that were all, ballet would long since have gone into terminal decline. For much of his working life the choreographer William Forsythe has been concerned with ballet's place in contemporary

times. As a consequence he has spent years questioning its structural organization. Forsythe argues that to think of ballet as complete in itself is to turn away from its potential to function as part of a bigger organizational system wherein opposition to its principles is permitted and movement not lost to rigorous rules.² "It is a body of knowledge, not an ideology" says Forsythe (cited in Sulcas, 1995: 8), who believes that

we cannot say precisely what ballet is because there is so much more to know. It is “a treasure trove, waiting to be plundered,” he insists.³ If the metaphor of ‘plunder’ might seem like a hyperbole, what often shows up in his choreographic oeuvre is balletic movement wrested from its classical context and linked with other disciplines and ideas. The resultant body of work is, of course, renowned, and of major significance in today’s dance culture. In what follows here I am concerned with looking back over the twenty years that Forsythe ran the Ballett Frankfurt. During this time he developed a methodological approach to movement that was inspired by the work of Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) and intended to emphasize the conceptual exploration of movement-as-theory.

An American, born in 1949, Forsythe now works internationally after directing The Forsythe Company for the past decade. He has been based in central Europe for most of his career after emerging as a choreographer while dancing with the Stuttgart Ballet (1973-1981). In Stuttgart his first three works (*Urlicht*, 1976; *Daphne* and *Flore Subsimplici*, both 1977) appeared to pay homage to Balanchine’s linear and spatial organization. Then came a shift, and links not only with other art forms but also with a wider perspective that drew from social issues and cultural theory.⁴ He was a choreographer with an individual voice. After Stuttgart followed a brief period as a freelance choreographer, before he took over the reins of the Ballett Frankfurt. It was during his two decades with the Ballett Frankfurt (1984-2004) that he rose to international fame, becoming one of the most sought-after choreographers of his time and claiming the attention not only of dance aficionados but also of the artistic world writ large.⁵

In Frankfurt Forsythe embarked on detailed and complex research processes that dislodged ballet from its narrow confines and repositioned it in a multi-cultural domain. His choreography made connections with ballet’s past, present, and future, forging new relationships with contemporary culture. Hence he was disrupting ballet’s legacy by introducing a labyrinthine network of differences and invading territories that were mathematical and geometric. The contradiction between extreme virtuosity executed by performers who were so plastic and adroit that they seemed to be without bones, and phrases that needed no more than casual walks, proved revolutionary. High art met popular culture and ballet’s codification seemed to have been superseded by chaos—though in reality the choreographic structures were highly organized. Bodies skewed out of their uprightness were held in a counterpointed organization connecting stabbed feet to projected hips and folded torsos. Forsythe was driving a wedge through convention, disrupting assumptions

about harmony and decorum so as to introduce a host of other ideas. His ballet was contemporary rather than classical, and it divided audiences into supporters and detractors—between those who valued what was new and different and those who objected to changes wrought to the system.⁶

At my first encounter with Forsythe and his Ballett Frankfurt (Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, 1991) I immediately sensed the work was made by a choreographer steeped in philosophical mores and intent on envisioning dance through a large-scale intelligence—or horizons that stretched beyond what was assumed about the discipline. The dancers, moreover, shared this intelligence even though what they communicated in a triple bill was often abstruse. In *New Sleep* (1987) three mysterious figures appeared to have escaped from a surrealist nightmare to wander arbitrarily through a more “normal” kind of dancery activity. *Herman Schmerman* (1992) revealed an anarchic collapse of ballet principles and gender challenges. *As a Garden in this setting* (1992) mixed elements of theatre and the everyday into a nonsensical environment, with a strange blend of dancing styles, cultural references and everyday objects. Although appearing to suggest disorder all three “ballets” were intently focused, and the dancers took ownership of the works’ peculiarities, colluding with the bizarre, the oddball and the outré.

Herman Schmerman was one of several works that Forsythe categorizes as “the ballet ballets,” by which he means that the logic of movement is sufficiently recognizable for other (ballet) companies to be able to dance them.⁷ *Herman Schmerman* was rooted in ballet, even when the cumulative force of rapid spins, darting jumps, and limbs yanked into space proclaimed spirit of the new. Arms and hands were as significant as legs in establishing the movement’s shape and impetus. Thom Willems’s score of frenzied rhythms spurred on the dancers’ dynamic and they responded with energy that ran up the body, through precisely jabbing footwork into exaggeratedly airy wrists.⁸ This might be “a ballet ballet,” but it was one of broken rules.

It was Laban’s kinesphere, and its relationship with the icosahedron that caused Forsythe, early on in his career, to perceive ballet’s potential for radical change.⁹ The upright body in Laban’s model is held by the intersection of the axis through muscular tension and destined to return to a vertically opened and centralized physicality. In this blueprint for “a kind of pure text in dance” (Forsythe cited in Driver, 1990), Forsythe saw a departure point: if the body were no longer compelled to return to a centered organization, other movement values would emerge. Limitations on the body’s relationship in space

could be altered if the concept of the kinesphere, as a binary system of organization, were to be taken apart. When verticality was no longer a controlling power, and when any line or point in the body could lead, the look of the body was transformed. What Forsythe was doing was deconstructing the conventional organization of the dancing so that release into multiple kinespheres became possible and “any point or line in the body or in space [could] become the kinespheric centre of a particular movement” (Sulcas, 1995). When movement was no longer directed by a required linear order it could be released into a myriad of “other” lines, curves, angles and points (Forsythe cited in Sulcas, 1995: pp 6-9), and activities such as rotation, flexion, and folding could postpone the return to a centrally organized unity in order to move in unexpected spatial directions. Hence, Forsythe opened up a ‘dialogue’ with gravity and space, recognizing the altering of the sequential time it took for the body to carry out actions, actions that might seem alien to conservative viewers.

If uprightness and turnout were no longer fundamental in his eyes, the potential of joint movement became pivotal and a new freedom in movement emerged. Folding at the hip brings a radical alteration to the body’s uprightness and increasingly Forsythe and his dancers (who were often his choreographic collaborators) saw, as he put it,

how to fold and unfold again, at various rates and moving through different body parts. So we create what I call a “many-timed body” folding and unfolding towards and against itself. (Forsythe cited in Kaiser. 1999:66)

The evolving geometry with its changing orientations and co-ordinations, and its different attitude to peripheral movement, was too powerful for a hierarchy of order in which every point and every line, and indeed every activity, contributed to the form. Nothing was transitional, intermediary, or extraneous.

Laban referred to secondary movements as “muscular tensions” that contribute to dynamic and direction, or to intentionally oppositional movements.¹⁰ This can be contrasted with Forsythe’s ‘residual’ movement, in which the body parts organize themselves with, and not against, the flow, enabling the body to move in its own logic manner through which the flow is determined by the movement’s execution. The results may be seen as organic, but are an extension of Laban’s kinespheric reach to show that the moving body no longer needs to be dependent on a regrouping of its central organization. It can function with an awareness of multiple kinespheres. Crucial, of course, to the conceptual delivery is the dancers’ dexterous mental/physical response

to Forsythe’s methodological approach. They are often required to let go of all or part of their carefully acquired (historicized) muscular knowledge. If limbs are no longer constrained by turnout, residual movement can discover what convention has kept hidden. The body can find physical and metaphorical alignments that lie beyond normal balletic laws, and in doing so blur the demarcation between the inner and outer. Release of the body’s joints leads to a new kind of focus for where there is no longer adherence to the dictates of turnout and line then the activities of shoulder, elbow, wrist, knee or ankle can be unexpected. Sometimes limbs may turn inwards drawing attention to the underside of the arm or leg, of the part that is usually hidden behind what could be thought of as the ‘edge’ produced by turnout.

Eyes are important to any performer, yet the Forsythe gaze undergoes a strategic shift so that the dancer seems to be looking inwards, and the movement emerges in apparent response to feelings. It is as if the dancers are concentrating on the dance itself rather than drawing attention to themselves or their performance.¹¹ They do not look out into the auditorium, instead their eyes become, to use Forsythe’s own image, “disfocused”.¹² The focus is on proprioceptive awareness, in counterpoint to or harmony with, their fellow performers.

Proprioception involves recognition by the nervous system of the dimensional body and the flow of energy through the entire organism—and neurological cognizance is itself communicative. Forsythe’s dancers must develop acute awareness of their spatial orientation, so as to sense how every part of the body reacts in performance.¹³ While proprioception is a part of ballet (where awareness of what is happening in the organized body is held in a relationship with an external geometry), a deeper understanding is needed, often involving improvisation and split-second decision-making by Forsythe’s dancers.

To help guide dancers into the new way of working when they joined the Ballet Frankfurt Forsythe developed his methodology into a lecture demonstration/introductory tool and recorded it as a CD-ROM (1999).¹⁴ The resultant *Improvisation Technologies: A Tool for the Analytical Dance Eye* illustrates the means of choreographic inquiry, rather than how to choreograph in the manner of Forsythe. On the recording he demonstrates some of his strategies for changing the look of the moving body. As approaches to lines through ideas about writing (the body) are shown, reorganizational systems and movement to which Forsythe has given strange-sounding names (point, point line; bridging; room writing; spatial reorientation, isometries, room writing, iterative thinking, and so on) are devised.¹⁵ His manner is that of a teacher who is thinking about the ideas as he shares them with viewers.

Forsythe evolves movements from the body such as ‘extrude’, ‘extend’, and ‘slide’, which when linked to different joints cause us to notice what points in the body ‘do,’ how they function and how relationships occur—as can be seen, for example, when thinking about the space between the tip of the elbow and the top of the hip bone. The emphasis on points and lines makes an obvious connection with Laban’s movement scales through the icosahedron. Yet Forsythe works through shapes made by the body showing their amalgamation into different forms. On the recording these are enhanced by a laser beam that is superimposed to complete the shape. A laser line is left floating in space and as Forsythe moves around it, avoidance is introduced as a strategy. This is further illustrated by the way he folds around the line: with each dart and dip the body is forced into a rapid reorganization so as not to hit the space occupied by the line. The complexity of this shows up as each joint reacts to gravity in relation to the movement’s direction and impetus.

Sometimes imaginary extensions are beamed from, for instance, knee level to the ground, and Forsythe approaches virtual lines in different ways—advancing, retreating and nudging the bent body round the line in a spiral, but never touching the lines. What becomes important is the degree of precision required, not just from the angle of approach, but also from the surface of the body. The change in dynamic and shape will be evident for, as Forsythe explains, “the ways of approaching these lines are as rich as your imagination” (Forsythe, speaking on his DVD; for reference see Sulcas, 1995).

The laser beam shapes help to rationalize shape, or to link it to a recognizable object, and the pictorial logic is further illustrated by Ballett Frankfurt dancers. Noah Gelber, for instance, dances the physical dimensions of tables and a chair as a laser beam completes the skeletal shape of the object. Rather than any recognizable usage of the object, what signifies is a physical arrangement that depends on volume, dimension, and weight. Gelber must relate to the exact proportions of the chair, and the viewer cannot anticipate how his dance will proceed because the movement does not send out recognizable signals about the directions that will be taken. Instead, the body is thrown into unexpected systems of control and balance. Unlike ballet, which extends across the globe in a general sense, Forsythe’s method is specific to his team, for it is highly complex and dependent on skilled dancers with a rich imagination and an ability to improvise at speed. Dancers need to have understood the philosophy of his thinking and his conceptual openness.

Forsythe’s plundering of ballet, or his act of stealing and stripping to engage in processes of deconstruction, reveals qualities that make his dance seem, at times, almost transparent; it is a feeling that comes from

looking at movement that is so plastic and still so focused that there is no longer any sense of an outer, presentational mode. The body has let go of its borders and become seemingly ‘edgeless’, permitting no divisions between the inner and the outer, or between dance and dancer. Here we may feel the emotional pull of Forsythe’s dance, recognizing through the underlying methodology that a metaphorical opening has been channeled into the dancer’s inner being. It is an aesthetic of body and mind into which form and content merge as one, and in which the zeitgeist reveals the extraordinariness of the human being.

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Notes

1. Postmodern theory examines the falsity of systems that promote notions of a totalizing practice as an end in themselves. See, for example, Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) and Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1984: 12).
2. Some of Forsythe’s ideas included here come from personal communication with him, in Frankfurt and on tour with his company between 1997 and 2006.
3. Personal communication, c1997.
4. I have written about the achievement of Forsythe’s time in Stuttgart in Nugent 2006. See bibliography for details.
5. While serving as artistic advisor for The Forsythe Company, William Forsythe continued to widen the scope of his work by taking on new projects, including a professorship at the University of Southern California’s Gloria Kaufman School of Dance and a position as Associate Choreographer of the Paris Opera Ballet. In the summer of 2015 Jacopo Godani will succeed him as artistic director.
6. By the time the Ballett Frankfurt closed in 2004, Forsythe had created about 100 works. While the dancers in his company attended a daily ballet class, increasingly his choreography moved away from links with ballet to explore other cultural and theoretical questions.
7. Among works that Forsythe refers to as his “ballet ballets” are: *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated* (1987, created for the Paris Opera Ballet); *the second detail* (1991, created for the National Ballet of Canada); *Herman Schmerman* (1992, created for New York City Ballet); *Firsttext* (1995: created collaboratively by Forsythe with Dana Caspersen and Antony Rizzi for Britain’s Royal Ballet); *The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude* (1996: created for the National Ballet of Canada). All these works were subsequently taken into the repertoire of the Ballett Frankfurt, and nowadays continue to be performed by various ballet companies carefully selected by Forsythe.

8. Forsythe observes in a question and answer session with Senta Driver:
 WF: We talk about all kinds of dancing. We think about dancing.
 There's a lot of theoretical discussion. And we're very arm conscious.
 I think that's, for us, the key to our style. One *tendu* is perhaps
 someone else's *tendu*, but our *port de bras* is really indicative of what
 we do.
 SD: And the hands, more than just the arms?
 WF: Often it emanates from the hands We're using the Laban
 model – space harmony. It's a model for a kind of pure text in dance.
 Quoted in Driver & the editors. (Spring 1990, 18:1, p91.)
9. Laban's kinesphere (the space surrounding the body) and the icosahedron
 (a polyhedron with 20 faces) see his *Choreutics*, (1966).
10. See *Choreutics*, 1966: 92.
11. Richard Glasstone has written about the eye in ballet in "Thoughts: Uses
 of Eye Focus" in the *Dancing Times* (January 2000:351, Vol 90, no 1072).
12. See exploration of "disfocus" in Roslyn Sulcas (1995, vol lxix, no 9:
 September 1995: 52-59) "Channels for the Desire to Dance" in *Dance
 Magazine*.
13. Neurological awareness by the dancer as a significant communicator has
 long been important to Forsythe because of its enhancing of "life energy"
 that can then flow through "the whole organism". See Linda Hartley (1995:
 26) *Wisdom of the Body Moving: An Introduction to Body-Mind Centering*.
 Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books.
14. William Forsythe. (1999) *Improvisation Technologies*: CD-ROM. Frankfurt:
 Ballett Frankfurt, text by Roslyn Sulcas.
15. The viewer can click different icons to explore the movement and theory,
 and the CD-ROM includes demonstrations from four of Forsythe's dancers
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 Macdonald & Evans.



Illuminations¹

Julia Gleich



I trained in NYC in the heyday of ballet, in the 1970s, when New York was a dance world capital. A student of Melissa Hayden, I studied with David Howard, Robert Denvers, Willie Berman, and many others. In briefly attending the School of American Ballet, I was in class with dancers from NYCB and ABT, defectors from Russia, and the energy was inspiring and thrilling. For me, ballet was just ballet. It was Balanchine and Petipa, Robbins and Joffrey, Tharp and De Mille. Those were also the days of the Joffrey company in NYC and they had a strong influence on my attitude toward ballet with a somewhat inclusive company model—dancers of different shapes, sizes, and colors, and a varied repertory that included ballet to rock music. In hindsight, I was embracing a contemporary aesthetic, but was in class all the time with “ballet” dancers. Rarely do I remember being mired in a singular style or sticking to narrow, rigid, classical ideals. But I never would have called our dancing contemporary, nor would I have called it classical. It was simply ballet.

Photo Credits: David Shliecker, Burklyn

Two decades later, while teaching and choreographing in New York City in the 1990s, I participated in a ballet choreography master class. At the time I identified with ballet as my medium, but upon showing my first study it was suggested that what I had made was “not ballet” but “something more modern like Graham or Cunningham.” Naturally I responded with great pleasure and said, “yes, it’s like ‘me!’” The master teacher was not impressed by my response and left me to ponder why I was taking the workshop in the first place. I thought I knew why: I came from ballet and used pointe work. My dancers were usually ballet trained and I felt I had not immersed myself in modern approaches to creativity. But what I produced seemed not ballet *enough*.

This furthered questions about my identity as a choreographer, teacher, and dancer. For my next project in 1999 I hired dancers from a program that was focused on modern dance. The piece was on pointe and I quickly realized there were unique differences in these dancers. They were less vertical, but also less daring en pointe and philosophically burdened by a need to solidify a modern identity within the piece. This experience influenced my approach to teach ballet, especially at the higher education level. What I wanted for my students was reflected in a technique that was neither of the ballet or the modern/contemporary extremes, but based in movement invention utilizing a ballet vocabulary. Choreographically, I want what is valued in both the modern and ballet worlds (or contemporary and classical?). Today I choose to work with ballet dancers who are strong on pointe and open to new methods. And I teach dancers to be hireable. We don’t know what new idea is going to capture the imagination of dance audiences next.

When it came to identifying my own artistic output I was conflicted. I thought audiences needed handholding to know there might not be tutus, but there might be pointe shoes. So I originally identified with “contemporary ballet.” I thought that contemporary meant “now.” I was making ballet as I envision it today. Classicism wasn’t even on my radar of aesthetic concerns. I was uncomfortable choosing a label and wondered if the choreographers of the past were made to do this.

As my career progressed I was invited to present my work in mixed bill evenings with others companies. The Hasting Creative Arts Council presented my work alongside that of Heidi Latsky, Pascal Rioult, Zvi Gotheiner and Robert Battle (now Artistic Director of Alvin Ailey Dance Company). In this company of talented new choreographers I thought I had made it—that I had created a new approach to ballet and therefore was part of this group. But I still felt insecure as a choreographer in their world and the insecurities grew as I watched their work. The distance from contemporary to ballet seemed much further than I thought. My interest in progressive pathways and percussive sound seemed paro-

chial with a pink pointe shoe on the end of it. Can dancing on pointe, ever be anything but old fashioned?

When I moved to London from New York I discovered, to my chagrin, that the title used for most ballet classes was “classical ballet”. What does this classical ballet refer to? Is it the *danse d’école* of Beauchamps and Blais? My training was a glorious mix of Bournonville, Balanchine, Vaganova, Cecchetti; diversity was the strength of my technique and led to my enjoyment of the form. What’s more it was this diversity that allowed room to experiment as I wasn’t concerned about labels; I felt, as a young artist, that all dance forms were available to me if I was open to them. I guess you could say that I’m a good old New York City mutt. Would I be able to deliver the kind of ballet training that British students expect when what I value in ballet is: the opportunity to discover and then expand beyond a common vocabulary in order to create dancers who can dance anything.

Perhaps the very impetus to re-invent and develop ballet may be limited in part because companies move through choreographers without fully engaging with their philosophies about the form. We consider the training of dancers extensively. Which schools are choreographer-driven in ballet? Do the dancers of most companies take class with the choreographers who come to create or set works? Even American Ballet Theatre has invented its own National Training Curriculum and is working to create a kind of uniformity of attitude to the technique and this was a company originally known as a melting pot for ballet, drawing dancers from everywhere with a wide variety of types and training. Many felt this was the very strength of the company, yet I ask what such universalizing efforts will bring to ballet?

Relatedly, dance reviewers will often refer to a classical vocabulary in a contemporary work—consider William Forsythe’s *Artifact*. Though his choreographic tools more heavily impact the teaching of choreography today, Forsythe is probably the most recent choreographer to alter our ideas about ballet. Who are the others since Balanchine and Ashton whose influences have trickled into training? These issues emerge quite profoundly at the nexus of higher education and the profession. Teachers are asked to create a syllabus, and in it they define their teaching practice within a fairly limited choice of extremes. Do I teach Vaganova or Cecchetti, RAD or Russian, Bournonville or Balanchine? And if I teach only one of these “techniques” does that mean my dancers are prepared for only a limited approach to ballet? I suppose not, but what I advocate for is a more artistic approach to ballet training. I redefine ballet as a series of directed energies, vectors that turn ballet into a collection of directions of movement, rather than shapes. This seems a rather obvious idea, but when executed it leads to students

discovering how to teach themselves, and dancers playing with new ideas, moving through and beyond the technique. Students should engage with different technical and aesthetic approaches to ballet just as they do in modern (or contemporary). This might help to broaden our definitions of ballet and to recognize that ballet training is more than creating perfect alignment and high extensions, but that it is a tool for creative interpretation, and no singular technical approach can suffice.

Additionally, technique is not an end in itself. I have to remind my conservatoire students that taking technique class does not a dancer make; if you perfect your *tendu*, you still might not be dancing. It's a chicken and egg cliché. Louis XIV was dancing before he founded the Académie. In other words, we developed the technique to support the dancing and we can change it. And the technique ought to change over time, as choreography changes along with culture and physicality. Too often ballet technique is rooted in old-fashioned ideas about purity and grace, proper behaviour and elitism—a clash with a 21st century sensibility—and these have little to do with the actual dancing. My students routinely describe ballet in very negative terms, as though it is replication of perfected movements created in 1661, and either you've drunk the Kool-Aid or you haven't. I often ask them to pretend they are in a contemporary class in order to embrace a wider range of attitudes to the form. I think as a teacher and choreographer, I have failed my students if they finish their training with this same limited view of what ballet could be.

Vaganova wrote about bringing into the class material that prepares her dancers for what they are performing on stage. She considered the teaching and the performing to feed into each other. This is a process that I use in my own practice and I wish more choreographers were also studio teachers. A teacher for whom I have great respect told me once that class was not choreography (but rather exercises). I disagreed, arguing that it is through class that students develop the skills to pursue new ways of engaging with the art form. Marie Rambert felt a rigid approach to technique spurred creative (rebellious?) ideas. My approach is to offer my considered knowledge as an educator in dance, combined with my aesthetic of ballet and art. I keep my hand in the profession very actively as a choreographer, collaborator and producer, regularly auditioning dancers both for my own company and for Brooklyn Ballet. Annually I produce *Counterpointe*, a performance series for women. Through curating this evening I have discovered interesting works by women that play with pointe in a most unballetic way. Karole Armitage was my guest speaker in 2013 and she “remember[s] one of my first ideas in these early punk pointe pieces was to think of pointe shoes as weapons.”²

I have been Head of Choreography and technique faculty in ballet and Limón at two conservatoires that offer the BA (Hons) in London since 2003, and I know less now about what contemporary ballet is. I have lectured and taught in Asia, Europe, and the United States. From what I see, students remain preoccupied with labeling dance; they want to name it (i.e. they want to name the “style” by which they will choreograph), and to name each dance they see as though it emerges whole from a codified technique class. I strive to eliminate these labels and to open their minds and bodies to any choreographic experiences offered. I want them to be complete artists. The terms limit our experience of dance and drive us towards cliché. Movement is our medium. Would a painter today use the label Renaissance artist, because s/he embraces the distinctive style that originated in the 15th century? Likewise when is a ballet dancer a classical ballet dancer? Who decides what is and isn't ballet? Other forms are still often defined against ballet—and I thought post-modernism freed us of all these concerns! Are we falling into a new trap using the term “contemporary”? Does the phrase serve to distance us from classical ballet, often considered the higher art form? Are we locked into a hierarchy of labels that stifles creativity? Who are these labels for anyway? They haunt my practice and make me question my creativity. And I still wonder what I should call my work...

Notes

1. “Ashton, in his 1950 ballet *Illuminations*, set to Benjamin Britten's cantata on Arthur Rimbaud's poetry, featured [Melissa Hayden] in a notably erotic role as Profane Love, with one foot in a pointe shoe and the other bare. His sudden request that she remove a ballet shoe late on in rehearsal alarmed her, until he pointed out that all the choreography she had learned so far was fashioned for this unprecedented idea.” *The Telegraph*, Melissa Hayden obituary, 12 Aug 2006. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1526131/Melissa-Hayden.html> accessed November 20, 2014.
2. Armitage, Karole. 2013. Speaking at *CounterPointe: Women Making Work on Pointe*. Transcription by Norte Maar. <http://nortemaar.org/2013/12/karole-armitage-talks-pointe-shoe-with-6-rising-choreographers> accessed November 25, 2014.

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The Contemporary Ballet Menu: A Regional Repertory Concert Practice in the 1970s (Washed Down with Beer)

Caroline Sutton Clark

In this conversation I consider ideas about, and practices of, “contemporary ballet” by way of an unusual historical and cultural phenomenon—that of the Austin Ballet Theatre’s sixty-plus monthly performances at the Armadillo World Headquarters from 1972-1980. This case study investigating cultural trends in the 1970s may prove useful to understand desires towards and practices of contemporizing ballet today.

Journalism student Stephanie Chernikowski, writing for a counter-culture newspaper in 1974, describes the scene:

The first time I went to [the] Armadillo to see the Austin Ballet Theatre perform I drove up a little late to find about half a dozen police cars parked at the entrance. This wasn’t some rock and roll show with an audience of dope smoking freaks, it was a ballet... Turns out the regular cop on the beat had been making rounds and was so taken with the idea of a ballet in Armadillo World Headquarters, Austin’s funky rock parlor, that he called a bunch of the boys to come have a look. There they stood fascinated, just inside the door stunned. (17)

Rather than appearing regularly in Austin, Texas’ civic auditorium or Paramount Theatre, local ballet company ABT (and they were very aware of the fun in sharing that acronym with the prestigious American Ballet Theatre) performed in the Armadillo World Headquarters, an eclectic music venue variously described as “a rambling, barn-like structure” (Bustin A13), “an old, dirty beer hall” (Bergquist), and “a country western-rock and roll asylum” (Schweitzer 22). While on other nights the Armadillo hosted “cosmic cowboy,” hippie-oriented, and “outlaw country” music artists such as Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airmen (Mellard), on second Sundays diverse audiences of 800-1200 people paid \$1.50-\$2.50 a ticket and rushed the bar to get beer and nachos before the first ballet began (Shelton, “Armadillos” 2).¹

This time and place afforded favorable conditions for the founder and Artistic Director of Austin Ballet Theatre, Stanley Hall, to create ballets

in a variety of styles. This was based on his wide-ranging breadth of experience from Sadler’s Wells to Hollywood and Broadway. The flamboyant Englishman had an illustrious career as a performer. He began dancing at the age of sixteen with the Vic-Wells in London, toured with Roland Petit, danced in over thirty Hollywood musicals such as *Oklahoma!*, worked with Jack Cole and Bella Lewitzky, appeared on television, danced on Broadway, and toured in shows with Liberace and Betty Grable. In 1967, when Hall came to the small college town of Austin as a favor to a friend, ballerina Nora White Shattuck, he sought an opportunity to transition his career more toward teaching and choreography. Once Austin Ballet Theatre began performing at the Armadillo World Headquarters in 1972, Hall developed a popular series of regular repertory concerts through the use of an effective, time-tested programmatic formula that I think of as “menu” or “sandwich” programming: a template for determining the program order of several ballets in one concert by placing his most experimental ballet in the middle. Sandwiching worked very well in this particular time and place. Analysis of Hall’s “middle” ballets and their context at the Armadillo World Headquarters brings to light several working elements towards how *contemporized* ballet manifested in a field of practice and the functions that it served this community.

I first studied the concept of menu, or sandwich, programming in an undergraduate dance production course: a structure of presentation in a dance concert consisting of several independent dances that place a pleasant opener first, an experimental, serious, or guest-choreographed dance second, and a crowd-pleasing closer last. This creates a flow for audiences that welcomes and eases them into the concert experience via the first dance (appetizer), provides the most challenging or featured work(s) afterwards once the audience is “warmed-up,” or attuned to the experience but not exhausted (main dish or “meat”), and then ends the concert with something upbeat to leave the audience feeling positive about the event as a whole (dessert).² Monthly Armadillo performances almost always consisted of a mixed repertory program with three to five separate dances in menu formation (some of the dances were repeated and added onto from month to month).

The first would be a “light” classical, semi-abstract ballet (Chernikowski 18); examples of this type of ballet include Hall’s restaging of Frederick Ashton’s *Les Patineurs* and Hall’s original *Birthday Waltz* set to music by Tchaikovsky, which one reviewer described as “a harmless bit of pleasantry” (Shelton, “Austin” n.p.). In contrast, the middle offering would be a serious-themed, “strictly contemporary” ballet such as *The Rites of Joseph Byrd* to music by rock-jazz musician Joe Byrd (van Hulsteyn 16). Occasionally, another short contemporary ballet and/or classical *pas de deux* such as *Le Corsaire* followed featuring principal dancers of company. Finishing the evening, the closer was often a sprawling, “zany” finale featuring parodies of Hollywood (Flickers I and II), dance (*Parody of Isms*), or cultural narratives (Centennial Rags) (Hogner, “Sadness” 11). Hall explains the strategy of the closer from the perspective of his own background: “[Both Sadler’s Wells and Ballets de Paris] made a practice of finishing their performances with a ‘light-hearted ballet—something that would send the audience home smiling’” (Smith 11).

According to dance and community studies scholar Judith Hamera, dance practices, such as program order, have tactical utility operating with the needs and desires of people in community. Hamera asserts in *Dancing Communities* that iterations of dance are “inherently social” in their aesthetic processes, producing meaning in social time and social space (3). Therefore, ballet, as an example, is always “local” in individual communities of practice through generative matrices of technique and aesthetics (4). Ballet in this view functions as a process by which people develop understandings of community relationships and identity—re-framing the question of *what contemporary ballet is to what the practice of contemporizing ballet does*. In the case of Austin Ballet Theatre, what was the context in which these middle, contemporized ballets operated? How might aesthetic processes have been reconciled or related to their time and place? And what purpose(s) did this serve?

In her text *Apollo’s Angels*, Jennifer Homans describes the 1970s as a dynamic time for ballet in the United States, a period of excitement that has not been seen since (467-469, 540). There was a sense during this era known as the “dance boom” that ballet was exciting, youthful, and popular (Homans 468). Although Homans focuses more on the influence of New York City Ballet’s George Balanchine as the catalyst for a dynamic American ballet, the 1970s saw a confluence of cultural phenomena that charged the ballet world on a national level; the high-profile defections of Mikhail Baryshnikov, Natalia Makarova, and other Soviets to the United States, the movie *Turning Point* featuring Baryshnikov, the rise of regional ballet companies along with increased funding for them, the gay rights movement, more open ideas about mas-

culinity and propriety, a fitness boom for men and women, and social dance practices from do-your-own-thing music concerts to *Saturday Night Fever*-inspired disco, all contributed to new interests in movement. Sam Binkley provides a helpful resource concerning changing U.S. attitudes toward the body during the 1970s in his text *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s*. In the chapter titled “Letting It All Hang Out,” in particular, Binkley analyzes literary discourse to identify themes of relaxation, getting back to nature, and releasing socio-cultural ideas about physicality towards finding more “authentic” experiences. Binkley writes:

The “squaring” of the body as both a functional instrument of the military-industrial complex and an other-directed symbol of a status-driven affluence was countered by the forcible and very mediated “grooving” of the body as an organ erupting with feeling, endlessly seeking opportunities to experience itself and the world afresh by overflowing the strictures imposed by the old order. (207-208)

Ballet in the context of the United States in the 1970s, then, negotiated the strict discipline of classical technique with the desires of a youth-driven culture seeking subjectively-motivated experiences of the body.

Hall’s middle ballets featured attributes that “overflowed the strictures” that some Armadillo audience members, many attending ballet for the first time, may have assumed about ballet (Binkley 208). These emerged as the aesthetic matrices that contemporized ballet largely through incorporating contemporaneous elements. A salient factor for even the novice ballet-goer was the departure from traditional-sounding, classical ballet music; the middle ballets were choreographed to 20th century classical, blues, or jazz. In these selections, Hall intentionally “catered to” the Armadillo’s usual clientele of diverse music lovers (Shelton, “Armadillos” 2). Also, Hall incorporated movement from outside the classical ballet canon including modern dance, jazz, “pop-disco,” and, in the case of a ballet about youth-culture interests in Eastern spirituality, “Hindu postures” (Brock 9). In devising movement, Hall could draw upon his own performing background as well as his exposure to dance in London, New York City, Paris, and Los Angeles; according to numerous oral history accounts, he often took inspiration from dances he had seen. Hippie audiences who might have had preconceived ideas that ballet was “square” had new experiences with the overt sexual drama and violence of Hall’s *Tregonelle* or the tantric physicality of *The Rites of Joseph Byrd* in which form-fitting unitards or, in the case of the men, dance trunks, emphasized a sensually-available, unrestricted body. Such “loosening” of the dancing ballet body, in Binkley’s terminology, fits into a 1970s context that would have appealed to youth-culture

interests amongst many of the dancers and their Armadillo audience members.³ And they responded enthusiastically: in a 1972 review by local newspaper journalist Carol Nuckols, she reports that of the three dances in the repertory concert she saw, people reacted most noticeably to the middle dance, the dramatic *Dante*: “Beatrice danced to eerie music through Hell and Purgatory to Earthly Paradise, to the audience’s shouts of delight” (n.p.).

Analysis of newspaper and magazine articles reveals an interesting trend amongst reviewers during this time period—that of explaining, and often championing, the weird, middle ballet of the program to the community, even if they did not agree on what to call it: “contemporary ballet” (van Hulsteyn 16), “modern ballet” (Hogner 11), a “presentation” (Chernikowski 18), or an “experimentation” (Schweitzer 22). Furthermore, Hall’s own vision as a choreographer, and how others saw him as an artist, seems to be discursively situated in these ballets—the main course of the menu—rather than his openers or closers. For example, in multiple reviews for the daily newspaper, author Steve Hogner disseminates the message that Hall’s “modern ballet of the ‘70s, a rarity indeed,” demonstrates his “growth as an artist” (“Sadness” 11):

Rarely has an Austin audience (theater, film, or dance) been as visibly stunned by a performance as they were during “Snowflakes Are Dancing.” Many sat there awed, audibly wondering what Hall could do to top each movement and how far Austin dance has come to foster such a work. (“ABT” 18)

Dance critic and scholar Suzanne Shelton, writing for the student newspaper, also advocates for Hall’s middle ballets through subjective, narrative description:

[*The Rites of Joseph Byrd*] has been added to the program at audience request. The lights dim, and that weird electronic music wells through the darkened Armadillo. Onstage, a transparent sac, an embryo, rises to reveal a clump of bodies. They begin to move in the imperceptibly changing patterns (like one of those toy kaleidoscopes with colored rocks) that mark the best of Stanley Hall’s choreography. The program notes, ‘The children that represent the new generation believe they will change the world’...And from this tension, this unbearable concentration of bodies, escapes one dancer, like a butterfly, looping free, and you’re thinking, my god this is brilliant—and it’s over. (“Armadillos” 3)

In the context of the mid-1970s, student journalist Carrie Schweitzer asserts that being “dedicated to experimentation” is “important if you dance for an audience of newcomers,” like Austin Ballet Theatre did at

the Armadillo, continuing: “Now ‘ballet’ dancers are required to do all things,” such as blending ballet training with “modern and jazz styles” (22). In examples such as these, writers supported a contemporizing of ballet in Austin and reinforced community acceptance along with a sense of local value.

On the other hand, Hall learned quickly that he could not present a program consisting solely of his contemporized ballets. His first Armadillo concert was just such a program in an attempt to appeal to hippie audiences, and it was, in Hall’s words, “too top-heavy,” meaning that the works as an aggregate were too serious in theme and/or challenging for the viewer (Shelton, “Armadillos” 2). Dancer Eve Larson, in an oral history interview, recalls that some of the audience missed “ballet,” or what they thought of as ballet, in that first show:

Eve Larson: It was certainly a noble attempt. I think Stanley’s first performance there, he, um, geared to a more modern idea of dance because he thought it would appeal to the young people at Armadillo. So he didn’t choreograph anything in classical ballet.

Caroline Sutton Clark: Mm-hmm.

Eve Larson: ...he did a ballet called Dante, and he did a couple of other, you know, pseudo-modern type things. But, um, he found that there wasn’t really much [of an] audience [for it], for most people anyway, and most of the audience actually came up and said, “Stanley, we miss your ballets. We-we want ballet.” (Larson 37)

Clearly, in the development of this community there was also a desire for something known as “ballet”: aesthetic matrices that aligned with cultural imaginaries of ballet practices. Insightful reminiscence along these lines comes from interviewing Armadillo bartender Leea Mechling, a hippie immersed in the youth culture of the times with an enthusiasm for progressive ideas. Yet she remembers particularly enjoying classical ballets such the snowflake scene from *The Nutcracker*, finding in them a serenity that was a welcome change from the riotous live music events she usually worked (Mechling 6-7).

Perhaps, through providing contrast, presenting classical and contextually-contemporary ballets on the same program functioned discursively to distinguish and possibly deepen appreciation for the fantasies-made-manifest by both classicism and invention.⁴ The inclusion

of what I term “contemporized” ballet served at least two purposes in this context: attracting new audiences towards the regeneration of a local ballet community and the relationships within, and establishing a sense of identity, pride, and relevance to larger cultural narratives valuing artistic innovation.

Notes

1. Austin Ballet Theatre folded in 1986, six years after the Armadillo World Headquarters was razed to make way for a parking lot. Historical information about the company is largely generated through oral histories. The majority of written documentation comes from dancers’ scrapbooks with a few clippings and company documents turning up in archival files at the Austin History Center. Every attempt has been made to find the original sources of these clippings, but in a few cases the text was clipped out of a newspaper without any contextual information such as publication, date, and/or page number. In such cases the Works Cited listing notes where the clipping is archived.
2. The dancers also experience an affective flow. In the case of Austin Ballet Theatre, many of the same dancers would perform in the opener, be featured in the middle dance, and develop a character in the closer. While they may have been perfectly warmed-up and engaged in a light, classical opener, they would be even more warmed-up and attuned to each other and the audience (but not exhausted) for a middle work, whether that was the “contemporary” ballet or a virtuosic classical pas de deux. Stanley Hall then thought of the closer as a lark for the dancers, even if it was high-energy:

Hall wants to ensure that the dancers enjoy themselves at the end of a long night’s work. “You’ve got to give something to the dancers occasionally,” he says. “They’re tired after the end of a long performance. And what audiences don’t understand is that dancers are their own worst critics. At the end, they need to do something they won’t worry about too much; something they can enjoy and have fun with.” (Smith 11)
3. Future inquiry into visual culture and ballet may draw interesting resonances between experimentation in ballet during the late-1960s and 1970s and interest in moving patterns linked with psychedelia.
4. Hall’s background in the Vic-Wells company may have provided a significant model for him in this strategy of programming. Homans discusses how during the 1930s, Frederick Ashton’s new, England-centric ballets provided for English audiences a welcome contrast to the imported Russian classics such as excerpts from *Swan Lake* (419).

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Wry Subversion

Ann Murphy

For decades Mark Morris has challenged assumptions about the heterosexual body, the homosexual body, the large body, the strong and effortful body, and the hyper-trained body. His dances are known to flout codes of gender, conventions of decorum, organizational rules, and relations to power. This is made visible when sturdy dancers move alongside willowy ones, bearded men run past the clean-shaven, older dancers crawl beside the young, men dance with men, women move in tandem with other women, and when the rules of hierarchy are ignored and lowly dancers pulled out of the shadows. Many contemporary ballet choreographers also try to undo the fixity of convention, but Morris goes further than most, shifting ballet's paradigmatic relationship of the dancing body to its parts, the body to its movements, bodies to bodies, and bodies to stage and theater space. He has a tactic few have: he defies social and dance norms with wily, and wry, subversion.

While the choreographer treats social regulations, in general, as fair game, Morris has a particular fascination with the limits of gendered action in modern dance and ballet, as well as with the normative behavior expected of men and women both in love and out. In his *New Love Song Waltzes* first performed by the Mark Morris Dance Group in 1982, Morris disrupts some of these norms by having his dancers polymorphously partner up like children who care little about how love is meant to be performed—they simply love, profusely, awkwardly, and freely. Or in *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1988), the men saucily spank then kiss each other with an insouciance that is both innocent and fey. In this danced world, longing is fluid, surprising, easily frustrated, joyous, and as varied as the beings from which it springs. It is what binds and makes us human.

Morris as a humanist holds ideals about gender, love, and expression that thrive in modern dance, because modern dance is a large and supple container that not only weathers ideological upheaval but also welcomes it. Large ballet institutions, on the other hand, with origins in now-defunct royal court systems, continue to reflect a complex, highly regulated social order tied to power, wealth, caste, and privilege, and are consequently less amenable to social change. But because Morris shares ballet's profound dedication to music, and he "is willing to obey rules, to raise up his art on the art of others..."¹ he has been able to cross the divide from modern dance to ballet as not many choreographers outside the idiom have. Since 1994 San Francisco

Ballet (SFB) has commissioned eight ballets from Morris. His latest, *Beaux* (2012) is one of his most radical and sweetest responses to gender to date.

The Seattle-born, Balkan dance-trained Morris has been considering the limitations set on love and expressive freedom in the ballet idiom at least since his 1991 *The Hard Nut*,² a musically ingenious pastiche of modern, vernacular, and classical dance set to Pyotr Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite". *The Hard Nut* liberated the old holiday warhorse *Nutcracker*, and in place of a 19th century Christmas tale Morris created a wildly popular, broad, modern burlesque that fused camp and lyricism with a commitment to individual transformation inside a finely delineated and fixed social order. Morris' order, unlike the one posited by 19th century ballet, happened to be wayward and hallucinatory. In fact, it was closer to the world inside E.T.A. Hoffmann's story *Nutcracker and the Mouse King* than any traditional rendering of the tale. It was also populated by robust modern dancers who had varying degrees of ballet finesse.

As inventive and, at times, moving as this reworking of the *Nutcracker* was, at bottom it was revisionist. Morris' most radical act was assigning the *pas de deux*, usually performed by the Queen and King of the Snow, to Herr Drosselmeier and his nephew, the Nutcracker Prince, with Drosselmeier assuming the normative male role, and the Prince taking on the traditional female part. The male-male duo starts with a *promenade* to allow them to survey the realm, as the iconic *Nutcracker* couple traditionally does. Then the uncle sinks into *tombé* in 4th position, wraps his arm around the Prince's waist as the Prince stands in *tendu en arrière*, reaches his right palm up toward the young man's heart, and sweeps his left hand through space, pointing out invisible vistas beyond.

As the *pas de deux* unfolds, the clock maker tenderly supports the Prince while the younger man performs the kinds of actions the Snow Queen would—lifting his leg in *battement*, extending in *arabesque*, rising in *attitude*, and leaping in *grand* and *tour jeté*. Also like the Snow Queen, the nephew becomes the object of the dance and the primary focus of our attention, moving outward with Drosselmeier's assistance, then returning inward toward the older man. As daring as this may have been for a family entertainment in the 1990s, and as much as it challenges the basic heteronormative structures of ballet, it still upholds the normative by dividing the men's work based on levels of status and power, mirroring the traditional masculine/feminine divide. Regardless of the meaning of the pair's relationship, their expressive freedom is circumscribed by such stratification.

A similarly restricted freedom emerged from the wonderful drag turns by several of the cast members in the work's early West Coast performances. In the "Waltz of the Flowers," Peter Wing Healey doubled as the luxuriant Queen of the Flowers and as Mrs. Stahlbaum, dancing alone with almost rhapsodic melancholy below an enormous veiny purple lily that was provocatively sexual but not especially fertile looking. As the Maid for both the Stahlbaums and Princess Pirlipat's parents, Kraig Patterson loftily oversaw all goings on from the elevation of his pointes, taking up little space although projecting a large and benevolent persona. June Omura ransacked the space in her travesty role as the combative Fritz, while Morris himself took a star turn as a hairy-bottomed harem dancer, staging masculinity as defiantly slinky, silly, and naughty.

These roles were touching, even hilarious, but though they complicated gender, they nevertheless were unable to transcend the limits of drag. As Mark Franko writes, a man in drag "expresses the affirmation of his unique and difficult subject position by parodying a secondary (or primary) other: woman."³ Thus drag makes it difficult to "suggest radical newness"³ in expression because it relies on intact heteronormative gender codes to parody those very codes, and therefore remains trapped inside the normative binary. Even though *The Hard Nut* gleefully dismantled ballet's hierarchies, replaced the ethereality of classical dance with fleshy weightiness, and imagined a society as varied and odd as a world in a John Waters film, it never achieved that more difficult goal of breaking out of the binary to the "newness" that could enlarge our conception of gender.

With *The Hard Nut* an annual event at UC Berkeley's Cal Performances and the Mark Morris Dance Group in regular residence, Berkeley became a second home for the company. That made it only slightly surprising when San Francisco Ballet's Artistic Director Helgi Tomasson invited Morris to cross the bay and create a work for the troupe. The outcome was *Maelstrom* (1994), a dark, complex and often wry work set to Beethoven's *Ghost Trio* Op. 70, No. 1. While the work stayed true to the moody classicism of the *Ghost*, Morris mischievously swirled together corps members with soloists and principals in egalitarian fashion. Audiences also got to see the company in a new light when he highlighted individual dancers in refreshing and sometimes unexpected ways, allowing their humanness to show. He brought out comedic qualities in Sarah Van Patten, for instance, a dancer most known for her regalness, and he allowed the ever-courtly Gennadi Nedvigin to become mysteriously expressive, as though ironically commenting on his place in the company as the *danseur noble*.

Morris also moved the work in sweeping patterns and jettisoned the idiom's traditional use of linear perspective and 3-point focus.⁴ First he created a level field of horizontal relations and flow that allowed the dancers to perform as a group from which individuals unexpectedly emerged and receded. At times, hands and feet assumed a life of their own. A dancer suddenly appeared, raised her arm in a grand gesture, then disappeared. Feet abruptly flexed, bodies collapsed without warning, and upstage shadows swallowed performers. Morris also emphasized space's breadth by accentuating the wings, suggesting continued terrain and air not above in the ether but beyond on the physical plane itself, drawing the viewer's imagination out onto the street or allowing us to visualize the ballet as continuing offstage. This shattered the domination of the black box and allowed Morris to highlight a sense of flux both in the music and in the dance.

Ten years later, Morris premiered the evening-length *Sylvia* and more aggressively overrode the ballet's ranking system when he pulled corps member Frances Chung out of the crowd and made her one of the leads. (He also gave this coltish young woman a big break that led to her rising quickly up the company ladder.) On Morris' end he not only enlarged his pool of talent by ignoring organizational codes, he implicitly posed a set of questions that asked: What other dancers are hiding in the shadows? How are promotions made? What does it mean that the Ballet can allow its procedures to be overturned? Morris once again took us beyond the confines of the stage design to query the structures that made that design possible.

Beaux (2012) is a dance for nine physically varied men that also ignores the ranking system, uses the horizontal expanse of the stage, plays with the space beyond the wings, and then goes further by overturning the bedrock that supports all the others—gender norms, particularly conceptions of masculinity upon which the gender status quo rests.

The moment the curtain rose viewers were thrust into a comic, cognitive trap. Nine men were silently arrayed across the stage in a phalanx of "X" shaped Vitruvian figures with their backs to the audience (save one), in pink and yellow camouflage unitards while a somewhat darker but corresponding pink and yellow drop with hints of wine and leaf green hung behind them. On opening night, confused by the tableau that appeared on stage, the audience first rustled uneasily, then rippled with surprised laughter. Morris and designer Isaac Mizrahi had locked viewers into a visual and cognitive conundrum: the masculine (camouflage) was spliced together with the feminine (pastels of pink and yellow), and the homonyms beaux (French for boyfriends) and bow(s) (the hair ties, the hunting tools) intertwined subversively. However, this led to no hint of parody anywhere. The reason for this was that the

ballet never let the viewers escape from the constant tension of the surface pun and its play with drag on the one hand, and the utterly non-parodic dance that followed. Acts of drag are built from “two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference,”⁵ and by foisting this cognitive tension on the work and using it to repeatedly rupture audience expectations, Morris set out to prove the ballet’s premise that gender is a set of unstable surface codes, and that dance is a brilliant means by which to address, refute, and strive to transcend those codes.

To make his case, the choreographer immediately began to mix and interchange traditional “masculine” and “feminine” action. One man lifted another by the waist and, rather than becoming “feminine” as such an action by Drosselmeier to the Prince did, it signaled to viewers as supportive and tender. Men waved, faintly echoing the gesture in *Swan Lake* or other ballets with hunting scene pantomime, but abstracted from any specific context, the action cascaded with multiple implications—of hello and goodbye, of hope and loss, of past and future, linked to the men but referencing a range of human expression and action shared by all. The men gathered in a half circle, oblivious to the audience, the object of our gaze, as women so gathered on stage traditionally are, but the men were impervious to it. Instead, they established a remarkable intimacy among themselves that briefly transformed the audience into voyeurs spying on a group of strangers. We saw men in poignant duets dancing with passion as lovers or friends, just as we saw them as modern bodies of equal value and interest enacting a performance of abstracted human drama.



Mark Morris' *Beau* performed by San Francisco Ballet

Photo Credit: Erik Tomasson

If in *Beaux* Morris is seeking Franko’s “radical newness” in the “fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization....”⁶ and I believe he is, Morris is able to recontextualize maleness here because he begins with the dance inheritance: the language of traditional ballet and balletic modern dance. Viewers are already cognizant of society’s gender conventions and most are aware of how masculinity is performed in ballet. As a result they are able to experience *Beaux*, happily or not, as a reconstitution of gender codes.

Although Alastair Macaulay colorfully writes that Morris’ men in *Beaux* are “hunks, angels, Pucks, darlings, colleagues, cavaliers, chums,”⁷ the choreographer has done much more than create a compendium of ballet’s men or even of agreed-upon masculinities. *Beaux*’s men are communal, strong, soft, supportive, silly, collaborative, solitary, tender, despairing, and loving. They edge out past ballet’s gender norms and in their fluidity usher in a humanity—a radical newness—far greater than men in ballet have been allowed to bring to the stage before.

Notes

1. Joan Acocella, *Mark Morris* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1993), 181.
2. The ballet premiered in Brussels and in 1996 became a holiday mainstay at Cal Performances at UC Berkeley.
3. Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995) 94, 95.
4. With its roots in Renaissance science, religion, philosophy and politics, this spatial perspective reinforces centralized male-dominated power that descends from the Judeo-Christian God (represented by a central vanishing point) to king to nobles to subjects to animals, and does so through a series of pyramidal formations on stage.
5. Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (The MacMillan Company, New York, 1964), 27, 35, 64-68.
6. Koestler, 35. Koestler defines this process as the foundation of creativity itself. In the collision between different systems something new is created.
7. Alastair Macauley, “Pushing, Prodding, and Exploring the Potential for Men,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/04/arts/dance/san-francisco-ballets-works-by-mark-morris-and-ashley-page.html> (accessed September 10, 2014).



Prayer of Touch (2012) by Helen Pickett for Atlanta Ballet

Photo Credit: Charlie McCullers, 2012.

Contemporary Ballet: Inhabiting the Past While Engaging the Future

Gretchen Alterowitz

In a 2014 review of Greek choreographer Adonis Foniadakis's work *Glory* performed by the Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, *The New York Times* dance critic Gia Kourlas comments, "while it's true that dance companies can't exist as museums, another question persists, as it often does in contemporary ballet: What is the point of 'Glory'?"¹ As I have previously observed,² Kourlas is not alone among *The Times* reviewers in criticizing "contemporary ballet" for its inability to address "contemporary" concerns. Critic Roslyn Sulcas claims, "ballet—even

contemporary ballet—can often look stuck in its relentlessly heterosexual dynamics...and in its expressive, or dependent, relationship to music;"³ while Alastair Macaulay finds, "the major issues for ballet today lie in its presentation of sex, gender and race,"⁴ and questions "how well equipped [ballet is] to speak to, or of, the world we know."⁵ These comments raise questions about ballet's cultural relevance in a world that is further aware of diversity and more willing to advocate for new interpretations of traditional value systems and practices.

Contemporary ballet appears caught in a stymied relationship—it needs ballet of the past and yet that strong linkage makes evolution seem largely impossible. Ballet must show a clear foundation in movement vocabulary to be recognized as such, though many presume it should advance today's beliefs and sensibilities through racially diverse casting, choreography that portrays varied genders and sexualities, up-to-date narratives, and uses of technology. Ballet's history as a patriarchal form and its tradition of distinguishing men and women in terms of movement vocabularies, relationship roles, and leadership capacities impacts the ways new ballet choreography is made and received, and the ways ballet dancers, choreographers, and audiences interact with the larger world of ballet.⁶ Ballet's interests and aesthetics are demonstrated on stage, but they are taught and learned much earlier, and they affect which dancers are most likely to seek out the challenge of, and receive support for, developing choreographic skill. Although outside the area the reviewers address, I propose that for contemporary ballet to become a form able to speak to present day concerns, it needs to do so in ways beyond choreography and performance, such as through the inclusion of more women choreographers.

As the 2012 Special Issue of *Dance Chronicle*, "Ballet is Woman: But Where Are All the Women Choreographers?" points out, the majority of choreographers in ballet, are, and have historically been, men.⁷ Only in this century have women begun to be recognized with choreographic commissions from high-level ballet companies, and while the list in the United States is growing, these commissions are far from common and the choreographers still a minority. I deliberately use "women" throughout this essay instead of "female" to put forward an engagement with ideas of gender and its various constructions, rather than a predetermined association of feminine qualities with the female sex. I understand that this wording may create speed bumps for readers, and I am hopeful that any slowing down that occurs will allow readers to take time to think about how gender functions in contemporary ballet, and to contemplate the possibility of multiple or varied genders having a place in the ballet world.

Kourlas, in the review quoted above, articulates a sense of disconnection between contemporary ballet choreography and its ability to make meaning. Throughout the review, she implies that ballet choreography should alter its attitude or approach. To add to the list of potential shifts these critics have started, and as a way of imagining how contemporary ballet might become more relevant, I suggest contemporary ballet must change its relationship to and presentation of sex, gender, and race by engaging more women choreographers. There is no guarantee that women will create work that challenges patriarchal or discriminatory practices and beliefs, but encouraging women in choreographic leadership positions may force ballet and

ballet audiences to further examine why it has been uncommon for ballet to have diverse choreographers. By promoting more diversity in choreographic leadership, mainstream and top-tier ballet companies might then study the current perpetuation of elitist philosophies. It is worth querying whether the art form we know as ballet would still be considered ballet if these systems were to change—perhaps they are so fundamental to the form that it is impossible both to alter them and maintain ballet's integrity? That question is now crucial to investigate.

I have begun to address contemporary ballet's relationship with gender and sexuality in my writing on choreographers Katy Pyle and Deborah Lohse who incorporate queer and lesbian perspectives into their work through narrative details, diverse casting, and partnering roles.⁸ Here, I turn my attention to another, Helen Pickett, who, though not as radical in her interventions on traditional ballet's practices as Pyle and Lohse, is important to contemporary ballet's evolution because she operates in ballet's highest tiers (as resident choreographer for Atlanta Ballet and a prolific freelance choreographer she works with established ballet companies that provide her with the support of classically trained and technically virtuosic dancers, space and time to work, and designers and venues for the pieces she produces).⁹ Pickett does not tear down ballet's traditional foundations, but instead uses them to advance her work. As one of a small group of women choreographers whose work is commissioned by elite ballet companies, Pickett hovers between satisfying staunch ballet partisans and urging ballet's traditions to evolve.¹⁰

Pickett is deeply invested in maintaining connections to conventional markers of classical ballet, even as she thinks of it as a mutable form that can move in new directions. Ballet choreographers like her, who introduce women's perspectives all the while making work that satisfies expectations of what ballet is, might be seen as following the tenets of liberal feminism. As articulated by feminist performance critic Jill Dolan, liberal feminism's work is to "insert women into the mainstream of political and social life by changing the cultural perception of them as second-class citizens."¹¹ The fact that women choreographers are making inroads into an elite and hierarchical world suggests that ballet is evolving. Choreography by Pickett, and other women like her, is significant even when it does not drastically alter ballet's traditions because it helps ballet address the needs of today's world.

Although I am not convinced that an attempt to define contemporary ballet is ultimately useful or necessary, there are two elements that appear often enough in the genre that I state them as a starting point in this discussion. First, mainstream contemporary ballet is performed by dancers who are classically trained and who use that training and the resulting particular ways of moving to influence the choreographic material. Second, mainstream contemporary ballet maintains many of

the aesthetic and relational rules created in other periods of ballet's history, such as centralizing partnering between men and women, frontal presentation in a proscenium setting, virtuosic display of dancers' physical abilities, and very often, pointe shoes for women dancers.

Pickett's choreography shows clear evidence of ballet's DNA—recognizable steps, positions, body orientations, and partnering roles—even as it twists and contorts lines, integrates curving spines, and moves the dancers into and off of the floor. An example is her dynamic, witty, and human *Prayer of Touch*, created in 2012 for the Atlanta Ballet to musical compositions by Felix Mendelssohn.¹² The movement material for this work unmistakably stems from traditional ballet's balanced and proportional vocabulary while simultaneously separating body parts from each other with pelvis, rib, and shoulder articulations and emphasizing off-center, and often lopsided positions and movement initiations.

Pickett uses pointe shoes regularly for women dancers, but speaks of being interested in exploring differing gender roles in her work. Her women strut the stage heel first in a way that draws attention to the pointe shoes as tools, and this image is augmented when the shoes change shape and the women rise gracefully, making their pointes spear-like extensions of powerful legs. Pickett incorporates some partnering for men with lifts and weight bearing, and describes her approach to duet work between women as “same gender partnering with women around each other, in very close proximity.”¹³ She notes that since women in ballet are not trained to partner each other,



Helen Pickett's *Prayer of Touch* performed by Atlanta Ballet

Photo Credit: Charlie McCullers, 2012.

her choreography incorporates “manipulation” between and among women, but only some weight bearing.¹⁴ Ballet technique itself does not allow for more radical alterations because the training ballet dancers receive distinguishes them based on traditional, gendered assumptions. As a result of training that does not prepare dancers to work in new ways, ballet choreographers are limited in how far they can push the technique. All the dancers move powerfully in Pickett's work, and often enact the same movement vocabularies at the same time however the main partnering relationships are between women and men. In further association with traditional ballet, Pickett often centers a *pas de deux* in the work. For example, the middle section of *Prayer of Touch* is a romantic duet for a man and woman in which they enact traditional gender roles.

It would be remiss to describe Pickett's choreography without tying it to choreographer William Forsythe's interventions in the 1980s and 90s. Pickett, having danced in Forsythe's company, acknowledges his influence on her work when she describes ballet as a space of “investigation, discovery, possibility, in-depth questioning, curiosity, change, [and] openness.”¹⁵ Although Forsythe has lately moved in different directions, his early work is often performed by ballet companies around the world and continues to influence choreographers and define the look of contemporary ballet. For example, in 1999 he celebrated *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, originally choreographed for the Paris Opera Ballet in 1987, “show[ed] no sign of wearing out its welcome,” and it is still performed regularly by companies today.¹⁶ Pickett credits Forsythe with shaping her belief that ballet is a site of exploration and a “catalyst to so much possibility,” rather than a closed, unmoving system entrenched in past practices.¹⁷

The language Pickett uses to describe ballet sets a different tone than that of the dance reviewers quoted at the onset of this conversation. While they do not see ballet representing and conversing with today's world, Pickett believes ballet is a place of, and for, change. At the same time that the reviews indicate a desire for ballet to contemporize, dance critics expect today's ballet choreography to visibly demonstrate its roots in the classical vocabulary and choreographic structures. Sulcus protests specific incorporations of movements outside the traditional vocabulary and states that contemporary ballet “too often... means overlaying academic steps with flexed feet, parallel legs and the occasional backbend that aren't part of the ballet lexicon.”¹⁸ And Kourlas, in a more general evaluation of contemporary ballets that combine classical ballet with modern dance movement vocabularies, grumbles that the dances are “often mind-numbingly generic work[s] in which ballet is watered down and modern dance is watered down.”¹⁹

The efforts and effects of contemporary ballet will become more apparent when viewers acknowledge the inherent tension between having to break

ground while being evaluated for fulfilling the aesthetics of the past. One clear outcome of contemporary ballet's work is that the ballet establishment is beginning to encourage and produce more women choreographers in the field, undoubtedly changing ballet for choreographers, dancers, and audiences. Whether it is choreographers such as Pyle and Lohse, who queer traditional structures and narratives to intervene on ballet's elitist associations, or choreographers such as Pickett, who expand movement possibilities and understand the form itself as a site of inquiry and change, the institution of ballet must directly address diversity and representation in leadership roles. These contemporary ballet choreographers are at the forefront of a movement that could reorient ballet from a form that is defined by its conversations with the past, to one that envisages and enacts new directions for the future.

Notes

- Gia Kourlas, "One Free Spirit Amid the Fog and the Frenzy," *The New York Times*, March 27, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/27/arts/dance/geneva-ballet-and-melodrama-at-the-joyce.html?r=0> (accessed April 17, 2014).
- Gretchen Alterowitz, "Embodying a Queer Worldview: The Contemporary Ballets of Katy Pyle and Deborah Lohse," *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 37, no. 3, (2014), 335-366.
- Roslyn Sulcas, "Taking Ballet to New Heights" *The New York Times*, March 27, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/28/arts/artspecial/6-ballet-directors-discuss-current-evolution-of-form.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed April 17, 2014).
- Alastair Macaulay, "Duets of Disconnection," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/arts/dance/christopher-wheeldons-pas-de-deux.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed April 17, 2014).
- Macaulay, "Story Ballets, Still Romantically Inclined" *The New York Times*, August 8, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/arts/dance/08storyballet.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed April 17, 2014).
- Many scholars have addressed ballet's patriarchal and elitist past, as well as the ways it has constructed femininity and masculinity in opposition to each other. For example: Christy Adair, *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Emily Claid, *Yes? No! Maybe . . . : Seductive Ambiguity in Dance* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Cynthia J. Cohen Bull, "Sense, Meaning, and Perception in Three Dance Cultures," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 269–87; Ann Daly, "The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers," *The Drama Review*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1987), 8–21; Ann Daly, "Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference," *Women and Performance*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1987), 57–66; and Susan Leigh Foster, "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe," in *Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture and Power*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1–24.
- "'Ballet is Woman': But Where Are All the Women Choreographers?" *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 35, no. 1, (2012).
- Alterowitz, "Embodying a Queer Worldview."
- Pickett has received commissions from a variety of ballet companies around the world, including Boston Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Aspen/Santa Fe Ballet, and Scottish Ballet, among others. She trained at the San Francisco Ballet School and danced for William Forsythe at the Frankfurt Ballet for over a decade.
- Other women choreographers who have begun to gain recognition from elite ballet companies include Amy Seiwert, choreographer-in-residence of the Smuin Ballet, who has her own company (Imagery) and has been commissioned by such companies as the Atlanta Ballet, Colorado Ballet, and Sacramento Ballet, among others; Jessica Lang, who has her own company (Jessica Lang Dance) and has choreographed for the Birmingham Royal Ballet, Joffrey Ballet, Kansas City Ballet, and Pennsylvania Ballet, among others; and Emery LeCrone who has choreographed for North Carolina Dance Theatre (now Charlotte Ballet), Minnesota Dance Theatre, Oregon Ballet Theatre, and Colorado Ballet, among others. Companies that have recently produced evenings of all-women choreographers include North Carolina Dance Theatre (now Charlotte Ballet), Colorado Ballet, and Houston Ballet.
- Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, (1991; reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 4.
- I witnessed a performance of *Prayer of Touch* on May 18, 2012 at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta Georgia, and observed the work in rehearsal at the Atlanta Ballet, April 4-5, 2012.
- Helen Pickett, interview with the author, Durham, NC, June 11, 2011.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- David Stevens, "A Strong Choreographic Influence : Forsythe in Paris," *The New York Times*, April 14, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/14/style/14iht-ballet.2.t.html> (accessed April 17, 2014). Ballet companies that continue to perform *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated* include: Pacific Northwest Ballet, North Carolina Dance Theatre (now Charlotte Ballet), Pennsylvania Ballet, Joffrey Ballet, Mariinsky Ballet, and many others.
- Pickett, Interview with the author. Forsythe's company is distinct for having encouraged dancers' choreographic explorations, and many women who danced in his company have established their own choreographic careers, including Regina van Berkel, Emily Molnar, and Crystal Pite.
- Sulcas, "Six New Works in a Program with Three Guest Appearances," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/12/arts/dance/12columbia.html> (accessed October 7, 2013).
- Kourlas, "Is it Fusion or Just a Mishmash of 2 Forms?" *The New York Times*, July 12, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/12/arts/dance/12ball.html?pagewanted=print&module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar> (accessed September 8, 2014).

Sowing Curiosity

Meredith Webster

“Then comes the cultivation of the being from which whatever you have to say comes. It doesn’t just come out of nowhere, it comes out of a great curiosity. The main thing, of course, always is the fact that there is only one of you in the world, just one, and if that is not fulfilled then something has been lost.” Martha Graham, *Blood Memory: An Autobiography* (1991).

I remember when I first met Alonzo King feeling that he could see things that I couldn’t. His eye was keener, his awareness more thorough than anything I thought myself capable of. Immediately, he insisted that I form my own opinions, take responsibilities, and experiment in territories that were unfamiliar to me. In the years and years of “training” I had done before that, these were areas that had been neglected and allowed to lie fallow. I barely remembered that I knew how to contribute my own voice to the work.

In a way, I had to de-educate myself. I had to come to the studio naive every day and persistently mine my physicality for more articulation and fresh synaptic connections. I had to trust all the training and knowledge I had built but work to clear excess debris and habits that muffled the voice of my intuition. I had to make room for discovery and invite wonder.

Nine years later, I feel newer than ever, having re-educated myself in the practice of curiosity. If Alonzo hadn’t asked this of me, I don’t know if I would have asked it of myself. I can see more now, and I’ve realized that I’ll never see exactly what he sees, but that’s the miracle, that’s the “art,” that’s the overwhelming, seething divinity of being a human in the world: that what I am capable of seeing is singularly broad and beautiful, and that infinite potential lies in the practice of synthesizing curiosity and awe into expression.

I agree with what Alonzo says about dance being a medium of transparency—you can see and feel what kind of a person someone is when he or she moves. Putting someone on the stage reveals character. I feel supremely grateful and lucky that I have had the opportunity to commit such a huge portion of my waking life to the development of my character via dance. I now feel confident that I have the tools and the ability to continue this effort for the rest of my life in any context, and that devotion to curiosity can keep me eternally new, constantly growing. In the next chapter of my time at LINES, I get to use my current and past experience to help other artists speak more clearly in their own brilliant voices. By sharing what I see and inciting exploration, I hope to help them realize how little they actually need me.



Meredith Webster in *Sheherazade* (2010) by Alonzo King

Photo Credit: RJ Muna

In Conversation with Eric Underwood

This conversation between Kathrina Farrugia-Kriel and Eric Underwood took place on Tuesday, July 8, 2014 at Royal Opera House in London.

What drew you to a career in ballet?

I always danced as a child. I grew up in Washington D.C. and I guess I was most inspired by the summer dance programmes. I trained at the School of American Ballet in New York, learning George Balanchine's *Valse Fantasie* and *Stravinsky Violin Concerto*. That was my background in ballet.

What attracts you to work with choreographers who are reshaping ballet in recent times? Through your experience, how would you describe "contemporary ballet"?

Contemporary ballet is hard to define. I experience new as well as older forms of ballet as dancer with the Royal Ballet. We can talk about that. For the last seven years I have been part of the Royal Ballet in London, dancing the staple gems of the company (such as Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Manon...*) as well as being part of the creation of new works by Wayne McGregor, Resident Choreographer at the Royal Opera House. A diversity of this kind of ballet brings me different perspectives – a new "eye" to explore ballet. Wayne's work offers me great opportunities to explore new movements, new forms of ballet.

What are the shifts and tensions in your role or position as a male dancer as you create these new ballets?

With a lot of the new works (especially those by Wayne), the real energy and the real chemistry is driven by who I am. There are days, particularly when I perform in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Manon*, when I become Tibalt or the Jailer. In *Chroma* and *Infra*, I'm Eric. I walk on to the stage as Eric; I'm not playing a role. And I guess that's what makes these newer choreographies intuitive to the human nature – to our energy, our chemistry. The experience of working with Wayne offers a collaborative space. As dancers, we become the subject. I am the instrument - the subject to be moulded. Of course, there's a technique to ballet. It's a place of structure with codes that we learn and put to use in various works. But that structure is there to be explored. Wayne's creative space is a collaborative one; there's always something new to experience. We push the boundaries of those movements. Let me go back to *Infra*; there's a duet for Melissa (Hamilton) and myself in which the movements are extreme. You know which part? It's where we explore some extreme moments in the *pas de deux*. Yes. We surrender to the space. The space is limitless for us, for our bodies. It never feels

"pushed". We surrender to Wayne's directions to explore something new – shifting the limits of ballet. And that happened as early as the second rehearsal for the duet in *Infra*. It was a good moment for us. There are some days when I need the viscerality and physicality of *Chroma* or *Infra*. These newer forms of ballet bring a new vitality, a limitless sense of creativity to rejuvenate the art of ballet.



Infra performed by the Royal Ballet's Melissa Hamilton and Eric Underwood. Photo Credit: Bill Cooper, 2010 © Royal Opera House

Contemporary Ballet and the Female Body Politic

Samantha Parsons

This article examines a single *pas de deux* in Wayne McGregor's *Infra* (2008), with attention to ways in which choreographies, through pointework and partnering, shape the body politic of the female dancer. I seek to question whether there is still a place for the pointe shoe in contemporary ballet if it continues to hold the ballerina to an ideal notion of female? Consider how the ballerina *en pointe* illuminates the social expression of the female body, wrapped up in the essence of ballet are gendered constructs surrounding body, space, power, sex, and politics. I have read how pointework is "exhilarating and liberating" for the ballerina,¹ nevertheless I wonder if the enjoyment of pointework is learned through practices that construct it as a symbol of status in dance class? Can the pleasure of performing *en pointe* perhaps be found in a memory of watching ballet as a young girl and being awestruck by the exquisite costumes and the role of ballerina? Does this differ from the impact social media has on women's self-esteem through images of beautiful princesses, skinny models, and wealthy housewives? All are carefully constructed social notions of the *ideal* woman that ultimately suggest a web of oppression that is considered 'normal' and is further embedded through performativity.²

My recent writings focus on questions surrounding representation of the female body, specifically whether the pointe shoe is relevant to ballet in the 21st century. As I understand from the *pas de deux* between Eric Underwood and Melissa Hamilton in *Infra*, the pointe shoe serves to frame the ballerina as sexual, restrained, and protesting.³ I see Hamilton carefully press her extended leg towards the floor, precariously balancing on pointe while curving her fluid-like spine from side to side to look over her partner's shoulder. She appears caged. Tightly closing her legs in *sous-sous*, she rolls her pelvis up against his—once, twice. I sense a clash of ideologies between this very classical position and the overt sexual innuendo.

The moments from this *pas de deux* are particularly revealing examples of the narrative choreographies that continue to develop using prescribed gendered codes. I am searching for alternative possibilities for the ballerina. Depicting her as sexually subordinated is no different from other social representations of female in society. For in this ballet performance, as in so many others, the ballerina's power is constructed through the pointe shoe and the *pas de deux*. Her strength and technical prowess are not shown through a presumed physical ability, as is the case with her male counterpart. Certainly, up

until the development of the pointe shoe the female dancer was not celebrated. Pointework offered the female dancer an opportunity to showcase her skill, IF she pretended to be ideal. In terms of historical contextualization the pointe shoe liberated and elevated the ballerina, economically as well as socially.⁴ Still balletic narratives positioned the ballerina according to social milieu as literally and physically subordinate. She was incomplete and vulnerable, and according to Ann Daly "needy and 'deserving' of male assistance [and] chivalry."⁵

Ballet in the 21st century appears to digress from the rigidity of classical ballet by blurring its boundaries. New or contemporary approaches, such as an evolving movement vocabulary, strive to weave global dialogue with the aesthetics of classical ballet. Interestingly, contemporary ballet finds it difficult to renegotiate the female body politic. The ballerina remains under socio-cultural discourses as the embodiment of female ideal. *En pointe* and in *pas de deux*, the female dancer continues to manifest an ideological dream created for/of women by men.

In *Infra*, Wayne McGregor's contemporary dance and technological influences sculpt dancers' visceral and twisting bodies through brief and fragile relationships beneath British visual artist Julian Opie's recognizable fluid electronic figures and Max Richter's haunting music.⁶ Of particular interest to me is the aforementioned *pas de deux* in the second scene between Underwood and Hamilton. It is strangely bound to old ideologies. In this scene the ballerina is constructed as passive partaker of sadomasochistic practices, an automaton, deft, sensual, female technician. Underwood is framed as strong and muscular. Together they engage in a precarious dance of manipulation, control, and eroticism. Violent and erotic undertones emerge through the visceral contortion of the classical vocabulary. The ballerina's flexibility is juxtaposed with tense, sharp, poking, groping, and slashing of limbs as she moves within the confined space of the *danseur's* firm grip. In the beginning sequence she pulls away from him, only to be met with his hand around her neck. This severe interaction is followed by rippling, pelvic thrusts that embed the *plié*. He lifts her off the floor, folding her legs underneath her body. She slowly stretches one leg to the floor, placing it between her partner's legs. He drags her *en pointe* until she sinks to the ground. The pointe shoe appears to facilitate his manipulation as he slides her across the stage. It becomes her physical restraint. The *danseur* pulls the ballerina up. She leans stiffly against him. He arranges and rearranges her body. He pushes and pulls,

moving her off center. Once she is destabilized he once again becomes her support system to prevent her from falling. At times the ballerina appears to resist his control. She stiffens her body and binds her movement, pulling away from him. In other moments she surrenders to his control and manipulation into surprising and sometimes precarious poses. She seductively wraps her arms around his neck and runs her hand over his arm and down his back. Near the end of the *pas de deux* the ballerina appears more object-like. The *danseur* carries her stiffly like a mannequin across the stage, with one arm wrapped around her torso. She protests with sharp, tense, scissoring legs; the pattern of resistance and submission repeats until she finally surrenders into a *cambré*. As the lights dim he slides her underneath his open legs. Her arms flail wide and press against the floor in protest with a loud SLAP.

McGregor's *pas de deux* focuses on the exploitation of the ballerina as object, and perpetuates a socially endorsed view of female through themes of dependence, subordination, and sexuality. Themes of coercion surface as the female body is pushed and pulled in the duet. Through these opposing forces and the spatial tensions they create, the ballerina experiences her body as afflicted and limited. In this case, she not only encounters her body's physical threshold, but also in performance produces an image of a docile, objectified body. Given the ability to perhaps redefine discursive practices on the female body in this era of contemporary ballet, why does the ballerina continue to be fabricated within the form's traditional choreographic practices? Is it because the modes of gender representation and gender constructs within ballet practices are so muted? Or is this a part of the technique



***Infra* performed by the Royal Ballet's Melissa Hamilton and Eric Underwood.**

Photo Credit: Bill Cooper, 2010 © Royal Opera House

itself that the ballerina learns to perform, just as she learns *tendu* or *arabesque*. Can the ballerina exist any other way?

Notes

1. Carla Escada, "Sexual Politics and the Sugar Plum Fairy" in *Ballet to the People: What We Are Saying*. November 21, 2011. <http://ballettothepeople.com/2011/11/21/sexual-politics-and-the-sugar-plum-fairy/>
2. Relatedly, is the idea that the female body is empowered by the male gaze and 'owning' less physical space, see Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in Phenomenology of Oppression (Thinking Gender)*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
3. *The Royal Ballet World Premier*. Pres. Martha Kearney. BBC Two, London, 22 Nov. 2008. Television.
4. See Judith Lynne Hanna, "Gender and the Evaluation of Dance", in *Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance and Desire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 122-131.
5. See Ann Daly, "The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers", in (*TDR*) *The Drama Review* 31:1 (Spring1987) : 9. Daly deems ballet to be "one of our culture's most powerful models of patriarchal ceremony". She argues that by "positioning women as needy and 'deserving' of male assistance" ballet perpetuates discursive gender constructs.
6. Program Notes from *Mixed Bill* for Royal Ballet. Royal Opera House. p.13-26 November 2008.

“To move is to stir”: Romeo and Juliet in Contemporary Ballet

Maura Keefe

*Juliet, the dice were loaded from the start...
When you gonna realize it was just that the time was wrong, Juliet?*
— Mark Knopfler¹

In a twist on the traditional telling of the familiar scene, film director Baz Luhrmann staged Romeo's death at the moment of Juliet's awakening. Rather than Juliet coming to an understanding of what occurred in the discovery of his death, in his wildly popular 1996 movie, Luhrmann instead displays a horrifying moment of recognition between them as Romeo dies and Juliet is reborn. That scene, however it is staged, and however often, stings. Hurling toward the inevitable conclusion of their deaths, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* makes one ache. If only. Luhrmann, like other artists, filmmakers and choreographers, plays with convention in the telling of the story. For contemporary ballet choreographer Edward Clug, that narrative instance became the seed for exploration in his telling of the familiar tale.² Starting with Juliet finding Romeo dead beside her, the ballet unfurls as a memory. How Juliet arrives to the unavoidable ending shifts from the conclusion to the beginning of the story. In an interview, Clug commented, “I developed the ballet as a prolongation of that moment. What would have happened if Juliet didn't take her own life?”³

In this essay, I explore two contemporary ballet productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, Clug's *Radio and Juliet* (2005) and Joëlle Bouvier's *Romeo and Juliet* (2009). I argue that contemporary ballet versions of *Romeo and Juliet* both allude to and elude the conventions of classical ballet: narratively, choreographically, and in the dancing itself. Certainly, part of the success of contemporary dance versions lies in the sheer number of traditionally danced *Romeo and Juliets*, as well as the audience's familiarity with the Shakespearean play. An analysis of the dances themselves demonstrates the mediation of textual elements by the dancing bodies and addresses the ways in which meaning can be made through choreographed action. In these two ballets, the character of and choreography for Juliet exemplifies a balance between innovation and tradition.

I began thinking about Juliet and her narrative function after seeing hip hop choreographer Rennie Harris's evening length work *Rome and Jewels* (2000), performed by his company Rennie Harris/Puremovement. Most

choreographers who stage *Romeo and Juliet* are steeped in the traditions of European-American theatrical dance. Harris's version comes from an entirely other tradition; theatrical dance based in street forms of African American hip hop styles, including stepping, popping, animation, locking, electric boogie, breaking, hip hop, and house. When Harris began working on *Rome and Jewels*, his original concept was to update *West Side Story*. While the piece was in process, they used Leonard Bernstein's music. As it developed they moved farther away from *West Side Story* and closer to the original text by Shakespeare. Harris came to realize how much the play itself connected with his own experience. As he explained: “How brilliant is it to write plays that covers every possible scenario, experience, and situation that presents itself in life?”⁴ He goes on to point out that to his contemporaries, Shakespeare was a man of the people, not accepted by the elite. It is only over the centuries that his position has been elevated.

While the movement vocabulary is strikingly different from the balletic sensibility that threads through Clug's and Bouvier's work, it, too, brings a contemporary choreographic sensibility to the staging of *Rome and Jewels*, shown in the characterizations and the overall structuring of the piece. Most pertinent to this discussion is that rather than an actual, corporeal Juliet, the character of Jewels is an apparition. There is no performer who dances the role. The audience creates a version of Jewels based on their own experiences and the perception of women as seen through the eyes of the male characters. As a feminist and dance scholar, I was stunned by Harris's choice to not have a dancer perform Jewels. The character exists, a story about a star-crossed lovers is told, she's just not there. Harris's choice is a dramatic contrast to every other dance production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The part of Juliet is a treasured role for ballerinas; she is a great dramatic and dynamic character. Over the course of the story, when told in a traditional manner, Juliet transforms from child to woman, displaying great passion and great sorrow. Margot Fonteyn, Carla Fracci, Galina Ulanova, and Gelsey Kirkland have all danced the role to great critical and audience acclaim. For the ballerina to perform the emotional content of the very young Juliet paradoxically takes years of experience on stage. Of particular interest here is the way the character of Juliet, as well as the role for the ballerina/dancer,

redefines the two works, the aforementioned *Radio and Juliet* (2005) danced by the Slovenian company Ballet Maribor and Joelle Bouvier's *Romeo and Juliet* (2009), commissioned Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, or Ballet Genève.



Edward Clug's *Radio and Juliet* performed by Ballet Maribor

Photo Credit: Cadel, 2009

My consideration of Juliet is part of a larger project that examines the ways in which Shakespearean plays serve as inspiration for choreographers working in a variety of concert dance forms from modern dance and ballet, to hip hop and Broadway. The resulting dances have varying degrees of correspondence to the original source material, some portraying full and specific narratives, such as David Gordon's *Dancing Henry Five* (2004), other dances distill the stories to evoke characters and conflict, like José Limón's *Moor's Pavane* (1949) and Doug Elkins's *Mo(or)town Redux* (2012)—both inspired by *Othello*.

A variety of methodologies have led me to this point. I mention them here to provide a sense of the shifting approaches that this subject deserves. First and foremost, I have watched multiple versions of the same story in person as well as recorded performances. *Romeo and Juliet* can be told and danced in a multitude of ways. Dance scholar Vida L. Midgelow's book *Reworking the Ballet: Counter-Narratives and Alternative Bodies* has been a critical source for considering what would appear to be the same dance. As Midgelow defines it, "Choreographers of reworkings have contradicted, criticized, dislocated, fragmented, updated, celebrated, refocused and otherwise reimagined the ballet on stage."⁵ Hence, while we may think there is only one *Romeo and Juliet*, each dance can actually be quite different from others.

I have also conducted numerous interviews with choreographers, dancers, and artistic directors about *Romeo and Juliet* in my role as Scholar in Residence at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival.⁶ With the insight of those kinds of experts, I have considered pivotal and driving points of action, such as the masked ball, the balcony scene, and the fight in the marketplace. And, further, what styles of movement evoke what kinds of feelings, what music is best, what characters are critical, and what is the importance of the story itself.⁷

Theatre scholar Alan Hagar contends that *Romeo and Juliet* is virtually commonplace:

By 1990, general knowledge of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* had become almost universal. Popular culture indicated that it was one of the world's favorite stories. In the age of international English, a 'romeo' had become a common term meaning 'serial lover.' Rock and roll songs...proclaimed [their] love, newspaper headlines and editorials referred to the vendetta (and love in the play) as common knowledge. Romeo and Juliet became the symbols for the letters R and J in the new international alphabetic code...⁸

Alpha, Bravo, Romeo, Juliet.

The vast number of *Romeo and Juliet* productions on the concert dance stage certainly supports Hagar's point. In fact, there are so many dance versions of *Romeo and Juliet* that Lewis Segal, longtime dance critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, called it "the warm-weather *Nutcracker*."⁹ Among the well known and highly regarded are ballets by Frederick Ashton, John Cranko, Kenneth Macmillan, Anthony Tudor, Maurice Béjart, Mark Morris. Jerome Robbins, who went on to create his *Romeo and Juliet* in *West Side Story*, danced the role of Benvolio in the Tudor ballet. For the 1938 film *The Goldwyn Follies* George Balanchine staged a production with tap-dancing Capulets and toe-dancing Montagues, with an unusual twist of a happy ending.¹⁰

Why have there been so many versions? Dance historian Rita Felciano argues that since the ballet is based on a "well-known literary masterpiece, choreographers can go back to a renewable source artistic inspiration."¹¹ In other words, rather than simply considering other versions of danced *Romeo and Juliets*, choreographers can read the play or look at any of the dozens of movies that have been inspired by the story.

In *The Shakespeare Bulletin*, humanities scholar Robin Wharton argues that the audience's knowledge going in to the theatre assists in the choreographic innovation. She states: "Turning to Shakespeare, of

course, permits a choreographer to take advantage of an audience's presumed familiarity with the plot to introduce a previously unavailable level of narrative complexity."¹² Wharton goes on to assert, following dance critic Clive Barnes and others, that the narrative is only one element that choreographers contend with; they also contend with the element of the ballet—its history, the movement vocabulary, and the dancing itself.¹³

Vincenzo Galeotti staged the earliest known ballet about Romeo and Juliet in 1811 in Copenhagen.¹⁴ What we know about it is from August Bournonville's *My Life in Theatre* in which he describes Galeotti's strategies to make sure the audience could follow the plot. Bournonville reported: "The pantomime, according to Italian form, consisted of a complete dictionary of accepted gestures (that had been gathered from Roman and Neapolitan folkways) and also, to lend greater clarity to the whole, of written placards, tablets, banners, and transparencies which (like the Ninevite flame-writing of old) announced fateful occurrences."¹⁵ I mention Galeotti's version not simply for the historical record, but because of Bournonville's description. To make the story clear to the early 19th century audience, Galeotti employed to repeat "a dictionary of accepted gestures" and "placards" announcing events.¹⁶ While many choreographers have striven to maintain that specificity of plot and character, Bouvier and Clug have more open approaches to the story.¹⁷



Joëlle Bouvier's *Romeo and Juliet* performed by Ballet Genève.

Photo Credit: Tsushima, 2011.

French choreographer Joëlle Bouvier was commissioned specifically by Ballet Genève to make *Romeo and Juliet*. The artistic director selected Bouvier to choreograph based on her Joan of Arc.¹⁸ Bouvier's *Romeo*

and *Juliet* finds inspiration in the story and Prokofiev's music. However, she was not interested in the specificity of place and time, or the weight of the full Prokofiev score. She chose instead to choreograph to excerpts of three of his "Suites for Orchestra" and, as she put it, focus her research on the crux of the drama. The narrative is present, but it's evoked and suggested, rather than made explicit.

Danced by twenty-two dancers, the work opens with Romeo and Juliet dressed in light colors manipulated by the rest of the dancers in black, bringing to mind two different things. The first is bunraku, a Japanese form of puppetry, in which three puppeteers manipulate each puppet. One controls the right arm and the upper part of the body, another the left arm, and the third makes the puppet walk. However, the puppeteers go virtually unnoticed by the audience, since their role is to animate the puppets, not draw attention to themselves. Second, the dark-clothed dancers can be seen the Fates or the gods who deal action dealt on humans.

In the scene at the ball, Bouvier uses visual counterpoint to indicate who belongs with whom, rather than specify who is a Capulet or Montague. Simple strategies of staging to keep the warring groups separate from each other. She employs great sweeping movements to wash across the stage when the company dances in unison or in canon. The corps de ballet is not only women but men and women dancing a shared movement vocabulary together.

In building the dance, Bouvier toyed with the idea of naming the work *Juliet and Romeo* to call attention to the perspective she was taking in character development. Ultimately, she decided not to. As she explained it, she was inspired by the timelessness of the plot, explaining the continual relevance of *Romeo and Juliet* in this way:

How many wars in the world today reflect the tragedy of Shakespeare? This is why I chose not to situate my story in a precise time. For the scenery and costumes, we will remain timeless, because this story takes place, has taken place and has yet to take place everywhere.¹⁹

In this observation, Bouvier shares choreographer Rennie Harris's sense of the present nature of Shakespeare's works.

In *Radio and Juliet*, choreographer Clug foregrounded Juliet's character and her action in the narrative. The title changes reflects Clug's shift from the Prokofiev score to selections of music by Radiohead, the British rock band led by Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood. Juliet is the sole woman on stage, joined by six men. There is no one man who is Romeo, or Tybalt, or Friar Lawrence. They move in and out of

the characters, with only Juliet fully realized. Not only does this make her character pivotal to the action of the story, it also contends with the tradition of the corps de ballet, with its often anonymous group of women. The production is spare, without the lavish sets and costumes of many productions of *Romeo and Juliet*. The courtship is there, the masked ball is there, this time in surgical masks, as is the ferocity of battle. But all of it is more abstracted than specific. Gone, too, are the crowds, and characters that offer comic relief and secondary storylines.

Once the full-bodied dancing begins, there is no doubt of the assuredness of both the training of the dancers and the understanding they have for the story their dancing bodies tell. Clug winnowed down the familiar tale to essential elements. Juliet's opening solo is contained, fraught with tension and inwardly coiled energy. The stage is hers alone. And she is perhaps alone in the world. The first Romeo swallows space with loose-limbed ease. When joined by other men, camaraderie and restless energy unite them with a uniform sense of speed and attack, assertive and powerful. What will it take to turn them from friendly competition to combative rivals?



Joëlle Bouvier's *Romeo and Juliet* performed by Ballet Genève.

Photo Credit: Tsushima, 2011.

As Juliet and the next Romeo gently touch, with actions that cause small, inescapable reactions, their flirtation unfolds. Details of the black-suited man and white-corseted woman sharpen as they slice through the air—his hand on the small of her back, at the nape of her neck. It is tender without sentiment, raw without roughness. But no matter how intimate and personal their duet is, they will not be left alone. Within the new conventions Clug establishes, it makes perfect sense that multiple male bodies portray the same characters.

What is it that is so captivating about the characters of Romeo and Juliet? Why do we all return to the story of the star-crossed lovers more than 400 years after they first appeared on the stage of the Globe with Shakespeare's company of actors?²⁰ And what can we surmise about what Shakespeare might have thought about Clug and Bouvier and so many others tinkering with his timeless play? He probably would have delighted in their versions. As noted Shakespeare scholar Frank Kermode explains, the characters of Romeo and Juliet were well known when Shakespeare wrote his play in 1595.

Shakespeare's direct source, according to Kermode, was a poem by Arthur Brooke, who in turn based his poem on a French prose novella by Boiastuau. Kermode dismisses Brooke's 3,000 lines of poetry as a "very dull work."²¹ Kermode's analysis of the two texts side by side leads him to marvel at Shakespeare's ability to "transform the tale into a dramatic action, altering and compressing to make a sharp theatrical point, telescoping events, expanding such characters as the Nurse and Mercutio, cutting material, and inventing new episodes."²² It may well be argued that his sense of action contributes to the choreographic draw of Shakespeare's story.²³ Indeed, English studies scholar Rodney Stenning Edgecombe argues that not only is *Romeo and Juliet* is best suited of all the tragedies to ballet, "not least because of its unstoppable momentum."²⁴

In their respective ballets, Edward Clug and his elimination of secondary plotlines and abstraction of male characters and Joëlle Bouvier and her distillation of the plot, echo Shakespeare's curiosity about discovering new ways to tell the story. Like other contemporary ballet choreographers, they rely on the history of ballet in general and the strength of the movement tradition, without being confined by it. In creating a new *Romeo and Juliet*, choreographers can simultaneously hint at and resist the familiar, trusting in centuries of understanding. Clug and Bouvier's works, and even Rennie Harris's disembodied version, demonstrate the pull of Juliet herself. As Balanchine notoriously said, "Ballet is woman." Again and again, that woman is Juliet.

Notes

Thanks to Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, especially Executive Director Ella Baff and Director of Preservation Norton Owen. Thanks to Julia Zdrojewski and Janet Schroeder for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. Mark Knopfler, *Romeo and Juliet*, The Dire Straits © 1980
2. Edward Clug, Romanian-born dancer and choreographer, is the Artistic Director of Ballet Maribor, the Slovenian ballet company.
3. Interview with the author, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Becket, Massachusetts, 2 July 2009.
4. Harris's point echoes what noted Shakespeare and dance have argued which I discuss later. Rennie Harris, Program essay for *Rome and Jewels*, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Becket, Massachusetts, August 2000.
5. Vida L. Midgelow. *Reworking the Ballet: Counternarratives and Alternative Bodies*, (New York: Routledge, 2007) 1.
6. For example, I moderated a panel discussion called "*Romeo and Juliet* and Ballet" at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. The panelists were Ashley Wheeler, Artistic Director of Joffrey Ballet and former principal with San Francisco Ballet among other companies; master teacher and former principal ballerina Anna Marie Holmes, the first North American invited to perform with the Kirov Ballet in Russia, and Philippe Cohen, the Artistic Director of Ballet Genève. "*Romeo and Juliet* and Ballet" *PillowTalk series*. Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Becket, Massachusetts, 23 June 2011.
7. Ultimately, I, like Juliet ask, as dance writer Julia Zdrojewski commented, when reading a draft of this essay, what meant by the name of *Romeo and Juliet*? ("What's in a name? that which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet" Act II, Scene 2).
8. Alan Hagar, *Understanding Romeo and Juliet*. (Greenwood Press, 1999) 183.
9. Segal made this comment at Crossed Stars: Artistic Sources and Social Conflict in the Ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. co-presented by the Dance Critics Association and the San Francisco Performing Arts Library. See Renee Renouf, *Crossed Stars*. (*Dance Research Journal* 26/2 Fall 1994: 57).
10. While this happy ending version seems ludicrous, in fact, in 1662, Shakespeare's text was re-written by Sir James Howard to have a happy ending—in production, the happy ending nights alternated with the tragic ending.
11. Rita Felciano, "Romeo and Juliet." *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*. ed. Selma Jean Cohen. vol. 5 (Oxford University Press, 1999: 392).
12. Robin Wharton, "'There are No Mothers-in-Law in Ballet.': Doing Shakespeare in Dance. *Shakespeare Bulletin* 23: 3 (2005) 7.
13. This interaction between multiple makers of meaning—the narrative and the dancing and the choreography—can be understood as a kind of intertextuality. See, for example, Janet Lansdale, "Intertextual Narratives in Dance Analysis." *Decentering Dancing Texts: The Challenge of Interpreting Dances*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
14. Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, "Trans-formal Translation: Plays into Ballets." *The Yearbook of English Studies* Vol. 36, No. 1 (2006): 70.
15. Bournonville, *My Theatre Life* as quoted in Edgecombe, "Trans-formal Translation: Plays into Ballets" (70).
16. Ibid.
17. In her work, Midgelow similarly selected dances, "that might broadly be perceived to depart from a source text (or texts) in order to give rise to a new dance that has a significantly different resonance, while evoking a purposeful extended and intertextual relationship with that source" (3).
18. Joëlle Bouvier, *Jeanne d'Arc* (2003) with the Centre Chorégraphique National (CCN) Ballet de Lorraine.
19. Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival Press Release, Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, June 2011.
20. *Romeo and Juliet* was first performed in 1595.
21. Frank Kermode, "Introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*." *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston, 1974): 1055.
22. Ibid, (1056).
23. Edgecombe (75).
24. Ibid.

Survivor: The Ballet Edition

Jennifer Fisher

“Ballet is like a hooker,” I have found myself saying to explain aspects of its history in various university classes and public lectures. “It will go home with anyone who has the money.”

This tends to get a laugh for its irreverence, but as usual when I make jokes about dance, I have something serious in mind. Ballet is expensive, always needing more money—the extensive training, the shoes, the orchestra—and it’s usually not too fussy about who pays. But comparing it to prostitution? Not fair, really, because ballet is an elite, revered art form, perhaps outmoded at times, definitely resented, but full of “class.” Still, ballet has a wily kind of longevity that has something in common with the world’s oldest profession. In its 300-plus years, ballet has morphed into different identities in order to fit in, with different values to order—from the age when dancers, dressed as courtiers, held flowers, to when revolutionaries held rifles, to today’s stripped-down beings who look like they might have been conjured by a Silicon Valley game designer. In other words, ballet seems to survive by adapting.

Ballet is opportunistic, the way we imagine hustlers to be, following the sources of power and money. But, to be fair, so are governments and religions. And maybe you and your family. We are all opportunistic at times, trying to take advantage of different situations, or just changing to keep up with the times. After all, history is written about those who have taken the “main chance.” To be even more fair to ballet, it has adapted not only to survive, but to be creative and relevant. And what *is* this thing I’m referring to as ballet? Almost everyone knows that—“recognizability” is the main advantage of being a familiar brand. Ballet is the form that’s lifted, elegant, turned out, pointed, flexed, and turned out again. It uses five basic foot positions, lycra and tulle, and exacting port de bras, although today this princess and prince vocabulary is mixed in with many other embellishments and attitudes. Ballet does whatever it takes to keep rolling along.

In this essay, I do more freestyle associating than analysis, more in the style of conversation about the ways people use terms, how *they* think of ballet and other labels for surrounding dance genres or styles. It’s another way of considering how our terms and associations change over time and eventually become enshrined, or not, in the annals of

usage. Labels provide chapter titles, tell people what you do, and, in dance listings, help sell tickets. All the labels for ballet have a history, but the word ballet remains popularly recognized, a particularly strong brand. It’s not the world’s oldest profession—the hooker reference is too literal—but that’s an interesting comparison to consider. There are the historical associations—as with many dance forms all over the world—because making a living with your body and the economic exigencies that dancers have often faced have produced a slight overlap of these two *professions*. Of course, if ballet were like a hooker, it would have to be a high-class version, like, say, the never-existed Julia Roberts role in *Pretty Woman*. Improbably innocent and hard-up, she deserved expensive things to get respect, and we all knew she had a heart of gold, so—well, going back to the ballet comparison, patrons such as the handsome, super-rich Richard Gere character have always been welcome. Power and privilege gave birth to and nurtured ballet, but shifting landscapes have nudged it into different territory, from a centralizing and “civilizing” strategy of kings and courts, to popular entertainment for the masses; from plaything of the tsars to propaganda tool of the Communists; from suspicious European import, to *Stars and Stripes* in America. Fitting into new landscapes when times change is one secret of longevity.

Ballet is also like a cockroach (bear with me here, ballet gets better labels as we go along), in that it seems to survive so many threats to its existence. In 17th century France, the king stopped dancing, so courtiers did, too, and ballet might have become less important. But, no, professionals took over and learned to *appear* to be aristocrats, and who isn’t fascinated with people who look like they rule everyone and know it all? Precision, striving, harmony, ideal forms—these are all popular notions for upwardly mobile societies. For a while in the 19th century, ballet might have been overshadowed by opera in Paris, so it needed to step up its game. It adapted by becoming both sexy and poetic for the Romantic era. Then when ballet started to fade in Paris, it might have sunk into obscurity, but Bournonville was already going strong making ballet proper and intricate for Denmark’s discerning audiences, while Petipa took it to Russia and perfected the story ballet extravaganza for the elite of St. Petersburg. In the new world, jazz should have been enough for a lively, democratic nation—it was mad

fun, and ballet was suspect, so what happened? Balanchine joyfully absorbed jazzy energies and invented “American ballet,” another label.

For a while, it seemed ballet might be challenged by the fresh democratic impulse of modern dance, which claimed all the sleek new deals of modernism and seemed tailor-made for intellectual content; then postmodern dance showed us what real revolution looked like, so surely ballet was on its way out. But, even as a conservative form, ballet started to absorb a lot of rule-breaking in terms of subject matter, sets, and gesture. Somewhere along the line, Martha Graham started calling her pieces “ballets,” and postmodern experiments remained marginalized, while ballet incorporated many of the new reforming impulses. Ballet started to break many rules, while modern dancers got thinner and sleeker, like ballet dancers. Who is winning, I sometimes wonder, and is it a game? Of course not, but our minds tend to think like that when we label different genres and start to define and defend them as unified entities. “Is this modern ballet?” I would sometimes wonder when I had to review a dance concert and label it something, “or is it modern with some ballet?” Let’s see, classical means careful, rounded and upright, neoclassical means hip thrust and tilt, modern means contractions, weight, and floor, and postmodern means anything goes. Contemporary? Well, contemporary comes after all of that, along with all that. Everything has become “post-this” and “post-that,” meaning that you choose to be “post-anything” that you acknowledge having been influenced by. Choosing a label is, as usual, all about deciding which way the wind is blowing and how you want to weather it.

For a while, when I was writing about dance for the *Los Angeles Times* in the 90s, a critic tried to name the West Coast version of ultra-athletic modern dance “hyperdance.” Wouldn’t it be nice to have a label, he might have thought, instead of having to say, “You know, it’s like Elizabeth Streb, pow, smack, only here in L.A.” I preferred the title “slam dancing,” because I also like naming things, and “slam” seemed appropriately onomatopoeic. I understood the power of naming—usually, only dance critics back East get to do that. The West Coast seemed marginalized, both in the ballet and the modern realms. Wouldn’t it be nice if a Los Angeles style of hyper-athletic modern dance became known by its own label? But the geography of L.A. seems to let dance impulses disperse. Maybe labels only catch when there are denser population centers and more dance writers.

Now, there seems to be a category called “historical modern” or “traditional modern” dance—these are terms I’ve heard people throw around recently—I toss them in myself—in an attempt to adjust “the grand narrative” of dance history to match what’s going on. Historical

modern refers the older style (Graham, Wigman, Humphrey, Limon) that prevailed before various “release-style techniques” produced a looser, free-flowing-ness. Post-Graham dance? Lately, I’ve become aware that fewer and fewer people teach Graham and the shape-preserving techniques of Dunham or Horton, though they survive strongly in some locations. A new convert to Pilates, I start to worry about dancers who have no “powerhouse”—how will they hold the shapes of historical modern dances still being staged? Ballet dancers have caught on to Pilates and weight lifting, with a vengeance, an inevitable adjustment to the explosion of ballet choreographic styles. Formerly known as graceful and light, ballet now *needs* a powerhouse. Ballet has toughened up to meet the times.

Not that we all agree on the history I’m highlighting here—generalizations I have made up to this point have already riled some readers who would tell the story differently, guaranteed. But this is the kind of conversation we all have, which doesn’t often get recorded: questioning, categorizing, reporting, searching for labels, and arguing about them. After all, you cannot teach history—you can’t *have* history—without naming and chronicling things in a particular way. One of the labels I have been most challenged by lately is “contemporary dance” as it’s been coopted by the commercial competition dance industrial complex. After many years of hearing about so-called “lyrical” dance, which provided the roots for a competition version of “contemporary,” I decided to write about it. Elsewhere, I recap the brief history of so-called lyrical and its questionable aesthetics (*Dance Chronicle* 37/3 2014). Here, I toss out a warning: what anyone under 25 thinks is “contemporary” is probably competition dance.

Teaching in a university dance department, I became aware of the “lyrical” category over the last ten years, not being familiar before with the competition dance world. I wanted to know more about it, in that our dance majors nearly all had grown up in competition studios, and it wasn’t enough to know that attention spans are shorter these days. I could see that younger choreographers loved acting out pop ballads and seemed to value only extreme movement and emotion. I saw the same odd steps and phrases repeated over and over again (Gee, that collapse looks familiar, and when did flashing your hoo-ha to the audience like that get popular?) I got the creeping feeling that the concert dance world might soon be negatively affected by competition dance’s shallow training methods and shortcut aesthetic (make faces and shapes to get judges’ attention). Then, as I researched, something else caught my eye—the fact that the word “contemporary” has started to replace the “lyrical” category in dance competitions.

Now, here is an evolution of the term “contemporary” we all need to be aware of and follow the consequences of. Younger dancers do not know that “contemporary” already has a history, as it evolved in Europe, North America, and elsewhere in different ways. But the word is also generic, in that it could mean “whatever is happening now.” “Modern” is also such a word, but when it became associated with barefoot dancers in the 20th century, the specialist label “modern dance” also became known. The word still circulates outside the dance world, but dance insiders all learn what modern dance means. “What do you think about modern dance,” Bill T Jones was asked at a UCLA forum around the turn of the new century—“You know, the kind the kids do nowadays, hip hop and krumping?” We all recognized this as a confusion that occurs when you don’t know the dance world. Now, however, a more general confusion is occurring, mostly due to the producers of *So You Think You Can Dance* replacing the “lyrical” category with “contemporary,” because it sounded more sophisticated. It sounded sophisticated, but it was still the competition category “lyrical” after it started including more angled, hard-hitting movement, probably around the time hip hop was going mainstream.

So, what we have now is the generic word “contemporary” used to describe both Hubbard Street Dance Company, and formula dance contestants who embrace hip hop crew-style cheering, extremes, and frontal orientation. If you want to see a condensed version of the “moves” that occur over and over in the competition version, you need only look at a viral YouTube clip that provides the formula (keywords: “contemporary dance how-to”). A satirist who calls himself “Contemporary Eric” demonstrates 15 “moves” that you can put together in any order, add emotion and an Adele song, and presto, you, too, can be a contemporary dance choreographer. (Picture sudden startled responses and ragdoll shakes, and moves he describes by saying you have a serious conversation with your knee, then put it down because you realize you shouldn’t be doing that.) It’s funny, as they say, because it’s true: for the competition world, where everything boils down to a formula.

Even “competition contemporary” tends to use ballet as a base, and I feel sure that competition babies will not succeed in toppling the substantial identity that contemporary dance has built. Both “contemporary ballet” and “contemporary” labels, as they exist in the professional world, rely a great deal on classical training and will always exist in overlapping ways. It’s just another way ballet has changed over the 300-plus years it’s been evolving in conservatories. First there was “modern ballet” and “neoclassicism” to indicate some departures from Petipa-land. Then there came “post-neoclassicism,” or perhaps

“post-Balanchine” and even “post-Forsythe,” as well as the ubiquitous “contemporary ballet,” depending on who you’re talking to. Along the way, ballet subtly absorbed the playfulness of boleros and salsa, the gesture vocabulary of vogueing, the thrash and despair of punk, and the hitting and thrusting of hip hop. Balanchine was most prominent in weaving together classical ballet and new world influences, from the African diaspora, as scholars have pointed out. Happily hip, ballet still garners visibility, grants, and respect, even as it has changed.

To acknowledge some basic shifts in ballet, I have started to change the “overview” term I use, from calling it a “Euro-American” or “Euro-Russian-American” form, to, as Joan Acocella once suggested, a “Euro-African-American” form. Ballet arose in Europe, developed significantly in Russia, and came to America, so labels might reasonably adjust now to acknowledge the huge influence Africanist aesthetics have had on it through Balanchine first. That part of ballet heritage is often glossed over and “invisibilized,” as Brenda Dixon Gottschild and others have concluded. Ballet can swallow up influences and march on without calling attention to them, because the word “ballet” is firm, enduring, and iconic—like love-life, storytelling, spiritual-seeking, and showing off. What I see onstage now is Europe and Russia and Denmark, plus Africa, and whatever emerges next to temper its strength. Ballet absorbs whatever it wants, while never giving up the basics that can still be read on the stage as ballet.

We are in the middle of dance history, so it’s hard to tell what labels will stick and how they will evolve, as the victors and the interlopers continue to write it. I’m starting here with the premise that ballet survives—and, to the metaphors of “hooker” and “cockroach”, I’m now adding the idea that ballet survives like a philosophy, a religion, or a man-made compound you can build with. Which ballet am I talking about now? Still the one we recognize enough to make it a topic, the one that started in Louis XIV’s era, had golden ages in Paris, St Petersburg, and New York, then migrated all over the world. Ballet accrued even more intellectual content eventually, when choreographers like William Forsythe started reading theory and approaching it like a puzzle or mind game. Jiří Kylián stepped up the complexity and deathless beauty of duets, providing a breadth of vision that has never stopped appealing. Alonzo King brought ballet closer to spirituality, explaining that dance is about nature and life, and something larger than you, about what is honest and true. By stepping out of the ordinary, he suggests, you partake in an important ritual, where you can see the highest incarnation of human beings. Current choreographers keep going—some of them even challenging gender stereotypes, which are particularly entrenched in the ballet world. The idea of “the thinking

dancer” gets more and more expanded, even in a realm where taking orders has been the rule of law.

Ballet is one of the clearest labels in the dance business, despite all the changes that have taken place. I say it survives *because* of its adaptability—and I happily give the last word to the philosophy and religion metaphors, moving on from ones that emphasize its dependence on commerce, or its sheer ornery persistence. Ballet adapts, grows, and serves many needs successfully, without breaking the law, while it remains an art form capable of deep meaning. It evolves while providing an endlessly fascinating model for the striving of human beings to be their best selves; ballet is a model of harmony, or embodiment of loss. It’s art, commerce, and politics (not forgetting who is excluded and possibly worn down in that model); and the word “ballet” endures because it tends to mean a dance form that includes the recognizable core of elements, those five basic foot positions, turn out, grace, precision, careful placement, and lifted and extended limbs. It tends to conceal effort and has a strong relationship to pointed toes and verticality, except when it doesn’t. It’s a durable, protean brand.

Is “contemporary” dance, whatever that is, watering it down? Engulfing the art form? Does competition dance diminish it? Do the many experiments equal endangerment or extinction? I doubt it, but when you’re the big dance form on the block, you invite (and repay) a lot of critique and examination. What we call things matters, of course, and my premise is that a discussion of meanings—the way they are used, and how much they are in flux—is more interesting than seeking definitive definitions. I propose we enter the “tends to be used” zone, as I’ve done so frequently here. As in—“Classical ballet tends to be vertical, rhythmically straightforward, and strictly aligned, while neoclassical ballet plays with all that.”

I introduced the term “tends to be used” to Wendy Perron recently when she spoke to a group of dance majors at my university, and she found it useful right away when someone asked her what she thought of as “contemporary dance.” I won’t attempt to quote her answer, but the reason “tends to be used” came in so handy will be obvious to those of us who know in how many ways the term “contemporary dance” pops up in different contexts. As scholars, we want to honor history and evidence, but we also have to admit to the way things tend to shape-shift as time marches on. Ballet, I suggest, is one of the most stable labels, even as it absorbs, adapts, and changes. It endures. Or, at least, it has tended to endure, so far.

Contributors

Gretchen Alterowitz is a choreographer, scholar, performer, and educator whose research focuses on the social and cultural work of contemporary ballet choreography, performance, and pedagogy. Companies and festivals that have presented her choreography include Atlanta Ballet (emerging choreographer's series), Wabi Sabi, Grachtenfestival (Amsterdam), and Women on the Way Festival (San Francisco). Alterowitz recently published articles in *Dance Chronicle* (2014) and *Journal of Dance Education* (2014). She is also a member of AGA Collaborative, a trio of artist-scholars who collaborate on research and performance projects. She is assistant professor of dance at UNC Charlotte, teaching ballet technique, dance history, and choreography.

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Jennifer Fisher, Ph.D., is the author of *Nutcracker Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World* (Yale, 2003), which won the Special Citation of the de la Torre Bueno Prize given by the Society of Dance History Scholars. She co-edited with Anthony Shay *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders* (Oxford, 2009). An associate professor in the dance department of the University of California Irvine, she is also a ballet coroner whose most recent inquest into the death of Giselle was held at the San Francisco Ballet. She is writing a "memoir ethnography" titled *An Autobiography of Ballet*.

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Ann Murphy is Assistant Professor and current Chair of the Mills College Dance Department, San Francisco. Her chapter "Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple Tap Past Jim Crow" will appear in the Oxford Anthology of Screen Dance Studies, out in spring 2015. She also recently contributed to and co-edited *Rhythm Field: The Dance of Molissa Fenley*, a collection by fellow artists about the 25-year career of the choreographer and dancer. The volume is due to be published by Seagull Press this spring. Murphy, a dance critic in the Bay Area for over 20 years, writes for the Bay Area News Group.

Ann Nugent, Ph.D., is a British dance critic and senior lecturer at the University of Chichester, where she teaches criticism and writing. Her research focuses on the choreography of William Forsythe and - following some 50 articles, papers and broadcasts about his work, she is currently completing a monograph for publication. She was founding editor of *Dance Now* and, subsequently, editor of *Dance Theatre Journal*. Her first career was as a dancer, with London Festival Ballet and Sweden's Gothenburg Ballet. She continues to work as a freelance critic, and is a regular contributor to the *Shinshokan Dance Magazine*, Japan.

Jill Nunes Jensen, Ph.D., instructs courses in dance history and ballet technique at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. In 2014 Dr. Nunes Jensen completed two terms of service on the SDHS Executive Board as the Corresponding Secretary. She has presented work at CORD and SDHS conferences both nationally and internationally. Her research on Alonzo King LINES Ballet has been published in *When Men Dance* (Oxford University Press), *Dance Chronicle* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis), and *Theatre Survey* (Cambridge). Additionally, she has an article on King and AKLB that will be published in *Dance in American Culture* (University of Florida Press, forthcoming).

Samantha Parsons is a movement analyst, dance educator, researcher and scholar. She holds a BA (Honors) in Dance Education from the University of Surrey and is currently pursuing a Masters in Liberal Studies through State University of New York - Empire State College. She received her certification in Laban Movement Analysis from IMS. Her interests lie in the analysis of 21st century balletic forms, systems of representation and recent discursive dance practices.

Caroline Sutton Clark is a doctoral candidate at Texas Woman's University. Coming from a range of experience in modern dance, butoh, ballet, and other forms of world dance, Clark received her BFA from the University of Michigan and MFA from the University of Hawaii, where she received the Carl Wolz Award for outstanding graduate student in dance and a Hawaii State Dance Council Choreographic Award. An avid oral historian, Clark's dissertation research focuses on the monthly performances of Austin Ballet Theatre at a psychedelic rock and country music hall during the 1970s.

Eric Underwood trained at the School of American Ballet in New York, joining Dance Theatre of Harlem in 2000 and American Ballet Theatre in 2003. He joined The Royal Ballet Company in 2006 as a First Artist, creating roles in Christopher Wheeldon's *DGV: Danse à grande vitesse* and Wayne McGregor's *Chroma*, and was promoted to Soloist in 2008. In almost a decade with the company in London, he has created roles for Wheeldon in *Aeternum*, *Electric Counterpoint* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (the Caterpillar), and for McGregor in *Infra*, *Live Fire Exercise*, and *Tetractys – The Art of Fugue*.

Meredith Webster studied dance under Jean Wolfmeyer, at the Harid Conservatory and Pacific Northwest Ballet School. She has worked with Sonia Dawkins and Donald Byrd in Seattle and earned a BS in Environmental Science from the University of Washington before joining Alonzo King LINES Ballet. In her nine seasons there, Webster performed and originated many central roles, received a Princess Grace Award, and guested at gala events around the world. In August 2014, she moved into the role of Ballet Master for AKLB.

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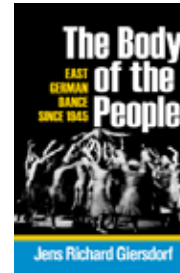
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