

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE UNCONVENTIONAL BALLET BODY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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The Unconventional Ballet Body in the 21st Century represents the written portion of my thesis project in support of my dance choreography *Bodily Intelligence*, both requirements of the M.F.A. in Dance at the University of Maryland, College Park. *Bodily Intelligence* premiered on November 17th, 2022, at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center's Dance Theatre. This research explores the impact of unconventionality of ballet in the 21st century and reveals how the search for the ideal body aesthetics has made it exclusive and disconnected from the current times. This paper highlights the influence of dance icons whose atypical aesthetics pushed the art form's boundaries and contributed to its advancement towards a more inclusive world. It also examines the importance of racial diversity, inclusion, and gender non-conformism within the dance world and explores the impact of the corps de ballet in the current era. Moreover, the research describes how my choreographic influences and professional ballet experience feed into the creative process. It shines a light on my desire to work with a racially diverse cast with

various dance training and highlights how their collaborative effort can redefine the future of ballet in the twenty-first century.

THE UNCONVENTIONAL BALLET BODY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by

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Introduction

In 1992, a performance of the Ballett Frankfurt at the *Festival de Montpellier Danse* left me in a state of wonder. For the first time, I witnessed a group of dancers of all shapes, sizes, and skin tones fiercely commanding the stage. The piece, titled *Limb's Theorem*, was choreographed by William Forsythe, who was the artistic director of the Ballett Frankfurt at the time. Forsythe is known for breaking away from traditional ballet aesthetics, such as ethereality and uniformity, while stretching the boundaries of the classical ballet line to highlight complex physicality. For instance, in *Limb's Theorem*, I remember Stephen Galloway's long silhouette executing a series of *chaînés*¹ across the stage at light speed with his locks whirling furiously. What struck me the most while watching *Limb's Theorem* was the dancers' power, freedom, and their individuality didn't obscure their sense of unity throughout the piece. It is important to note that such actions are not common in traditional ballet pieces, which promote uniformity and conformity.

This experience, combined with my training in classical and contemporary ballet, which requires me to navigate between tradition and innovation, makes me a believer in the need to move ballet forward to reflect the current culture. In other words, I am looking at ways to make ballet less intimidating, less exclusive, and more accessible to all.

In my research, I focus on the unconventional ballet body's contribution to advancing the form in the twenty-first century. For the project, I emphasize choreographers and ballet companies that are influenced by the classical form but push its limits further. For instance, choreographers William Forsythe, Alonzo King and Crystal Pite are visionary artists whose work on ballet companies have stretched the classical vocabulary to transform it into a larger

¹ *Chaînés*, or chains in English, are a series of consecutive turns executed on both feet and at a fast pace.

spectrum. In addition, it is essential to define what I classify as a conventional body in the ballet world to establish clearly what an unconventional body encapsulates. By the traditional ballet body, I refer to the white, thin, long-legged, narrow hips and able body of the female dancer, a description drawn from ethereal images of fairies and sylphs and later idealized in Balanchine's aesthetic. While the art form has evolved over the years, the Eurocentric gaze and aesthetic from which ballet originated are embedded in today's ballet companies and choreographies.

In my inquiry, I am also looking at the gender power dynamics within the choreography, especially the traditional man-woman relationship reflected in classical ballet pieces such as *La Sylphide*, *Giselle*, *Sleeping Beauty*, or *Romeo and Juliet*. These ballets depict heteronormative love stories in which the male dancer almost always rescues the female dancer, and the female dancer is portrayed as frail and fragile and often transforms into an ethereal being. Additionally, when I mention my desire to see the ballet world reflecting the current societal shifts, I refer primarily to the impact of LGBTQ+ communities, representation, and inclusion in the ballet world. For example, there has been a recurrence of gender-fluid and nonbinary dancers seeking opportunities to perform in dance companies other than *Les Ballets Eloelle-Grandiva* or *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo*².

Aside from my interest in aligning the relationship of the ballet world with the current societal shift in gender relations, I look closely at the structure of ballet companies and the role of the *corps de ballet*. Indeed, dancers who join a company usually start in the *corps de ballet*, which stands at the bottom of the pyramid. Then, based on their growth and performance skills, they can move up to the position of demi-soloist, soloist, and even principal dancer, the

² The two companies defy gender norms with an all-male cast performing the classical ballet repertoire, and dancing female roles *in drags* and *en pointe*, placing the emphasis on the comical aspect.

company's highest rank. It is essential to point out that, even at the bottom of the hierarchy, *corps de ballet* members represent an indispensable element, often referred to as the backbone that supports the principal dancers. Today, where traditional power structures are being tested worldwide, I am questioning if the conventional ballet hierarchy can be reshaped to bring more value to the *corps de ballet* members.

Lastly, my research is designed to support my career as a higher-education dance instructor. The students I teach have a range of body shapes and sizes. They are talented and disciplined, capable of a professional dance career, regardless of whether they embody the so-called ideal. As I reflect on my career, I recognize that I did not have all the physical attributes of a conventional ballet dancer, such as narrow hips, wide external rotation range, or a flexible back that facilitates the arabesque line. Yet, I succeeded in dancing professionally for twenty years. While dance education organizations continue to address issues concerning racial diversity, healthy training, and gender acceptance, such changes are not widely reflected in the professional world. I hope for dance educators and company directors to be in critical conversation and practice, working diligently to reflect the changes in both the educational and professional fields.

Chapter One: The Politics of Josephine Baker's Aesthetics

“It is the intelligence of my body that I have exploited, and that is what has turned me into an international star.”³

-Josephine Baker

Baker's unconventional body connection to the current ballet body canon

Josephine Baker symbolizes the embodiment of unconventionality in dance. In many ways, her nonconformance became her greatest strength and made her a successful artist. Baker is a venerated icon admired and respected worldwide, especially in France. Though she passed away in 1975, her legacy lives on. On November 30th, 2021, she became the sixth woman and the first woman of color to enter the *Panthéon*⁴, the place of rest for distinguished French citizens. In selecting Baker to be pantheonized a few months before the presidential election, the head of state, Emmanuel Macron, intended to unify a country ravaged by strikes and protests in response to a rise in racism and antisemitism. In his speech during the ceremony, Macron highlighted Baker's passion for universalism and the unity of humanity, yet his decision ignited debates across the country, as it was interpreted as a political tactic to seek reelection.

Interestingly, it is hardly the first time Josephine Baker has sparked controversy. The American-born artist, who grew up poor in St. Louis, moved to France in 1925, where she became an overnight sensation when she starred in *La Revue Nègre*. The show opened at the

³ Anthea Kraut, “Whose Choreography?: Josephine Baker and the Question of (Dance) Authorship” in *Josephine Baker: A Century in the Spotlight*, edited by Kaiama L. Glover, S&F Online: Scholar & Feminist Online No. 1/2 (2008), 5.
https://sfonline.barnard.edu/baker/kraut_05.htm

⁴ The *Panthéon* is the final place of rest for French citizens who have been of excellent service to France.

Théâtre des Champs Elysées in Paris and brought audiences in frenzy due to the country's colonial association. Indeed, at the time, France was hosting the *Exposition Universelle d'Art Nouveau*, which was deeply rooted in African art. Parisian audiences had a taste and curiosity for novelty, expressionist art, and anything extravagant. Thus, when Baker appeared nude in *La Revue Nègre*, the spectators were blown away by her performance. As she danced naked but for a few ornaments, she captivated her audience with her staged presence and the way she moved, combining comedy with sensuality and power. Her debut at the *Théâtre des Champs Elysées* was immortalized by the show poster designed by Paul Colin, which highlighted Baker's curves, long legs, and big smile. The Parisians saw in the St. Louis native a living representation of African sculptures displayed at the *Exposition Universelle d'Art Nouveau*. Baker exulted in confidence and skillfully managed to embody the object of the male gaze while mocking the Afro-American stereotypes by using comedy in her dancing. Her signature crossed-eyed look wowed audiences.

When Baker reflected upon the first presentation of the *Revue Nègre* at the *Théâtre des Champs-Elysées*, she confessed, "we had thought our show was marvelous, and Monsieur Rolf's verdict- 'Catastrophic'- struck like a thunderclap. But he was an able and agreeable taskmaster, and we did what he wanted, although it meant working day and night."⁵

It is important to note that Baker wasn't a novice when she arrived in France. Before moving to Europe, she danced at *The Plantation*, a prominent nightclub in New York, and performed as a chorus girl in renowned shows such as the Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*. She even became the highest-paid chorus girl for her outstanding and unique performing skills and is

⁵ Josephine Baker, Jo Bouillon, and Mariana Fitzpatrick, *Josephine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 50.

credited as “the girl who put Harlem on the map of Europe.”⁶ Hence, she knew how to steal the show and navigate skillfully between pleasing her audience and letting her voice be heard.

While she gained international recognition for her audacity, some claimed that her blackness was exploited and sensationalized. Dance critic Arnold Haskell alleged Josephine Baker lacked authenticity to please her audience. He writes: “Josephine Baker...always seems to me to be playing up to what the public wants the negress to be. She has become Parisianised.”⁷ But Baker has a different point of view. During an interview, she stated, “it is the intelligence of my body that I have exploited, and that is what has turned me into an international star.”⁸

It is important to point out the discrepancy between the dominant race’s ideology of ethnic art, and Baker’s own vision. To counterattack Haskell’s criticism, Author Ramsay Burt writes the case of Baker’s unauthenticity is “defined as a loss of origins as these were determined by dominant white, colonial ideologies.”⁹ In other words, although the French were curious and drawn towards African art, they were filled with stereotypes and their idea of black culture was biased. For instance, Burt reveals the producer of *La revue Nègre* had a different vision of how to showcase African art on stage. Burt writes, that “when she was asked by Monsieur Rolf to

⁶ Josephine Baker, Jo Bouillon, and Mariana Fitzpatrick, *Josephine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 101.

⁷ Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, “Race,” and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), 62.

⁸ Anthea Kraut, “Whose Choreography?: Josephine Baker and the Question of (Dance) Authorship” in *Josephine Baker: A Century in the Spotlight*, edited by Kaiama L. Glover, S&F Online: Scholar & Feminist Online No. 1/2 (2008), 5.
https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/baker/kraut_05.htm

⁹ Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, “Race,” and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), 62.

dance in more ‘African’ way, he may on the one hand have been asking her to do something that conformed more closely to his idea of Africa, but she too had an idea of Africa.”¹⁰

Additionally, author Anthea Kraut reveals that while Baker had to learn set and specific choreography, there were times when she would conveniently forget the steps and start to improvise. In her autobiography, Baker confesses, “driven by dark forces I didn’t recognize, I improvised, crazed by the music, the overheated theatre filled to the bursting point, the scorching eye of the spotlights.”¹¹ This might have been, the diplomatic way for Baker to navigate between the politics of what was expected her performance to be, while she appeared in control of her own artistic decision making. From a choreographer point of view, it represented the perfect combination of set choreography and improvisatory style. And what is more powerful than the blending of styles.

Josephine Baker, George Balanchine’s first muse?

Another aspect of Baker that is often kept in the shadows is her connection to the ballet world. In a photo with Paris Opera Ballet dancer Serge Lifar, taken somewhere on the beach in 1925, both dancers strike a pose in which Baker is on *relevé*,¹² showcasing her long legs and high arches. At the beginning of the 1930s, Baker studied classical ballet technique with Vronska and Alperoff, dancers at the *Théâtre Imperial Volinine* directed by Alexander Volinine, a dancer

¹⁰ Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, "Race," and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), 65.

¹¹ Josephine Baker, Jo Bouillon, and Mariana Fitzpatrick, *Josephine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 51-52.

¹² *Relevé* in classical ballet, is the French term for raised. It describes the action of rising on the ball of the feet.

with the *Ballets Russes* and Anna Pavlova's partner. Baker saw a presentation starring Alberto Spadolini, who also worked with Volinine. She made him her partner at the *Casino De Paris* in the revues *Hawaii*, *Singerie du XVIIIème Siècle*, and *La Féerie de l'Eau*. Dance historian Andrea Harris has written extensively on Baker's connection to ballet. She describes a performance in which Baker, partnered by Spadolini, is dancing on pointe during a charity ball called *Le Bal des Petits Lits Blancs*, held annually in Paris. Harris writes:

“Baker's dancing mixes ballet and jazz. Her costume is not wholly classical but rather combines an elegant ball gown with pointe shoes. As she prances around Spadolini, she does not lift her torso away from gravity but rather bends her knees and accentuates each step, as if the ballerina's fluttering string of bourrées were slowed down, stretched out, turned in, and transformed qualitatively from floating to strutting. Her pointe work does not replicate the lyricism of ballet, but instead is syncopated and grounded. She executes a rendition of “trucking,” an African American vernacular step, on the tips of her toes, leaning forward slightly at the waist and breaking the long clean lines of the classical body by sticking her seat out behind her.”¹³

Baker's most significant connection with ballet is through her collaboration with George Balanchine. Burt reveals, “In Paris, George Balanchine (1904-83) not only worked for the Ballets Russes but also gave Josephine Baker classes and then choreographed a few numbers for her appearance in the 1930-1 revue *Paris qui Remue*.”¹⁴ Baker's collaboration with Balanchine carried on when she returned to New York to perform in Ziegfeld Follies, for which he choreographed the ballets. Balanchine was an appropriate collaborator for Baker, since as dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild pointed out, Balanchine had worked with African American artists such as the Nicholas Brothers, Herbie Harper, or Katherine Dunham. Hence, he was directly influenced by the Africanist aesthetic. Balanchine even stated:

¹³ Andrea Harris, “Parody In Pointe Shoes: Josephine Baker, Ballet, And The Politics Of Aesthetics,” in *Discourses In Dance* (Volume 4/Issue 2/2008), 5.

¹⁴ Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, "Race," and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), 4.

“What is the use of inventing a series of movements which are a white man’s idea of a Negro’s walk or stance or slouch? I only need to indicate the disposition of dancers on stage. The rest almost improvised itself. I was careful to give the dancers steps which they could do better than anyone else.”¹⁵

What Gottschild finds problematic is the sentence “The rest almost improvised itself.” The passive tense entails that the choreography happened on its own without giving credit to the actual performers; it also suggests that improvisation doesn’t require labor. Similarly, when working with Baker on Ziegfeld Follies, it was a collaborative effort in which Baker would adapt Balanchine’s ballet training with her choreographic practice, which involved a series of steps combined with improvisational practice and demanded a lot of work.

After reading about the strong influence of African American artists on Balanchine’s work, I see how Baker inspired the Russian choreographer’s ideology and how she can be credited as one of his first muses. Baker’s inspiration can also expand to Balanchine’s vision of having an interracial company of black dancers and white dancers.

What made the Balanchine technique revolutionary was the incorporation of elements directly drawn from African aesthetics. For instance, while dancing with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, I performed several works from the Balanchine repertoire, such as *Agon*, *Prodigal Son*, *Concerto Barocco*, *Serenade*, and *The Four Temperaments*. Although quite different, all these ballets include moves borrowed from vernacular dances, such as the weight being shifted off the center of the movement initiated by the hips. These choices that defy uprightness, one of the fundamental rules of the classical ballet technique, allow more freedom and edginess to the

¹⁵ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 69.

movement. I recall watching a video of *Who Cares* while studying in France, and I was stunned by the dancers' swiftness, brilliance, and lightness. I knew I wanted to dance in such a manner. Later, when studying at the *Rudra Béjart School*¹⁶ in Lausanne, Suzanne Farrell, the legendary Balanchine ballerina and muse taught classes for a week, and she very much focused on the velocity of the *bas de jambe*¹⁷ combined with the fast changes of direction initiated by the hips. I enjoyed Farrell's classes because, for the first time, I was pushed to dance outside the mold, without the fear of making mistakes but with the encouragement of "going for it." I felt more audacious and less fearful.

The musical scores accompanying Balanchine's choreography are also rooted in jazz music. For instance, when working on *Agon* with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, Arthur Mitchell, who was part of the original cast, proudly shared how, thanks to his extensive knowledge of tap dancing, he was able to decipher Stravinsky's intricate score, that he approached like a jazz partition; hence, the rest of the cast had to rely on him.

On a more personal reflection, Josephine Baker has been a source of inspiration throughout my professional career. I have always admired her boldness, charisma, and her unapologetic stage presence. On a few occasions throughout my dance career whenever I had occasions to portrait females with strong personalities, she became my role model. For instance, in 2003, Mr. Mitchell invited Michael Smuin, the choreographer and director of Smuin Ballet, to create a piece titled *Saint-Louis Woman* for the company. It was the first time that I had originated a role, and I was ecstatic, especially since my character, Della Green, was the belle of

¹⁶ The Rudra Béjart School, or *Ecole-Atelier Rudra Béjart Lausanne*, was founded in 1992 in Switzerland by the Choreographer Maurice Béjart. The institution's philosophy was inspired by Mudra, the first school Béjart opened in Belgium from 1970 to 1988.

¹⁷ *Le bas de jambe*, translates in English as the lower part of the legs, which is paramount to the training of the classical ballet dancer.

St. Louis, Josephine Baker's birthplace. Hence, I recall my desire to channel her seductive, daring, and charismatic persona upon building my character.

Chapter Two: Racial Diversity's Contribution to the Advancement of Ballet in the Twenty-first Century

The myth was that because you were black that you could not do classical dance. I proved that to be wrong.¹⁸

-Arthur A. Mitchell

Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem

George Balanchine's intention to create an interracial company was never realized. Yet, in 1955, he hired African American dancer Arthur Mitchell and promoted him to principal dancer the following year. Mitchell originated many works by Balanchine, such as *Puck* in his version of *A Midsummer Night's dream* or the pas de deux in *Agon*. The latter work created controversy because it was very unusual at the time to showcase a dancer of color partnering with a white ballerina. Indeed, in the choreography, Balanchine intentionally contrasted Mitchell's dark skin tone against southern ballerina Diana Adams' pale complexion. One specific instance happens at the beginning of the duet, when both dancers slowly interlace their arms.

After a successful career as a principal dancer, Mitchell co-founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem, commonly known as DTH, with his teacher Karel Shook. The company, which started in a garage, had the vision to provide the same opportunities for African American children as their white counterparts. Mitchell was inspired to start the company following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which nearly broke the spirit of the African American community. During our conversation several years ago, Mitchell confessed that when he

¹⁸ Arthur Mitchell, *kennedy-center.org*, 1990-2022, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/artists/m/ma-mn/arthur-mitchell/>

mentioned to Balanchine his desire to create a company, he urged him to open a school instead. In fact, Balanchine told Mitchell that a company would present many challenges, and he might not be successful.

Against the odds, the Dance Theatre of Harlem was founded in 1969 by Mitchell and Shook and it gave its very first performance at the Guggenheim Museum in 1971. It is safe to say that, for a very long time, DTH was the only place for dancers of color to thrive. Decades before, Janet Collins and Raven Wilkinson experienced brutal discrimination based on the color of their skin. In 1932, Collins refused a position with the *Ballets Russes* because she was asked to paint her skin white, while Wilkinson had to move to Europe for the good of her career. In 1967, she joined the Dutch National Ballet in the Netherlands as a second soloist. Most recently, ballerina Michaela DePrince of Sierra Leonean heritage followed Wilkinson's footsteps and left America to join the Dutch National Ballet. When she heard the news, Wilkinson was disappointed. She shared with Rivka Galchen, a writer for the *New Yorker*, "I don't want to sound bitter—I've never been a protester—but when I saw that Michaela DePrince had left for the Dutch National Ballet, as I had, I felt like nothing had changed."¹⁹ She continued, "I asked Michaela, 'What about American companies?' She said she was told she didn't have the right body type." Well, the late Wilkinson would be happy to learn that DePrince returned to the United States and has since joined the Boston Ballet as a second soloist. In recent years, African American ballet dancers Lauren Anderson and Misty Copeland have reached successful careers, despite their bodies not fitting the norm of the ballet world. Throughout their successes, both ballerinas were scrutinized for their appearance. Anderson never thought she would be hired as a ballerina with

¹⁹ Rivka Galchen, "An Unlikely Ballerina," *The New Yorker*, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/22/unlikely-ballerina>

Houston Ballet since the company didn't have female dancers of color. Yet in 1990, she became their first African American principal dancer. In 2015, Copeland became the first African American ballet dancer promoted to principal dancer at the American Ballet Theater, yet her achievement came with a heavy price. She had been very outspoken regarding the racism she faced, especially when she was told her physiognomy didn't fit the ballerina standards, because she was too muscular and too "busty."

Nevertheless, artists like Mitchell, Copeland, and Anderson have worked in predominantly white companies, making them the exception, not the norm. Therefore, the work of Theresa Ruth Howard, former DTH dancer and founder of *Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet* (MOBB), is crucial in today's setting. In the summer of 2022, she curated an event at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, titled *Reframing the Narrative*, featuring the Dance Theatre of Harlem, Collage Dance Collective, and Ballethnic. It is important to note that both Collage and Ballethnic were founded by former members of DTH, which testifies that Mitchell's legacy lives on. Part of the event included a new work commissioned by celebrated choreographer Donald Byrd for a selected group of dancers. The particularity of the project was to choose artists of color working in predominantly white companies and, as Howard said, "eradicate the weight of being black in the white ballet space"²⁰ Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the performances, but I did have the opportunity to teach some of the morning ballet classes. Walking into a space filled with brilliant artists of color brought me back to my years dancing with DTH. Howard's vision to "create a safe space where blackness is oddly irrelevant because

²⁰ Theresa Howard, "Reframing The Narrative: Blacks in Ballet |A Kennedy Center Digital Stage Original," 1:08, accessed November 27th, 2022, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/video/digital-stage/ballet/2022/reframing-the-narrative-blacks-in-ballet/>

it's absolutely centered"²¹ gave the artists a sense of belonging. Their talent was validated not by the color of their skin but because they were enough. *Reframing The Narrative* turned out to be not only a successful project but also an essential testament to the future of ballet, which, stripped of the typical stereotypes, brings hope for more inclusivity for the years to come, which is paramount to the advancement of the art form. I hope such an event becomes more than a one-time sensation and develops into a recurring action that provides safe space and visibility for artists of color.

My years dancing with the Dance Theatre of Harlem

The company and Arthur Mitchell contributed to my American dream. Working for the organization realized my longtime aspiration of becoming a professional ballerina in New York and performing worldwide. I had the opportunity to dance many roles and participate in the creation of new ballets. However, even while dancing for this trailblazing company, and especially when performing the Balanchine repertoire during our home season at New York City Center, there was the inescapable pressure to be compared to New York City Ballet's dancers whose training is centered around Balanchine's work. Often, the performance reviews were positive when DTH showcased more ethnic ballets, such as Geoffrey Holder's *Douglas*, or Vincent Mantsoe's *Sasanka*, but when it came to Balanchine's works, the dance critics had mixed reactions. For instance, at the company's thirtieth anniversary celebration, dance critic Joseph Carman appreciated works by choreographers other than Balanchine. He wrote:

²¹ Theresa Howard, "Reframing The Narrative: Blacks in Ballet |A Kennedy Center Digital Stage Original," accessed November 27th, 2022, 3:27, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/video/digital-stage/ballet/2022/reframing-the-narrative-blacks-in-ballet/>

“Rituals of all varieties played an essential part of DTH’s theatrical repertory during the season, ranging from Geoffrey Holder’s spectacular *Dougl*a to the new *South African Suite*, a choreographic collaboration of Augustus van Heerden, Laveen Naidu, and Mitchell” [...] As for the Balanchine works, which have always been a cornerstone of the company’s repertory, the results were puzzling. [...] The company maintained a far shakier grip on *The Four Temperaments*, which at times looked leaden and unspacious. A miscast *Bugaku* was an uncomfortable choice for the season, partially because of the director’s dubious decision in this and other ballets to reengage former company dancers, some of whom looked out of shape or completely retired.”²²

Such reviews gave the impression that DTH does not excel in Balanchine’s work and should stick with presenting more ethnic ballets. This makes me wonder, based on whose criteria? It is undeniable that Mitchell was influenced by Balanchine when he created DTH, but he was very specific about the vision he had; proving to the world that Blacks can thrive in the classical ballet artform, and though the DTH ballerina’s attribute differed from the Balanchine one, there was a variation in skin tone, height, and proportion. Yet, Mitchell managed to create a unique look, based on charisma, stage presence and, of course, technique. I wish some dance critics would have taken into consideration and embraced the difference of interpretation, instead expecting a company of dancers of color to look like its white counterpart. Have we forgotten Balanchine’s Africanist influence during his early collaboration with many Afro-American artists whose works centered on improvisation? Can’t there be room for interpretation?

The collaboration between DTH and NYCB

The inevitable comparison between DTH and NYCB mentioned above came to light in 2000 when the opportunity for a historical collaboration between the two companies was

²² Joseph Carman, “Dance Theatre of Harlem City Center September 21-October 3, 1999” accessed November 27th, 2022, *thefreelibrary.com*, <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/DANCE+THEATRE+OF+HARLEM.-a058050385>

presented. The artistic director of NYCB at the time, Peter Martins, had invited Arthur Mitchell's company as an extension of DTH's thirtieth anniversary celebration. Both organizations were to give three performances at the NY State Theater. The program was composed of *Agon*, *Slaughter on 10th Avenue*, and *Tributary*. The first two ballets had been choreographed by George Balanchine and danced by Arthur Mitchell. The third was co-created by Robert Garland and Robert La Fosse, resident choreographers for DTH and NYCB, respectively. We were to rehearse in the NYCB building at Lincoln Center. Beforehand, Mr. Mitchell called a meeting in which he insisted that the occasion was a big deal: we were under the microscope and had to be on our best behavior. "You are representing something larger than yourself" was a recurrent mantra in Mr. Mitchell's philosophy. On the first day, we had a combined class, I felt so overwhelmed and paralyzed with intimidation. I had been in the States for two years and had just joined the company a year prior. Luckily, I was cast to work on *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, and the rehearsals were held mainly at the DTH building in Harlem. I felt I could give my best in the familiar environment, especially with coaching from the brilliant Susie Hendl. My partner, NYCB principal dancer Damian Woetzel, was great to work with, and sometimes Mr. Mitchell would come to rehearsal, which reassured me. Also, the part I was dancing, the striptease girl, was fun, and gave me another occasion to step into Josephine Baker's seductive persona.

As my confidence about the performance started to rise, someone from the DTH organization pulled me aside and said he needed to speak to me. He told me I needed to get a weave²³ to fit the role because in the second half, the character dances with her hair out. It is essential to point out that the ballet, which was part of the NYCB current repertoire, had been recently performed by principal dancer Darci Kistler, whose gorgeous long hair was down to her

²³ A weave is hair extension technique commonly used in the black community.

waist. It felt as though the person suggesting this wanted me to fit a mold I did not fit. The advice didn't sit well with me due to my ongoing insecurity with my hair. As a biracial child who inherited the frizzed texture from my Caribbean father, growing up, my hair was always tied up as an attempt to be disciplined. Later, I started to chemically straighten it, which allowed me to gain better control, yet it was far from perfect.²⁴ I spoke to Mr. Mitchell, who dismissed the case by saying I didn't need any extension, and my hair was fine. I got my hair professionally blow-dried for the performance, but I can't help but wonder, what if I had an afro cut at the time and decided to dance with it? Would I have been less credible as the striptease character? Reflecting on this encounter posits the larger question of the pressure black institutions experience to adhere to rules associated with the white aesthetic.

In fact, my hair misfortune was hardly the first time such an event happened. Dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild reveals that "there were times when both the Alvin Ailey and Dance Theater of Harlem dancers were not allowed to wear braids, locks, or twists."²⁵ Indeed, while in the early stages of DTH, ballerinas wore their natural hair, former company dancer and current artistic director of Ailey II Francesca Harper confided: "I straightened my hair for

²⁴ I spent most of my childhood in a small town in the South of France, twenty minutes away from Montpellier. My mom, who was Caucasian French, had little experience with afro hair and very little help. Indeed, where we lived, there were very few bi-racial children like me and even fewer with a hair texture similar to mine. Hair salons in my neighborhood didn't know how to style it, so it was always tied up. Once I got my hair braided during a trip to Martinique to visit my dad's side of the family, and when I came back home, my classmates made fun of me. I longed to have hair like everyone around me, just to fit in. Then, when I started ballet lessons, it was the perfect excuse to put my hair in a bun.

²⁵ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 213.

years to put it back, to slick it back and put it in buns... That was required at the Dance Theater of Harlem, and that was also growing up. My mother straightened my hair..."²⁶

Harper's statement testifies to the requirement for black culture to adapt to white American standards in order to fit in. During her promotional book tour *The light we Carry*, former First Lady Michelle Obama confessed that she conscientiously decided to keep her hair straight instead of her natural curls during her husband's presidency, because she thought about the American people and she said "nope, they're not ready for it."²⁷ On a larger scale, the desire to fit the mold of exclusive aesthetics, complement Gottschild's question, "were these economic, cultural, artistic, or inferiority-complex considerations?"²⁸

While significant progress has been made in the ballet world regarding inclusivity and representation it is essential to note institutions that haven't changed. For instance, although companies start to diversify their cast members, yet except for a few exceptions, the Balanchine ballerina types still fill the highest ranks.

²⁶ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 213.

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Michelle Obama says Americans weren't ready for her natural Black hair" in *The Washington Post*, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/11/17/michelle-obama-black-hair-braids/>

²⁸ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 213.

Chapter Three: The Impact of the Current Societal Shifts in Gender relations on the Ballet World

“The Ballez exists through a collective of supporters who want to create a radical reformation of ballet culture, aesthetics, and representation, away from the white supremacist cis hetero patriarchal old ways of doing things, and towards a joyful, expressive, generous, radical, gorgeous, intersectional, queer feminist future!”²⁹

The origins of ballet and its relationship to gender norms

The art form of ballet was introduced at the French royal court when Italian noblewoman Catherine de Medici married Henri II, the King of France. The *Ballet de la Cour*, presented in 1581, is credited to be the first ballet production. De Medici introduced ballet as a form of culture but also as a method of propaganda in which the courtesans performed grandiose choreographies to affirm the power of royalty and to keep the aristocracy distracted and entertained. Initially, at least based on our understanding of history, ballet could be performed by men or women, but later, in the mid-sixteenth century, by the time of Louis XIV, it was almost exclusively male. Dancers such as choreographer Pierre Beauchamps, music composer Jean Baptiste Lully, and king Louis XIV, among other noblemen, performed female parts showcased in lavish productions. Then in 1830, for the first time, ballerina Marie Taglioni performed dancing on the tip of her toes, wearing a unique kind of shoe called the pointe, in the production of *La Sylphide*. Through her prowess, Taglioni appeared to be lifted, defying gravity, and replicating the spirit of the sylph, a creature of the air. Her dancing emphasized the quality of ethereality, one of the trademarks of the classical ballet technique. Thus, the arrival of the pointe shoe dictated the role of the female dancer and placed a substantial gender difference in the ballet

²⁹ Ballez, “Join The Matronage,” *Ballez.org*, accessed November 27th, 2022, <https://www.ballez.org/>

world, where ballerinas portrayed frail creatures in distress. Male dancers, on the other hand, were expected to represent heroic figures.

Nevertheless, in more recent decades, roles performed by male dancers on pointe have appeared in classical ballet productions, including in the role of *Bottom* in Frederick Ashton's *The Dream* and the stepsisters in Ashton's *Cinderella*. Additionally, during a trip to France in the winter of 2020, I watched a performance of Nureyev's version of *Cinderella*, which takes place in 1930s Hollywood. In this specific version performed by the dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet, the part of the stepmother is interpreted by a male dancer on pointe. Nevertheless, it is essential to point out that these roles are designed for comedy, in which the expectations are not focused on the performers' technical proficiency, but on their drag acts. As a result, the male dancers' pointe work is purposely not as polished as the ballerina's.

Similarly, the creation of *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo*, commonly known as *Les Trocks*, and *Eloelle-Grandiva*, allowed male ballet dancers to perform the female parts of popular classical ballet productions such as *Les Sylphides*, *Swan Lake*, and *Giselle*. These roles, even if very well-danced, represent exaggerated caricatures, interpreted by men in travesty, and are meant to mock the originals. Oftentimes, company members' performances mocked the most common stereotypes attributed to the traditional ballerina, such as ethereally, lightness, and delicacy to turn it into a funny act. Hence, it seemed that, for a while, the only way for men to dance on pointe was to use comedy, humor, and exaggeration.

Gender representation in the ballet world in the current era

The twenty first century witnesses a shift, again in the ballet world's relationship with gender norms. Dance scholar Selby Wynn Schwartz notes that "before ballet treated pointe work

as if it were a *function* of gender- as if women were naturally built to rise to their toes and dance- it was clearly a technology, a prosthetic, a *figment* of gender.”³⁰ Currently, a growing number of non-conforming artists wish to integrate dance companies to perform roles that were traditionally reserved for ballerinas *en pointe*. For instance, in an interview for the New York Times Magazine, Ashton Edwards shares their perspective as a nonbinary ballet dancer who is one of the swans in The Pacific Northwest Ballet’s production of *Swan Lake*. It is important to point out that the ballet, choreographed in 1895 by Marius Petipa, symbolizes the embodiment of the *ballets blancs*. Indeed, it promotes architectural symmetry in the formation, and rigidity of the artform, in which sameness, conformism, symmetry embody the epitome of the symbol of the royal power at the time. Another essential remark is that usually, only female ballet dancers consist of the *corps de ballet*³¹. Hence, until recently, the idea of having other than white, ballerinas was not an option. But today, with artists like Edwards, “they are setting an important precedent: an artist assigned male at birth working routinely on pointe in a classical ballet company.”³² Since then, other gender nonconforming artists like Bryan Syms and Roberto Vega Ortiz of Ballet22, and Leroy Mokgatle of Ballett Zürich have fallen into Edwards’ footsteps.

Alongside the recurrence of nonconforming gender dancers in traditional ballet companies, dance institutions have taken charge and created a safe space for members of the LGBTQ+ community to exercise the artform in a place of love and passion. It is the case of Ballez, a company formed in 2011 by Katy Pyle, a white genderqueer lesbian choreographer.

³⁰ Selby Wynn, Schwartz, *The Bodies of Others: Drag Dances and Their Afterlives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 123.

³¹ *Corps de ballet*, translates in English as body of the ballet, and represents the dancers’ ensemble in a ballet company

³² Margaret Fuhrer, “A Rising Nonbinary Swan, On Pointe,” *The New York Times* (2022)

The company's vision statement on its website states "the Ballez exists through a collective of supporters who want to create a radical reformation of ballet culture, aesthetics, and representation, away from the white supremacist cis hetero patriarchal old ways of doing things, and towards a joyful, expressive, generous, radical, gorgeous, intersectional, queer feminist future!!"³³ Additionally, Schwartz points out the lack of representation in queer female ballet dancers. She cites dancers Lauren Flower and Audrey Malek, who in an interview for *pointe* magazine share that "even when a major company like Boston Ballet celebrates Pride, it spotlights gay men while shunning queer women."³⁴

In addition to dance institutions being more open to hire genderfluid, nonbinary dancers, certain choreographers chose to create non gender specified roles. For instance, Alonzo King, the artistic director of the Alonzo King Lines Ballet in San Francisco, choreographs works that are not dictated by the traditional gender role. In fact, many parts are interchangeable in his choreography. Dance scholar Jill Nunez Jensen states that the traditional ballet world has followed a strict gender heteronormative pattern, "LINES, however, has purposefully avoided such reductive approaches by presenting work in which gender is undone, transversed, and reenacted."³⁵ I recognize that, during my time dancing at Lines, King's work doesn't depend on gender specific roles, and it was not surprising to alternate a male and female dancer embodying the same solo during a performance run.

³³ Ballez, "Join The Matronage" *Ballez.org*, accessed November 27th, 2022, <https://www.ballez.org/>

³⁴ Selby Wynn, Schwartz, "'We'll see you at the barre!': Stretching Queer Sociality with Ballez" in *Global Performance Studies*, vol.4, no.1, (2021) <https://gps.psi-web.org/issue-4-1/gps-4-1-16/>.

³⁵ Jill Nunes Jensen and Jennifer Fisher, *Transcending Gender in Ballet's Lines* (2009), 7.

In King's work, the *pas de deux*³⁶ takes a different dimension that highlights gender equity and stirs away from the traditional male-supporting female canon. One instance was dancing with Ricardo Zayas in the ballet *Signs and Wonders*. The piece was initially choreographed in 1995 for the Dance Theatre of Harlem. While the ballet wasn't in the repertoire when I was dancing with DTH, I performed the same duet in 2004 for *The Gala des Etoiles du XXème Siècle* held at the *Paris Théâtre des Champs Elysées*. My partner, DTH principal dancer Donald Williams, was the embodiment of the Alpha male, and I felt secure performing with him. Years later, I was cast to perform the same duet at Lines with Ricardo Zayas, whose dance characteristics differed significantly from Williams. Zayas combines luscious and feline movement quality with extreme precision and velocity. Because I had danced the part before, I expected the same outcome with a different partner. It was a big mistake. Instead of relying on my partner, I had an equal opportunity to take part in the action. Part of the company's philosophy nurtures the exploration the choreographic vocabulary, allowing different interpretations instead of attempting to reproduce past sensations. Zayas and I eventually figured it out, but this experience taught me the importance of versatility, adaptability, and letting go of expectations.

³⁶ A *pas de deux*, or duet in English, is a dance performed by two people.

Chapter Four: The Ranking Structure's Relevancy in Today Traditional Ballet

Companies

The corps de ballet is to a dance troupe as the spine is to the body: it provides a framework, support, context, and aesthetic form.³⁷

-Joseph Carman

The corps de ballet: Definition and Role

As I touched on the shifting role of the *pas de deux*, the ensemble of dancers who constitute a ballet company represent the corps de ballet in the classical ballet technique, the *corps de ballet*, or body of the ballet as it translates in English, consists of a group of dancers moving together and serves as a backdrop to showcase the principal dancers. The corps' main goal is to achieve unison by conforming to the ballet aesthetics in which every dancer has to look identical. In my investigation, I examine artists whose works have given more visibility to the corps in today's setting. Inspired by how these choreographers are changing the nature of ballet, I question the requirement that dancers adopt an identical look. Can the essence of the company be preserved with unconventional bodies?

“In the nineteenth century, the emergence of Romanticism brought with it the idea of pure classical ballet, which was reflected in the *Ballets Blancs*.” The term, White Ballets in English, refers to a dance in which an all-female cast wears white costumes, frequently a tutu, and embodies supernatural spirits such as ghosts, dryads, and others. French artist Marius Petipa created and revived many *Ballets Blancs*, such as *Swan Lake's* second act, *La Bayadère's* second act, and *Giselle's* second act. Petipa, often named the father of classical ballet, is considered one

³⁷ Joseph Carman, “The Silent Majority: Surviving and Thriving in the Corps de Ballet,” *Dance Magazine*, (2007).

of the most influential ballet masters and choreographers in ballet history. He was born in Marseille in 1818. After dancing in various companies in France and Russia, he was invited to become the resident choreographer for the Imperial Ballet of Russia, also known as the Mariinsky. It is important to point out that unity and conformity were crucial to preserving the uniform aesthetic of the *corps de ballet*. During that time, it was unusual to see ballerinas looking anything other than white. Fast-forwarding to the 21st century, where some of these ballets are still being performed, but where diversity in ballet has entered the conversation, it seems that companies are dragging their feet when it comes to breaking away from the *corps de ballet's* traditional aesthetic. Precious Adams, a soloist with the English National Ballet, was one of the first dancers who boldly refused to perform in pink tights and adopted flesh-tone ones instead. She had the full support of Tamara Rojo, the company director at the time. On the other side of Europe, however, Chloe Gomes Lopes, a young dancer of French-Algerian and Cape-Verdian descent who studied at the renowned Bolshoi Ballet academy accused the Staatsballett Berlin of racism. Hired in 2018 as the only dancer of color in the company, she felt confident and hopeful at first. Unfortunately, things went sour when one of the ballet mistresses made numerous racist comments. She forced Gomes Lopes to paint her skin in white to blend in the production of *Swan Lake*, and for one of *Bayadère's* performances, the ballet mistress refused to give her a veil, saying "I can't give you one: the veil is white and you're Black." In an interview with the Guardian, Lopes Gomes also accuses the company of institutional racism after the top management officials failed to act even after various incidents were brought to their attention. At first, the ballerina chose to stay quiet for fear of retaliation and endured two years of unsavory remarks and harassment, but when the direction didn't renew her contract, she went public with her mistreatment.

Reflecting on what happened to Gomes Lopes and many female dancers of color alongside her, Theresa Ruth Howard, a former Dance Theatre of Harlem company member, offers significant insight into the origin of uniformity in classical companies. She argues that for companies to commit to more equity and diversity, they need to revisit their interpretation of the repertoire to reflect the current society. She explains:

“It is here that the concept of ‘breaking the line’ emerged. Breaking the line is what a woman who is too tall, too short, too heavy, or too brown does when inserted into a row of cookie-cutter women.” The ballet company determines the ‘too,’ which sets the standards – these, by and large, adhere to white Eurocentric ballet values. In her otherness, such a woman draws attention, distracts and disrupts the eye, and ruins the tableau – or so we are taught to believe. Directors see this woman as a blight in the picture as she mars the ‘classicism’ of the entire scene. Although it is undeniably true that the primary reason why Blacks are not permitted to perform in White ballet companies is systemic racism that denies access to training and performing opportunities, this accepted concept of breaking the line has been used as artistic reasoning that reinforces and/or perpetuates their absence.”³⁸

Gomes Lopes’ misadventure reminded me of a similar incident when I started my engagement with the Bavarian State Ballet in Munich, Germany. On my first rehearsal day, the ballet mistress remarked that I looked darker than my headshot. While my experience dancing in Munich wasn’t nearly as traumatizing as Lopes Gomes’, reading her story makes me realize that some ballet companies are still quite reluctant to diversify fifteen years later.

The new role of the corps de ballet

StaatsBallett Berlin’s failure to protect one of its employees raises the question of dance companies’ strategies to diverge from the white Eurocentric body aesthetics. Are company directors willing to review and change the rules and make them more critically relevant today?

³⁸ Theresa Howard, “The Dance Theatre of Harlem’s radicalization of ballet in the 1970s and 1980s” in *(Re:)Claiming Ballet*, Adesola Akinleye (ed. 2021 Bristol: Intellect Books), 168.

Certain establishments have already started the process of rechoreographing ballets that have racist connotations. For instance, in 2016, Benjamin Millepied, was newly appointed director of the Paris Opera Ballet, commonly known as POB. A French native and former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, he wanted to revamp the institution to make it more relevant in the twenty-first century. One of his missions was to invite racial diversity. The institution currently employs more than one hundred and fifty dancers. Among them, artists with racially diverse background, are a handful and they are often at the bottom of the scale. Millepied, however, followed his plan by reshaping the Nureyev version of *La Bayadère* and replaced the “*danse des Négrillons*,” which involved a group of children performing in Blackface, with a more appropriate arrangement. In a documentary titled *La Relève*, Millepied talks at length about the racism he encountered at the historic Paris institution upon joining in 2014. “I heard someone say a black girl in a ballet is a distraction [...] If there are 25 white girls, everyone will look at the black girl. Everyone must be alike in a company, meaning everyone must be white [...] I have to shatter this racist idea,” he added. The issue raised by Millepied aligns with Howard’s theory of breaking the line explained earlier. When I sat in the audience of a crowded Opéra Garnier in December 2015, I was happily surprised to see the lead role in Pina Bausch’s *Rite of Spring* performed by mixed-raced dancer Letizia Galloni. The documentary highlights the desire for Millepied to cast Galloni as the heroine in *La Fille mal gardée*, which had never been seen before. She became the first Paris Opera Ballet woman of color to perform a lead role in classical ballet.

Additionally, Raphaëlle Delaunay, a former company member of French Caribbean descent, who danced with POB from 1992 until 1997, alludes to the many microaggressions and racist comments she experienced during her tenure in the company. When asked to give her

opinion on Millepied's vision to eradicate racism and promote diversity within the institution, she answered that she stands behind the director. She answered: "Bravo! Of course, it's polemical; a polemic that many think is useless because the Opera has 'welcomed' diversity." But to cite the few dancers who are of Vietnamese, Moroccan, Algerian, or other ethnic heritage, [...] is a bit like saying 'I have a black friend' against an accusation of racism."

In addition, the documentary reveals Millepied's intentions to modernize the role of the Corps de Ballet. In his interview with the New York Times, Millepied said "he did not want the corps de ballet to serve as wallpaper, but to dance as individuals." He also shared his intention to eliminate the internal dance competitions organized within the institution, which was the only way for the dancers to move up the ranks.

His role as the director of Dance at POB was short-term. Millepied's desire to depart from the century-old traditions ingrained in the institution to focus on developing individual artists instead of reinforcing the line formations expected in the traditional corps de ballet was a sign of disrespect towards the institution. While his tenure did not last, he left a mark and set the tone for the advancement of the art form. Millepied announced his resignation at the beginning of 2016.

Besides Millepied, other dance professionals have observed the changing role of the *corps de ballet*. For instance, Joseph Carman's take on its meaning in today's dance world proves interesting. He writes: "the corps de ballet is to a dance troupe as the spine is to the body: it provides a framework, support, context, and aesthetic form. But as dance has moved into the 21st century, the demands on corps dancers have changed, making them more than just a backdrop for the principals."³⁹ Like Millepied's vision, Carman suggests that choreographers

³⁹ Joseph Carman, "The Silent Majority: Surviving and Thriving in the Corps de Ballet," *Dance Magazine*. July 2007.

have given more visibility to the company members in today's setting. For instance, in 1995, English choreographer Matthew Bourne first revolutionized the gender norm with his version of *Swan Lake*, performed with an all-male cast of swans.

Moreover, one section of Crystal Pite's *Emergence*, a piece set on Pacific Northwest Ballet, combines two groups of male and female company members crossing paths and dancing energetically across the stage. The movement is very athletic, and the audience is directly exposed to the extreme physicality of the choreography. Pite's artistic choices use a mixed-gender group of dancers and showcase the movement's effort to steer from the tradition of representing an all-female ensemble portraying ethereality.

My experience of being a corps de ballet member with the Bavarian State Ballet

Having danced with several notable companies, I am familiar with the technical demands placed on the *corps de ballet* and its significance to the art form. For instance, I spent two seasons dancing with the Bavarian State Ballet in Munich where my official position was *Gruppen Tänzerin*, or dancer in the *corps de ballet*, although I got the opportunity to be featured in soloist parts. But one ballet that tested my technical and mental skills was *La Bayadère*, especially in the *Kingdom of the Shades* section, which showcases the female company members' technical prowess. The work, originally choreographed by Marius Petipa and first performed by the Imperial Ballet in Russia in 1877, represents the essence of the *Ballets Blancs* era. The *Shades* section is marked by a procession of dancers who execute a series of arabesques⁴⁰ down a ramp before running into a symmetrical formation to perform an adage. The

⁴⁰ *Arabesque* is an essential step in the classical ballet technique in which the dancer is required to balance on one leg, the other being extended in the back and lifted off the floor while keeping the back straight.

challenge is to stay in perfect unison and synchronization with the rest of the dancers while working on the individual performance quality; thus, there is a double duty to be technically excellent and simultaneously attend to the group. Performing the *Shades* section made me a better artist and brought the personal satisfaction of having accomplished such a technical challenge. It also got me closer to my dance colleagues with whom I shared the stage. Dance critic and scholar Kate Mattingly and former ballerina Laura Kay Young reveal a similarity between the functionality of a traditional ballet company and the eusociality⁴¹ of the honeybees. They write, “in a colony, bees demonstrate democratic decision-making through their communication about new nest-sites by conveying the benefits of a site through the vivacity of the dancing. [...]”⁴² What the writers are referring to is the ability for honeybees to come up with an organized configuration that allow them to operate without a leader. Similarly, corps de ballet dancers succeed in creating the impression of “a coherent whole by using decision-making processes to create a homogenous aesthetic as well as democracy and solidarity among the dancers.”⁴³

During the *Shades*’ rehearsal, I faced many challenges, such as not falling off the ramp, staying focused, and keeping up with the rest of the dancers. I can relate to Mattingly, and Young’s research, which highlights that *corps de ballet* members are more than dancing bodies who replicate movement, and I appreciate the push toward the fact that dancers are thinkers and

⁴¹ Eusociality represents sociality’s highest level of organization

⁴² Kate Mattingly and Laura Kay Young, “Cooperation, Communication, and Collaboration: The Sociality of a Corps De Ballet,” *Dance Chronicle* 43 (2), (2020), 136.

⁴³ Kate Mattingly and Laura Kay Young, “Cooperation, Communication, and Collaboration: The Sociality of a Corps De Ballet,” *Dance Chronicle* 43 (2), (2020), 136.

excellent decision-makers. Nevertheless, when looking at the larger scale, *corps* members still must respond to the ballet master or mistress throughout the rehearsal process; hence the balance of power lays in the hands of whom are at the top of the hierarchical pyramid.

While there might not be such room for the *corps de ballet* to shift of power in traditional representation, choreographers like Pite, Bourne, and Millepied, among many others, have successfully reshaped traditional works and have created new ones to recast the power of the *corps de ballet*. By expanding its limitations, they want to stretch the boundaries further.

On a more personal touch, the *Kingdom of the Shades* has instigated in me the desire to revisit the section and reinvent the choreography for my thesis performance. I want to adapt it to my cast whose aesthetic attributes differ from the traditional ones, and to make it more reflective of the current times. I mentioned earlier my inquiry to keep the essence of ballet if it's stripped off the traditional elements. Can the soul remain without uniform bodies moving in shape free formations, and without their white tutus, pointe shoes?

Chapter Five: How my Research Investigation Feeds my Choreographic Work

Dances are thought structures created by the manipulation of energies that exist in matter through laws, which govern the space and movement directions of everything that exists.⁴⁴

-Alonzo King

My choreographic influences

When people ask me what kind of ballet technique I teach, my answer is, “I teach hybrid.” The French are credited to have codified the classical ballet technique, but other countries have developed their own methodologies throughout the years such as the Cecchetti, Vaganova or Cuban methods. I’ve studied in Europe and the United States with teachers of various ballet training. Because I trained and worked on both continents, I consider my teaching approach to be a hybrid of the dance education and professional experience I received. The French school influenced my early dance training. Although I never attended the Paris Opera Ballet School, my dance teacher regularly took pedagogical courses taught by members of the prestigious school. Plus, I would participate in summer intensives with former professional dancers from the same company. But when I moved to Switzerland to attend the *Rudra Béjart* Art school, I was trained by a Russian dancer, Azari Plisetsky, the brother of the world-class ballerina Maya Plisetskaya. He was the primary ballet teacher and taught the morning technique class. As expected, his Russian training influenced his teaching philosophy. Still, when he moved to Cuba as a principal dancer, he founded the Cuban training technique with Fernando

⁴⁴ Alonzo, King, *Linesballet.org*, accessed December 3rd, 2022, <https://linesballet.org/person/alonzo-king/>

and Alicia Alonso, which is very present in his teaching methodology. Later, when I relocated to New York, I was exposed to the Balanchine technique.

Today, I feel like the melting pot of various dance methodologies I received has influenced how I perceive classical ballet techniques and the way I teach. Similarly, my choreographic process is enriched by the diverse repertoire I was exposed to, ever since I was a young student. I credit one of my very first dance teachers, Véronique Claparède who always encouraged me to go and see live performance. I was also extremely lucky to live near a town where the arts held an essential part in the culture of its inhabitants. In fact, the city of Montpellier has been the host of *Le Festival de Montpellier Danse*, and it is there that I saw the most mind-blowing performances, such as the Béjart Ballet Lausanne, The Ballett Frankfurt, The Batsheva Dance Company, and the Netherlands Dans Theater, among many others. The festival has also been well-known for mixing tradition with avant-garde productions. While dancing with Lines, I got the chance to come full circle and perform on the same stage.

Pushing boundaries through Limb's Theorem

I never realized that one day, I would get the chance to perform in Forsythe's *Limb's Theorem*, the piece I mention in the introduction. The American choreographer is known for stretching the classical ballet technique past its limits and finding new avenues. He shares his choreographic approach:

“When you speak about the vocabulary of classical dance, you're talking about ideas. You say, this is a place the human body can occupy. I use ballet, because I use ballet dancers, and I engage with the knowledge in their bodies. I think ballet is a very, very good idea, which often gets pooh-poohed. Let me make a metaphor. It's like saying that a compass isn't valuable

because it has four points, and it divides the world into top and bottom, and orients you in a certain way. I see ballet as a point of departure – it’s a body of knowledge, not an ideology.”⁴⁵

Limb’s Theorem’s rehearsal process profoundly expanded my vision as a ballet dancer and influenced my choreographic work. The account of events I’m sharing below took place in Munich in the month of December of 2004. “Be fierce,” I recall William Forsythe cheerfully shouted after he watched an intense run of *Limb’s Theorem*. At the time, Forsythe had come to Munich to apply his final touch before the première. *Limb’s Theorem* is a three-act masterpiece that exhibits technological mastery mixed with astonishing human prowess in which the body’s limitations are being put to the test. There is always a limited time for choreographers to come and set work for a guest company. In the case of resetting *Limb’s Theorem* for the Bavarian State Ballet, for five weeks, the cast had the privilege of working with four répétiteurs, Ana Roman, Jill Johnson, Noah Gerber, and Chris Roman, all former or current company members. William Forsythe came to do fine-tuning and reshape certain sections in the last days before opening night. We began rehearsals with a warm-up involving movements inspired by the Laban-Bartenieff Movement Analysis⁴⁶. The first two weeks of rehearsal were dedicated to getting acquainted with Forsythe’s improvisation techniques. Then, each ballet master guided us in improvisational exercises involving the multi-dimensional use of space, change of levels, and directions. We also applied the Forsythe theory that shape-making starts at any body point.

Additionally, I retain from this experience the collaborative effort in which the entire cast was learning and participating in unison, regardless of rank. It is important to point out that the

⁴⁵ Roslyn Sulcas, “Kinetic Isometries,” *Dance International* V. 23, No. 2 (1995), 4-9 Ill.

⁴⁶ The Laban/Bartenieff movement system, created by Rudolf Von Laban and developed by Irmgard Bartenieff, is a methodology that provides interpretation and documentation of the human movement.

Bavarian State ballet is a traditional company that operates on a hierarchy system. However, in contemporary pieces such as *Limb's Theorem*, it is usual for *corps* members to perform featured parts. I also recall how first soloist Lucia Lacara gracefully “excused” herself from the cast because she wasn’t interested in improvising, which is a crucial component throughout the piece. Eventually, each dancer was assigned a specific role, but diving into the Forsythe improvisation technique beforehand proved essential. The ballet masters shared that when the piece was first created in 1990, it was an explorative project aiming to generate innovative movement and expression through dance. Part I could be seen as more traditional because of the integration of pointe work and the “*Agon*” section, an homage to Balanchine’s masterpiece of the same name. In this section, each protagonist engages in a skill contest similar to Mr. B’s choreography; two female dancers involved in a call-response correspondence are later joined by a group of male dancers out-dancing one another. Performing the *Agon* part was exhilarating because I had danced the original ballet during my engagement with the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Still, I pushed the boundaries to the extreme in Forsythe’s version. I was also dancing alongside one of the first soloists; thus, I had no choice but *to be fierce*, to reprise Forsythe’s expression.

In Part II, the improvisational components I mentioned early appear consistently. This section, at times presented on its own in performances, is called *Enemy in the Figure*. I recall being on stage before the curtain rose, laying down near a rope in a white leotard. As I engaged in an improvisational score, I was occasionally interrupted by another dancer, who cued me to stop and start again after she rearranged my pose. In *Enemy in the Figure*, the props enhanced the dark atmosphere in a *film noir* style. First, the undulated wall diagonally placed across the stage had many functions: stage divider, rest area, and costume change location. The rope mentioned above was used as a pulse, mirroring Thom Willems’s vigorous electro-acoustic

score. Lastly, an integral part of the choreography was a floodlight on wheels that bathed the dancers or voluntarily obscured them. I remember watching *Enemy in The Figure* in 1998 at the BAM theater in New York. I saw the piece two nights in a row, and the second time, at about ten minutes into the performance, the curtain came down; William Forsythe appeared on stage announcing the piece had to restart due to technical issues. It turned out that the moving light accidentally got unplugged. While there were no such issues during the performances with the Bavarian State Ballet, with the intricate choreographic patterns and props, it was paramount for every dancer to stay focused when performing chaos, as the slightest mistake could have derailed the flow.

In Part III, the choreography is designed in more massive ensemble sections. I remember feeling a sense of liberation as I was moving alongside the rest of my colleagues. The closing section symbolized a culmination of a collective effort and camaraderie we all gathered through the process. Performing *Limb's Theorem* remains one of the highlights of my career. It represented a dream come true and was an opportunity to decipher an intricate choreographic and learning process. I enjoyed the decision-making aspect, and the sense of ownership that resulted from the improvisation sections. This newfound way of working was different from dancing traditional ballet roles for which the script is already written and needs to be respected. My experience with performing *Limb's Theorem* proved essential when I joined the Alonzo King Lines Ballet, whose rehearsal process allows the dancers to contribute to the choreography. I joined the company in 2007, and the ballet *Rasa*, which was one of my favorite pieces from the repertoire was the first ballet whose creative process I was part of. This piece also pushed my mind and body to limits I didn't realize I could achieve. Being part of the company for seven years shaped my current choreographic and pedagogical methodologies.

Finding the essence of the work with Alonzo King's Rasa

Alonzo King is the co-founder and artistic director of the Alonzo King Lines Ballet, commonly known as Lines. The visionary choreographer is well-known for his teaching approach rooted in the natural element and the laws of physics. The years I spent working with King at Lines have showed me the different facets of the meaning of dance and have made me rethink the way I look at the art form. I had just turned thirty at the time, and I was ready to take a more active role in the creative process. As I previously mentioned, *Rasa* became the first piece whose collaborative process I was part of. It remained one of my favorite ballets, and the reason behind might have been because of the challenges I faced and that I had to overcome at throughout the rehearsals. Firstly, working at Lines was quite different from the companies I previously joined. Traditionally, dancers are called to specific rehearsal times, but at Lines, the schedule was the same for everyone. We were all part of the daily practice.

The challenges I faced were with memory and speed. King has a unique way of working that requires sharp thinking, and full body and mind investment. At several instances, I found difficult to retain the choreography, and once I had assimilated the steps, King would speed up the tempo. It became difficult for me to catch up with the other cast members and I grew frustrated, tensing my entire body. After a few months of struggles I managed to overcome the challenge, but not until I realized I wasn't allowing myself to adapt to the new process, in which the time spent in the studio is as important as the performance. In fact, King often said the dance studio represents what the laboratory is to a scientist. It is the place for trials, failures, and successes. For King, making mistakes is beneficial and valuable information for growth.

The reason behind my choice to write about my experiences working on *Limb's Theorem* and *Rasa*, invites reflection on the choreographic process for my thesis project. One of my goals is to investigate the outcome of blending classical ballet with various dance forms, hence my desire to play with interdisciplinarity. This idea flourished in parts when I asked undergraduate student Debanshi Chowdhury to assist me in a project due for one of my courses. The assignment was to reshape a variation from the classical or contemporary ballet repertoire and make it more culturally relevant. I chose a variation from the ballet *Bakti*, choreographed by Maurice Béjart in 1968. The piece focuses on the love stories of significant Hindi divinities. While the piece was revolutionary at the time of conception, because Béjart combined two classical dance forms from the East and the West, I wanted to revisit the work to bring the classical Indian form more to the forefront. Chowdhury taught me basic steps from the *Odissi* style that I incorporated into the original choreography. I also performed bare feet, instead of ballet shoes, to stay authentic to the Eastern tradition. Additionally, Chowdhury revealed that some of the original steps would not be appropriate in the Indian dance repertoire. For instance, several times throughout the solo, the dancer continuously swayed her hips right and left. Chowdhury noted that the pelvic floor should stay still, while the shift happens in the ribcage. Such discovery reveals the importance of accuracy when using cultural inspiration. Without questioning Béjart's vision, there are certain works, and especially in the classical ballet repertoire whose stories need to be revisited to be more culturally relevant. What Chowdhury taught me, gave me a deeper appreciation for the classical Indian dance heritage, and from that stemmed the idea of revisiting a section from a traditional ballet to bring it to the present time.

Another inspiration I drew from working with visionary choreographers like King and Forsythe, is the balance between teaching set material and engaging with the dancers' personal

choices. For instance, in the beginning of my piece, the cast replicates classical ballet movements from the barre. The scene eventually shifts to a series of improvised scores created by the dancers. Working this way allows me to connect with the artists and discover their personalities through the way they move. It's also a great tool to blend set choreography with improvisation, and then integrate my set score to adapt it to them. I recall one section of *Limb's Theorem* in which one of the dancers, Matthew Cranitch, struggled with the choreography. When Forsythe came the week before the show, he reshaped the entire solo for him. It might be surprising for a person of Forsythe's caliber to choose to alter the choreography instead of replacing Matthew with a more skilled dancer, which many other choreographers would have done. I was impressed by his decision because he adapted his work to Matthew. Such action made me aware of how to approach movement on dancers with diverse dance training and think of movement as an interchangeable tool to fit the artist instead of forcing the choreography onto the dancer.

However, while I draw from my experience in classical and contemporary ballet, not all my cast comes from a ballet foundation. Thus, one of the challenges I faced while casting for my piece was finding dancers with a strong ballet background who could realize my choreographic vision. However, it is essential to point out that the ballet technique at UMD, although taught regularly throughout the program, is not a requirement. The modern technique is the central area of focus. Thus, I had to adapt to the demography of students. I could have decided to use professional ballet dancers, but my goal was to work with college dance majors. Indeed, as an art educator in the university system, I encounter students whose technicity and proficiency levels are diverse. My role is to train, encourage, nurture, inspire, and bring them to the next level. As a result, my cast is very different. I mentioned Debanshi Chowdhury earlier, whose background lies classical Indian technique. When I asked my cast to share their relationship with ballet, she

confessed it was foreign to her, and she felt intimidated. While she feels that way, I see some similarities between Odissi and Classical ballet, such as both disciplines require using the external rotation of the hips and legs. But what is fascinating about Chowdhuri is the fact that she has successfully created a new dance style that incorporates Odissi dance with hip hop.

Overall, I see an inspiration in using interdisciplinarity and blending various dance forms. In the current era, I find it essential to find connection in multiple art forms, which allows a wider perspective of where ballet can expand its horizon in the future. In the next chapter, I highlight some of the artists who have informed and changed my dance practice.

Female choreographers' influence

Throughout my dance career, I never got the opportunity to work with female artists. Being an understudy in Maguy Marin's *Groosland* when dancing with the Lyon Opera Ballet was the closest I got. Maguy Marin, is a reputable choreographer from France whose works defy the traditional ballet canon. *Groosland* depicts a happy dance performed by overweight characters to Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*. The challenge of the piece was keeping the stamina while performing in fat suits. Although I never got the chance to perform the piece on stage, the studio rehearsals demanded significant physical involvement. More recently, I have been interested in works by Sharon Eyal, Crystal Pite and Francesca Harper.

Eyal recently revisited Nijinski's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, titled *Faunes*. I was drawn by the sensuality behind her movement language. In an interview with Alienor de Foucaud for the *Octave* online magazine, Eyal explains her work doesn't separate classical ballet technique from modern, and she finds her inspiration from experience. She is also drawn towards working with instinct, and paying attention to details, which is distinct in her work. For instance, in

Faunes, the way the dancers used their spine and torso enhanced their sensuality and felinity, which, combined with a guttural physicality gave a sense of power and control that commanded the stage. Witnessing such quality of movement inspires my choreographic approach, as I tend to break away from the traditional ballet canon by allowing more fluidity and expansion in the upper body instead of promoting an erected spine.

Crystal Pite, who danced with William Forsythe, bases her work on the human experience. At a conference in Vancouver, she said “I try to create performances that connect audiences to the stories that are contained in their own body.”⁴⁷ What I find striking in her choreographies is the ability to work with large groups as well as individuals. She has set pieces on big international companies such as Paris Opera Ballet, English National Ballet, or Pacific Northwest Ballet; yet the company she founded, *Kidd Pivot*, holds under ten performers. On February 21st, 2022, I watched a performance of *Body and Soul* by the Paris Opera Ballet at the *Palais Garnier*. The work captured conflict and connectivity between two entities, in a form of a duet, or a dancer in relation to the group. There are a few elements in Pite’s works, notably, the use of ripple effect, which is visually stunning and powerful. I was inspired to use this choreographic tool in my piece to create an effect of infinity and continuity.

Former DTH member and current director of the Ailey II company, Francesca Harper, who also worked with William Forsythe, is another choreographer I look up to. Her work crosspollinates into multidisciplinary endeavors. In March of 2022, Ailey II came to Towson University to tech their upcoming tour program. I got the opportunity to watch *Freedom Series* that Harper constructed in collaboration with the dancers. The work captures her personal

⁴⁷ Crystal Pite, “Public Salon: Choreographer of Kidd Pivot,” *YouTube*, accessed December 1st, 2022, 1:28, <https://youtu.be/cOjTd4Oa-js>

reflection, that shifts toward the anticipation of a brighter future. After the run, during a Q&A panel with the Towson University dance majors, Harper confided that the LED lightbulbs she used in her piece was a metaphor for hope in light of tragic events, such as the consequences of the pandemic. I've witnessed Harper's work on numerous occasions, and I am in awe of the universes she creates. What I find inspiring is the quality of coaching I witnessed during the run at TU. From the manner Harper engages with the dancers and the soothing tone of the voice, to the way she delivers feedback, I could sense the strong bond between her and the dancers.

The few artists I chose to highlight are only a glimpse of the number of already established or upcoming female choreographers. Although the three women have very distinctive choreographic process, I am drawn to the level of creativity, and the intensity of the physicality that they can pull out of the dancers. As a dance educator, I want to be able to inspire and uplift each student I teach. Learning about every one of these phenomenal artists was a source of inspiration when I created *Bodily Intelligence*.

Bodily Intelligence's creative process

While the artists and choreographies I mentioned above have contributed to my thesis's choreographic research, I was inspired by the eclectic group of dancers I've selected for my project. It was important for me to work with undergraduate students who major in dance. I felt comfortable to share my lived experiences and to prepare them to the professional world. *Bodily Intelligence* denotes an amalgam of influences and experiences related to my dance career. It was a journey in which ballet takes multiple forms, where it originated, the icons it encountered, the shape it can take, and of course, which direction it will go.

In the first part, the piece opens on the dancers in silhouette executing a series of steps that would normally be seen at the ballet barre,⁴⁸ and that quickly shifts to an improvisational section. For the second part, I had already workshoped the section during a showcase in the previous semester. The intention behind this segment invites suspense, a sense of connectivity and tension, contrasted by individualism. In the third part, enters the character of Josephine Baker, supported by a recording of the artist's interpretation of Piaf's *La Vie En Rose*. It was important for me to include Baker, symbol of successful unconventionality in dance.

In the fourth section, my vision was to revisit *Bayadère's Kingdom of the Shades*. The objective was to maintain group sections in unison but without the symmetry of the lines found in traditional classical ballet. I wanted to experiment with using the ripple effect instead of straight formations. The dancers' upper bodies were more fluid, undulating and replicating the moves of underwater organisms. Plus, the costumes differed significantly from the original version in which nude combi shorts and flowing blue shirts replaced the all-white tutus.

The previous semester I had the opportunity to make a piece for the graduate spring concert, which allowed me to create a starting point for the thesis choreography. But along the road, I made changes, and I felt most compelled to build on the dancers and feed off their energy. In the finale, the intensity picks up, reflecting the need for the dance world to act upon the changes of the current era.

One aspect that might have been unfamiliar to the cast is that I don't always rely on musical phrasing and counting when I create. I usually start developing a choreographic score and then add sound. For instance, the music I used for this project combines various artists and

⁴⁸ The ballet barre is part of the classical ballet technique in which, specific exercises are being executed in a specific order to warm up the body.

ambient sounds, resulting in multiple changing tempos, which prove challenging to count. As a result, the dancers must rely on each other to connect and stay together. Being in unison should come from an invisible bond with the group instead of an auditory prompt. This process was often used during my time at Lines, where King values the human connection over the system of counting to the beat.

I have worked with the dancers on the thesis project for a few months. Moving forward, I would be interested in revisiting the *Kingdom of the Shades* section from *La Bayadère* to explore further concepts. For instance, while I focused on deconstructing the symmetry and the lines, I am curious about combining multiple dance techniques. I touched on the idea in some sections of the opening and the finale when I asked the dancers to create a phrase using their most personal language. My experiment witnessed a conversation between Indian dance, hip-hop, modern, classical ballet, and post-modern. It would also have been interesting if I had asked all the dancers to teach a segment of their improvisation phrase to each other, which would have encouraged the cross-pollination of dance techniques. On a larger scale, could the future of ballet lay in interdisciplinarity? I recall having to learn Tai Chi Chuan⁴⁹ at the end of Alonzo King's *Long River, High Sky*, a piece made in collaboration with China's Shaolin Monks. The experience was fulfilling and transformative and broadened the possibility of the ballet language.

Lastly, I desired to work with dancers of various body types, particularly brilliant artists with fuller body frames, often invisible in ballet. Looking toward the future, I question whether the art form is ready to shift its standards and base its employment criteria solely on talent instead of physical appearance.

⁴⁹ Tai Chi Chuan is a Chinese Martial Art that conveys a series of slow, meticulous, and coordinated movements.

Conclusion

The Eurocentric art form of ballet that for centuries embodied exclusivity and conformity has shifted to reflect the current world state. My research delved into numerous yet specific areas whose trailblazer artists, such as Arthur Mitchell, William Forsythe, Alonzo King, and many others, have profoundly contributed to the cultural shift of ballet in the twenty-first century.

Additionally, I've included the icon Josephine Baker whose nonconformance became the base of her successful career. It was also paramount for me to highlight her connection to ballet and Balanchine, one of the most influential figures in American ballet history.

While steps are taken to promote racial and gender diversity and reinvest in *corps de ballet* members, more has yet to be done in the future. In a performance at the Harman Hall on October 5th, 2022, DTH presented a work inspired by the life of the multitalented artist Hazel Scott.

Artistic Director Virginia Johnson confessed in the video that opens the piece that she had never heard about Scott before starting the project with choreographer Tiffany Rea-Fisher. Johnson explained that one of DTH's current missions is to bring to light the untold stories of notable artists of color who have contributed to the art and culture in America. As we move forward, I agree with Johnson on celebrating such artists' importance. And I want to push the boundaries further, as I'm interested in the ballet world telling new stories aligned with the present societal shifts and changes.

On a personal reflection, I never thought I would realize my goal to become a professional ballerina because, from the very start, it was evident that I didn't have all the physical attributes. I didn't have enough turnout, my legs didn't go high enough, my back wasn't flexible enough, and I wasn't thin enough. Yet I managed to work for four different international ballet companies. Writing about the unconventional ballet body in the twenty-first century

proved essential because I tell my students that, although I didn't fit the mold, I made it, and so can they.

Appendix A: The Dancers' Voices: Recorded Transcripts of the Cast's Relationship with Ballet

Part of the rehearsal process was to gather the cast members' relationships with ballet. I've asked each of the dancers to record their reflections. I thought to use the recordings in the piece, but my original plan did not make the cut. However, I find important to share the dancers' voices to gain a better understanding of where they stand in relationship with ballet.

Anna Adhikari recorded on September 2nd 2022:

“Classical ballet is my life. The only thing that I care about attempting to master even though it's impossible. I feel my most powerful, yet also my most vulnerable in ballet class. I want to be perfect I'm willing to sacrifice time and effort to do that. It's an obsession; doing the same thing over and over trying to be better. There is comfort in the fact that we are all desperate for the same thing. Despite it all, I cannot live without ballet. It's the ultimate satisfaction and gives me the most joy.”

Isabella Grady, recorded on August 31st, 2022:

“Classical ballet was my first introduction to dance, the catalyst of my exploration of movement, and for that I'm grateful to it. However, although beautiful, I'm not confident ballet is for me, or that I am for ballet. It was only in my ballet classes that I was encouraged to lose weight, or had my thighs and butt grabbed and squeezed, as instructors told me to get rid of them. There's definitely space for a dancer to change their body, but it should be for functionality and health, not aesthetics. I found that in dance classes outside of ballet, the focus

has been more about how my body moves, and less on what's wrong with my build. And for that reason, I find myself gravitating towards other styles of dance, as I've gotten older."

Debanshi Chowdhuri, recorded on September 25th, 2022:

"To me, ballet is a completely different world that I have yet to explore. It is foreign to me. It's foreign to my mind and body. Every single time I think of ballet, and I'm intimidated; because I think of all the years that I lost not learning the techniques and flexibility and strength, all linked to ballet. All my life I grew up learning a different classical dance form whose aesthetics are completely different from ballet. And when I wanted to explore and expand my knowledge to Western dance forms, I felt like I wasn't enough because I didn't have those years of extensive training and in ballet. And as a result, I felt like an outsider."

Emily Adams, recorded on September 3rd, 2022:

"I love the artistry, delicacy, and performance aspects that accompany ballet. It is the first dance style that I was acquainted with, and it feels the most like home to me. Every gesture that I do is influenced by my dance practice, and the movement vocabulary that I have become so used to. Whenever I do ballet, I feel regal and like I am pushing myself to the limits of what the human body can do. To me, nothing feels better than coming out of the ballet class, knowing that I will be sore tomorrow, because it means that I am working as hard as I possibly can, and that I am improving as a ballet dancer. However, there are definitely aspects of ballet that I do not enjoy. Ballet is incredibly restrictive, and historically has been exclusive of people and bodies who look different. Up until a few years ago, I had no idea that pointe shoes are meant to blend in with lighter skin tones until I saw dancers of color talking about the struggles they face with

pancaking their shoes, or finding dancewear that blends in with their skin tone. I also noticed that ballet can be intimidating and exclusive. Often, dancers who do not begin their dance training with ballet feel worried about the classes, because there is an expectation that someone has been doing ballet their entire lives. Competition within the studio and between dancers is almost innate, and it can make those newcomers and seasoned dancers, feel unnecessarily compared to other dancers, and inferior to those who may have better technique. Ballet is a gorgeous and wonderfully expressive artistic practice, and it is definitely one that I have grown to appreciate and respect as I have gotten older. But there is a side of the ballet world that is sinister, and at times dangerous.”

Gaya Schechter, recorded on September 3rd, 2022:

“Ballet has been at the heart of my training for many years. It is the foundation for my individual movement practice, and I am grateful for the technical bases it gave and continues to give me. However, my relationship with ballet has also caused me pain. It forced my body to move in unhealthy ways, and it cost me to form an unhealthy relationship with my appearance.”

Genevieve Fernandez, recorded on August 31st, 2022:

“Ballet provides me a sense of regality, strength and pride. There is a sense of strictness within the dance form, which allows me to highlight my authenticity in a formulated way.”

Avital Dresin, recorded on October 2nd, 2022:

“Grace, strength, power. When I was younger, ballet class felt restrictive. I felt as though I wasn’t able to fully expand my movement, and it was not my favorite dance form. As a grew

up, my personal relationship with ballet changed. now in ballet class, I'm able to experiment with my technique, strengthen my muscles, and feel empowered. I'm able to channel different qualities of movement, and explore new ways of moving. I always thought that ballet is the foundation of all dance forms. In my own practice, ballet technique was crucial as it did help me in another dance forms. However, this statement is not necessarily true. There are so many dance forms that originated before classical ballet and exist today and have nothing to do with ballet. It is not necessary to have a ballet background to excel and dance. Grace, strength, power. It has taught me to embrace grace. Ballet helped me improve my strength, and my body, and ballet makes me feel powerful.”

Javi Padilla, recorded on September 14th, 2022:

“Ballet is a tool, a method, a language in which the human body is tested on its extremes. For me, ballet feels like a meditation, a quick dip into movement that, with a few words strung together, create exercises, phrases, and across the floors that are recognizable to the trained ear. Ballet pushes the human body to the extremes of linearity, balance, grace, and beauty, that pushes audiences to be in awe, to place dancers on a higher pedestal. The classical ballet canon accentuates gender by placing it on a binary of energy. The female ballet body is regal, soft, beautiful, and luscious, whereas the male ballet body is tough, commanding, and domineering of the stage space. Where does queerness land on the spectrum? Is there a space for trans, non-binary, and non-explicable or identifiable gender identities? I'm excited by the push of the contemporary world that translates ballet's unique movement framework into a progressive and individual art form that can cultivate the technique further, without its known exclusionary tactics of the past.

Appendix B: Pictures of the rehearsal process, and the performances



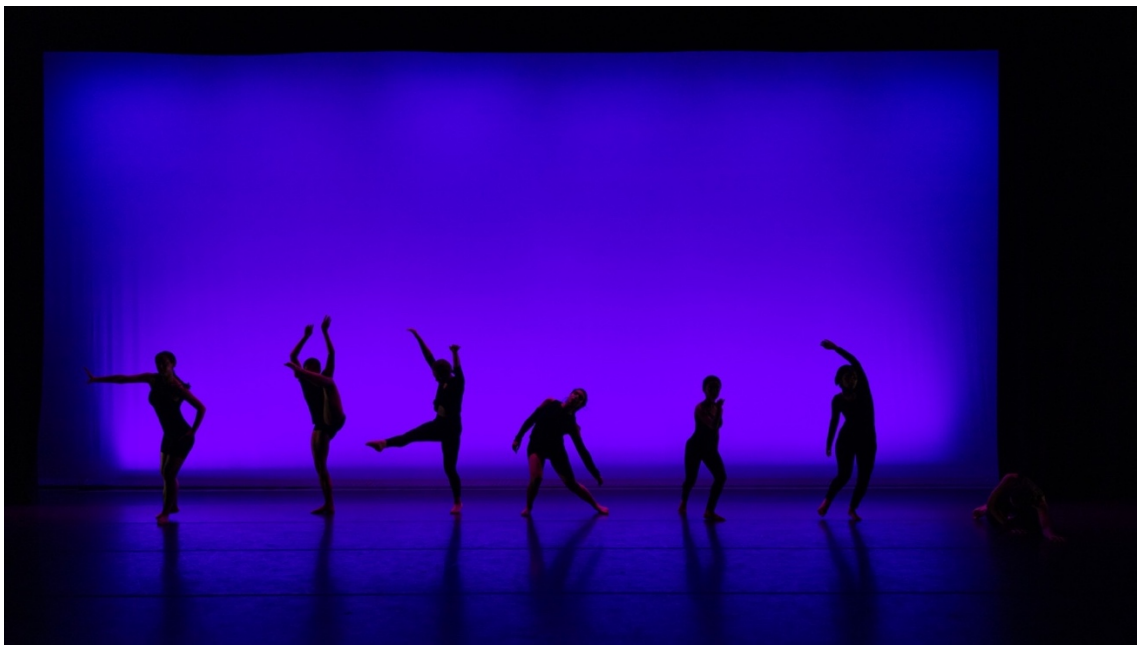
[Image 1: Still of rehearsal footage at UMD, College Park on October 20th, 2022. Dancers left to right: Anna Adhikari and Javi Padilla. Photography by Caroline Rocher Barnes]



[Images 2 and 3: Production still of *Section A* at UMD's Dance Theater on April 2nd, 2022. Dancers: Anna Adhikari and Javi Padilla. Photography by Jonathan Hsu]



[Image 4: Production still of *Section A* at UMD's Dance Theater on April 2nd, 2022. Dancers left to right: Javi Padilla, Cailey Solano, and Isabella Grady. Photography by Jonathan Hsu]



[Image 5: Production still of *Section A* at UMD's Dance Theater on April 2nd, 2022. Dancers left to right: Cailey Solano, Isabella Grady, Genevieve Fernandez, Avital Dresin, Emily Adams, Debanshi Chowdhuri and Anna Adhikari. Photography by Jonathan Hsu]



[Image 6: Production still of *Bodily Intelligence* at UMD's Dance Theater on November 19th, 2022. Dancers left to right: Isabella Grady, Debanshi Chowdhury, Genevieve Fernandez, Avital Dresin and Gaya Schechter. Photography by Dylan Singleton.]



[image7: Production still of *Bodily Intelligence* at UMD's Dance Theater on November 19th, 2022. Dancer Gaya Schechter with the cast. Photography by Dylan Singleton.]

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