

The Oppression of the Female Body by the Male throughout Ballet History

Woman is naturally inferior in matters requiring action and imagination. Woman obligingly accepts her lowly place. Woman is the object of beauty and desire. Woman is first in ballet by default, because she is more beautiful than the opposite gender.

– George Balanchine (Adair 1992, 116)

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Abstract:

Throughout ballet's history, the ballerina and her body have been controlled, restrained, and manipulated by the male gaze, whether that be choreographer, artistic director, ballet master, *danseur*, or patron. From the royal courts of France to Romanticism at the Paris Opéra, Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes to George Balanchine and the New York City Ballet, to recent contemporary experiences, men have used their status of power to control the presentation, movement, and availability of the female body in ballet. Because dance operates within a culture that has traditionally granted men power over women, the feminine ballet body has been constructed by the patriarchal nature of European-American society and sustained by the male gaze. Examining ballet history from a feminist lens, this research explores how men have governed the ballerina, revealing that the seemingly female-centric art form of ballet denies the female dancer agency and autonomy over her own body and career.

“Ballet is hard. And then you die,” my ballet teacher used to tell us. From the age of nine, in our class of twenty girls, we faced ourselves in the mirror, constantly battling the image reflected back at us. We were told that various parts of our bodies were not “suited” for ballet, our legs weren’t long enough, our arms too large, our thighs too muscular, and our backs not flexible enough. As we got older, this developed into “your chest is too big,” “you have too many curves,” and “clearly, you had too much to eat today.” When I was eighteen, I began taking company class at a ballet studio in Miami. I returned after winter break, and the artistic director told me I looked thinner; my thighs had slimmed out. I didn’t know how to respond, simultaneously shocked and secretly pleased, as he proceeded to say, “Now you have to keep the weight off.” Every female I have studied ballet with throughout my life has never had a strictly positive relationship with ballet and certainly not with their bodies. Body dysmorphia, disordered eating, extreme self-esteem, and body-image issues have been shared experiences, plaguing our daily lives both in and outside the studio.

Dance is a part of culture and is therefore influenced by and in conversation with societal conventions. European-American society’s patriarchal and hierarchical models of the body have existed from ancient times to the present, “establisih[ing] woman’s body as inferior and an inverted version of the male body” (Adair 1992, 36). The logic of a patriarchal social order considered the female body as something to be “controlled, constrained, disguised, or denied” (30). Because dance, in particular ballet, operates within a society and culture that has traditionally granted men power, the feminine ballet body is “dominated by the patriarchy and sustained by the male gaze, it does not embody potential for women’s empowerment” (Markula & Clark 2018, xxiv). The archetype of the ballerina portrays an ideal of femininity, “unblemished and ethereal... an idealized and stylized creature...[with] a kind of eternal virginity about her” (Kelly 2012, 1). Yet, throughout history, the image of the ballerina has been discolored by “institutional suffering, starvation, poverty, and sexual exploitation,” as she has “had to suffer enormous deprivation to maintain the ideal of the classical dancer as a symbol of perfection” (2). The oppression of women and the control and commodification of women’s bodies in society infiltrates the experience and opportunity of the female dancer: “objectification of women’s bodies and the display

of the [ballerina] limits female dancers' potential power" (Adair 1992, 61). The first ballet dancers in the royal courts of France were men, who danced female roles *en travesti* because women were not allowed to participate in this courtly display of etiquette. Court ballets "were used to reinforce the monarch's (male) power and to celebrate the (male) status quo" (89). From its beginnings, ballet was created *by* men *for* men. Western social construction places women in a less powerful position than men; thus, "It follows within the logic of patriarchal social order that...the power of the [female] body must be controlled, disguised, or denied" (30).

From the royal courts of Louis XIV in France, to the beginnings of the Paris Opéra, to Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, George Balanchine and the New York City Ballet, to recent contemporary experiences of female ballet dancers, men have used their status of power to control the presentation, movement, and availability of the female body in ballet.

The Dance of Kings

While originating in Italy, ballet's roots took hold in France, where the *Académie de Poésie et de Musique*, modeled after the Florentine Platonic Academy of the Italian Renaissance, believed that "music and art could summon *men* to their highest capacities and goals" (Homans 2010, 5). They saw ballet as a "chance to take man's troublesome passions and physical desires and redirect them towards a transcendent love of God" (5). The educated class was fascinated by "the sense of beauty and the ideal human form," and this "beauty was sought after in ballet. The emphasis was on the body being portrayed in its most 'harmonious' and ideal form" (Adair 1992, 83-84). However, it was not until the reign of King Louis XIV in the mid-1600s "that the rules and conventions governing the art of classical ballet were born" (Homans 2010, 12), as he made ballet an integral part of court life, using it as an instrument to display royal opulence. Louis XIV's ballet became a form of etiquette, a requirement of aristocratic identity, and a way to maintain control over his courtiers. *La belle danse* was considered the most important noble dance; performed exclusively by men, it was "unequivocally masculine, regal and weighted with gravitas" and "It was also the blueprint for classical ballet" (20). During this time, women's dancing "was largely confined to social balls or the queen's ballets; in the king's ballets and

court spectacles...female roles were danced by men *en travesti*” (20). Further, the conventions of dress gave men a distinct advantage: women had to wear “heavy skirts that fell to the floor” and “stiff bodices and corsets conspired to constrain movement in the interests of upright posture and dignified carriage” (28). The female dancer was required to be “daintier and more refined than her male counterpart,” and this quality has persisted, helping to explain why “ballerinas in our own time are presented as paragons of purity and virtue” (Kelly 2012, 9).

In 1669, the Royal Academy of Music, later known as the Paris Opéra, was founded. The Opéra became a “court away from court, a privileged outpost for royal spectacles and ballets” (Homans 2010, 39), replacing aristocratic amateur dancers that had performed ballets at court with professional dancers. A more apparent divide between social and professional ballet dancing – the difference between the court and the stage – developed. In 1672, Jean Baptiste Lully, who had danced in Louis XIV’s ballets, became the director of the Paris Opéra. Significantly, Lully began to train women, for the first time, “for his own glorification” and “as a result of [his] frustration with the prevailing system...the first professional ballerinas began to be noticed” (Kelly 2012, 12). Ballet, an art form now so synonymous with femininity and the female dancing body, was in its beginnings, reserved only for men. When women were allowed to dance, they were limited to dancing less complicated steps, less important dances, and only at certain social events. Men have controlled ballet – and women’s place in it – since before it even inhabited the proscenium stage.

The Paris Opéra, The Marketplace, and Romanticism:

The rise of the professional dancer and the transition of ballet to the marketplace changed the landscape of ballet – and women’s role in it – forever. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the professional female dancer was considered a “mythical and symbolic figure in the eyes of the aristocratic and bourgeois audience, she maintained the secret of creating a kind of fairy-tale transcending reality” (Robin-Challan 1992, 17). However, beyond the walls of the Paris Opéra, the professional ballerina “was the subject of a certain contempt on the part of all her contemporaries who accused her of leading a dissolute life tainted with all kinds of base acts” (17). The professional ballerinas of this period often

came from poor families, viewing the opportunity to dance professionally as a way to “acquir[e] social prestige” and “vast stores of wealth” (Kelly 2012, 12). But, the social mobility that ballet provided for women came at a cost. With the advent of the proscenium stage and an increased focus on individual technique, the ballerina’s body was more on display than ever before. Professional ballerinas were sexualized, and “many came to lead double lives as courtesans. The ballerina-as-concubine was an open secret in French society” (14). In 1830, Louis Véron assumed directorship of the Paris Opéra, dedicating it to the “victorious bourgeoisie to whom it will be Versailles” (Robin-Challan 1992, 20). Véron opened the dancer’s foyer to balletomanes, wealthy men of the bourgeoisie, who would, upon the suggestion of the ballet master, pay for private lessons for the most gifted among the ballet students. These male “patrons” “paid for a dancer’s keep and expenses and often shrewdly represented her interests within the theater. In exchange, she became her protector’s mistress” (Kelly 2012, 14-15). The dancers rarely chose such relationships freely, as it was the “only avenue to a successful artistic career” (Robin-Challan 1992, 24). The world behind the curtain of the Paris Opéra essentially became a place of institutionalized prostitution. The men who held power used their status to control the female body by not only forcing sexual relationships upon the ballerinas but also by determining what dancers would have the opportunity to improve their bodies via continued or private ballet training. These women became the pawns of opulent members of the Jockey Club de Paris, who occupied boxes in the Paris Opéra theater, using them as “salons and places for sexual encounters,” as the members “traded dancers for sport, swapping them among each other as sexual partners” (Kelly 2012, 49). Further, students at the Paris Opéra ballet had their bodies manipulated and deformed by the ballet master to make them more “suitable for ballet.” Their feet and legs were encased in a grooved box to enforce the maintenance of a fourth position, and a long wooden plank was used to throw out the chest, changing the spine (Robin-Challan 1992). The advancements made in technique during this time significantly contributed to how the ballerina was displayed, the emphasis on turnout making the body more open for viewing from the stage, and the popularization of pointe work “extended the ballerina...and enhanced the ethereal-image of nineteenth-century choreography” (Adair 1992, 87).

Beyond the social conditions at the Opéra in the nineteenth century, Romanticism flourished in France at this time, inspiring story ballets – like *Giselle* and *La Sylphide* – in which the ballerina “was cast in the new role as the ideal woman,” deceitfully concealing the reality that offstage, these ballerinas “were poor, hungry, and desperate for social advancement” (Kelly 2012, 48). The Romantic Era ballets established the image of the ballerina as an ethereal and otherworldly creature that moved with a supernatural lightness and grace, embodied by Marie Taglioni in her role as the Sylph in *La Sylphide*. The sylph “offers the lure of the unknown, the erotically charged adventure. She represents the ‘ideal’ woman” (Adair 1992, 100). The female dancer rose to be the prominent feature of the Romantic ballets, but these ballets were created in a society in which women were oppressed. Male choreographers and the predominantly male audiences determined and defined these women’s roles as dancers.

The Romantic ballets were further influenced by the effects of tuberculosis (TB) as women of high status began to starve themselves and chemically whiten their skin, mimicking the frames and pale complexions of those dying from TB. Many artists believed the myth that TB drove artistic genius – the mixed state of elation and depression experienced during the disease could elevate the mind (Barrett 2017). Premature death, decline of health, and the ghostly physical appearance of TB patients were combined with stories of madness and insanity, love affairs ending in tragedy, death, and loss. Two main stereotypes of Romantic ballerinas emerged: “‘Christians’ who evoked romanticism’s spiritual yearnings and supernal kingdoms, and ‘pagans’ who impersonated its obsession with exotic, carnal, and material themes” (Garafola 1985, 37). These contrasting stereotypes came into existence to describe the opposing styles of Marie Taglioni and Fanny Elssler, but no matter how aptly the virgin/whore complex seems to fit the ideology of romanticism, “it ignores...the dancer’s totemic reality – her position within the social order of ballet” (37). The feminine mystique that came to represent the ballerina aligned “balletic image with a hierarchy of class and sexual practice” (37) and has haunted ballet from the 1800s to the present day.

Russian Classicism, Sergei Diaghilev, and The Ballets Russes:

In the 1800s, ballet in Western Europe entered a decline. Amid revolution and civil strife, ballet arrived in Russia and was welcomed with open arms. French dancers, ballet masters, and choreographers had been coming to Russia since the early eighteenth-century, and Russian rulers had invited ballet practitioners from Paris. Marius Petipa arrived in St. Petersburg in 1847, bringing his French ballet training with him, ushering in the new era of Russian Classicism. Petipa's work in Russia led to extraordinary developments in technique, and his grand-scale choreography mirrored the "classical tenets of dance as developed in the court of the French kings" (Kelly 2012, 118).

Technical advancements, escapist dreamworlds of ballets like *La Bayadère*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake*, reinvention of the corps de ballet as a visually captivating unit of unison, innovations in pointe work, and establishment of the pas de deux were notable markers of the Russian ballet renaissance. That being said, the ballets' stories from this period were riddled with many of the female stereotypes suited to the male gaze that infiltrated the French Romantic ballets. In *Swan Lake*, for example, Odette and Odile exemplify the virgin/whore complex, as Odette's "power is undermined as her movements emphasize her fragility rather than her strength" while Odile "provides the other extreme of male fantasy as a 'woman to be used'" (Adair 1992, 107). Both Odette and Odile's characters were conceived and controlled by men – with the intention of appeasing the male gaze.

Also rooted in control and a system of hierarchy, ballet in Russia was the "culture of the disenfranchised – people who had nothing to lose but much to gain by striving for excellence through dance," and early Russian ballet dancers were considered "private property or as wards of the state and could be arbitrarily imprisoned, abused, sexually exploited, and sold off" (Kelly 2012, 116–117). Further, the idea of the ballerina as "chaste" and obedient, devoting herself entirely to the art of dance, to the point of self-sacrifice was embodied by the star ballerina Anna Pavlova: literally dancing herself to death at the premature age of fifty, after contracting pneumonia and performing against doctor's instructions. (126, 128). But, perhaps the largest shift in the emerging Russian Classical world was that ballerinas lost any sort of control and autonomy over their careers as they submitted themselves to the new star of the twentieth century – the choreographer – who was typically male and demanded that "the ballerina become

his inferior, a docile handmaid serving his artistic needs more than her own” (129). At the same time, traditional gender roles and how they were displayed on the concert stage became more complex in the early 1900s in Sergei Diaghilev’s acclaimed Ballets Russes.

Diaghilev reversed the role of the ballerina as an ethereal object of desire and the male *danseur* as a background fixture. Placing the male dancer in the spotlight, Diaghilev presented the eroticism of his golden boys’ bodies. Ballet after ballet “celebrated [the male’s] physique, dramatized its athletic prowess, and paraded its sexual availability” (Garafola 1999, 246). The reign of the Ballets Russes sent the ballerina into eclipse, as an individual, a category, and an idea. In Diaghilev’s company, the female dancer’s repertory was limited. His subordination of the ballerina was reflected not only in the “diminished importance and overt misogyny of many female roles but also in the progressive devaluation of pointe work” (252). Vaslav Nijinsky, the first star dancer, and choreographer for the Ballets Russes, choreographed three works for Diaghilev – *L’Après-midi d’un Faune*, *Jeux*, and *Le Sacre du Printemps* – that virtually erased the female dancer. He abandoned the *pas de deux* and, with it, “the system of supports by which the danseur had traditionally presented his partner” (254) and hardened the contours of the “natural” female body. In Nijinsky’s ballets, the male body not only asserted its dominance on the stage but “haunted the female bodies that shared it” as his male heroes avoided physical contact with the ballerina, “as though the female body itself filled [them] with loathing” (255). Diaghilev controlled his ballerinas’ physical appearances, keeping their bodies hidden and covered, never to distract from the allure of the male hero. Regarding the ballerina Lydia Lopokova in 1924, Diaghilev remarked, ““She is too fat for us”” (266). The epitomized elite beauty ideal of the female body had developed a new masculine quality to it: “it demanded a body as hipless and flat-chested as a boy’s” (266). Diaghilev also exerted his power over the personal lives of his dancers, prompting ballerina Lydia Sokolova to have an abortion after discovering she had become pregnant (Adair 1992). It was no secret that women in the Ballets Russes counted for less than their male counterparts, and the fact that this inferiority occurred during a period when women were creating a dominant presence in other forms of dance (i.e., modern dance), emphasizes the “antifemale bias implicit in Diaghilev’s homosexual radicalism” (Garafola 1999,

267). In the grand scheme of things, Diaghilev's cult of "masculinity" offered no more than a "temporary antidote to the 'problem' of nineteenth-century ballet, which burdened women no less than men with the legacy of the feminine mystique and a system grounded in patriarchy" (268). Former female soloist of the Ballets Russes, Ninette de Valois, noted that:

It is essential that we realize that the real history of ballet – and by this I mean the creative work, its organization, its pedagogy – has been a history of great male choreographers, directors, and teachers. We want the public to realize that once again the development of ballet is rapidly passing into the care of the male element. (de Valois 1977, 188)

Time and time again, the male choreographer, artistic director, and ballet master have controlled how the ballerina moves, looks, and lives. This was undoubtedly true of Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, so it is no surprise that George Balanchine, the most extreme example of this assertion of power, was the company's last prominent choreographer. Almost all of Balanchine's ballets for the Ballets Russes, evident in works like *La Pastorale* (1926), *La Chatte* (1927), *Apollon Musagète* (1928), and *Prodigal Son* (1929), portrayed the female as a "foil to the male hero, presenting and complimenting him, and showing off his attributes" (Garafola 1999, 259). Balanchine grew up studying at the Imperial Ballet School, which had a direct influence on his choreographic style that involved "manipulating the [female] body to make it move faster, sharper, and higher, with more musical complexity and breadth" (Kelly 2012, 131). The Balanchine ballerina became an iconic representation of the female ballet dancer, and has had an irreversible lasting impact on the ballet world.

"Ballet is Woman" – The Hypocrisy and Damaging Legacy of George Balanchine

In ballet, however, woman is first. Everywhere else man is first. But in ballet, it's the woman. All my life I have dedicated my art to her.

– George Balanchine (Gruen 1976, 284)

George Balanchine has been consistently praised for glorifying the ballerina, re-elevating her status post-Diaghilev's revolution. In reality, Balanchine choreographed representations of women that conformed to his *male* idea of what a woman *should* be. Contrary to his "ballet is woman" rhetoric, "the representational form in which Balanchine worked is rooted in an ideology which denies women their own agency. No matter what the specific steps, no matter what the choreographic style, the interaction

structure, pointe work, and movement style of classical ballet portrays women as objects of male desire rather than agents of their own desire” (Daly 1987, 17). Balanchine outwardly expressed that his ballerinas served as his muses, but backstage, he “subtly and systematically degraded them, denying them sex (unless it was with him) and sustenance, both in the form of food and domestic fulfillment” (Kelly 2012, 130). The constructed image of the “Balanchine ballerina” disseminated far beyond the realm of New York City Ballet (NYCB) and has come to be the industry standard in every studio where ballet is practiced.

Balanchine came to America at the invitation of Lincoln Kirstein, who hoped to establish a school and an “American ballet” company. The School of American Ballet (SAB) opened in 1934 with Balanchine as chairman of the faculty. Ballet in America faced a new attitude of reception in the wake of World War II, and in 1948 Balanchine and Kirstein’s goal was realized as The New York City Ballet made its premiere. NYCB became Balanchine’s curated aesthetic vision, rooted in his firm belief that dance alone could “tell the tale,” placing all of the focus on the dancing body, as it was the “human body as inherently expressive...[that] gave [NYCB] its artistic profile” (Reynolds & McCormick 2003, 313).

Balanchine left his signature on ballet technique, too, forcing his dancers to lift their legs even higher, omitting multiple pirouettes and flashy lifts in favor of speed and agility of the lower body, and stressing extreme turnout of the legs. But, the largest influence of Balanchine’s reign was the new ideal bodily aesthetic that he coveted of his female dancers: long legs, narrow hips, long arms, a long neck, and a small head. His ideal proportions required an “almost skeletal frame, accentuating the collarbones and length of the neck” (Kirkland 1986, 57). Gelsey Kirkland, a former principal dancer for Balanchine at NYCB, recalls one of her classes with “Mr. B” at SAB:

He halted class and approached me for a kind of physical inspection. With his knuckles, he thumped on my sternum and down my rib cage, clucking his tongue and remarking, “Must see the bones.” I was less than a hundred pounds... He did not merely say, “Eat less.” He said repeatedly, “Eat nothing.” (Kirkland 1986, 57)

This ideal goal of thinness continues to be exceedingly harmful to the health of the ballerina, as malnutrition creates bones that are more brittle and prone to injury. More importantly, it defeminizes the

female dancer, “stunting their development as women and turning them into sexless waifs” (Kelly 2012, 139). The ballerina is held to embody this “ideal” of femininity, yet the very same bodily aesthetic required of her, introduced by Balanchine, reduces estrogen levels and prevents the development of the biological bodily attributes that make her body feminine in the first place. Ann Daly further argues that the Balanchine ballerina “is unattainable simply because she is woman, not because she’s a supernatural or enchanted being. She is specifically a white, heterosexual American woman: fast, precise, impassive” and “These qualities...seduce the male gaze, but...the threat – of her self-sufficient virtuosity is tamed by her submissive role within the interaction” (1987, 13).

Balanchine required of his ballerinas a self-sacrificial, all-consuming devotion that aimed to “control women, to make them look, move, feel, be as he wanted” (Kelly 2012, 132). Balanchine controlled the sexual, psychological, and professional aspects of his female dancers’ lives too. Suzanne Farrell, regarded as one of the greatest dancers of the twentieth century and heralded as one of Balanchine’s most famous muses, watched her impressive career with NYCB instantly destroyed. Farrell had chosen to marry a man that wasn’t Balanchine, and “Literally overnight she was banished from the company whose reputation she had helped bring to new heights” (Steichen 2018). While women may have been the prominent feature of a Balanchine ballet, it was “the men [that] pulled the strings behind the scenes: the choreographers were men and the dancers were women” (Williamson 2022). Balanchine was known to advance the careers of ballerinas with whom he shared sexual or intimate relationships. Many of his female dancers viewed this as the only way to ensure their success in the company. This parallels the ballerinas controlled by the wealthy male patrons of the Paris Opéra, except this time, the man in control was the choreographer, ballet master, *and* artistic director. In the 1960s and ‘70s, North America was rocked by the women’s liberation movement. Women everywhere were “burning their bras, but within the confines of Balanchine’s ballet company, they were being told to park their brains at the stage door and submit themselves to his rule” (Kelly 2012, 133). This illustrates the definitively contradictory nature of Balanchine’s practices and his words: he claimed to put women on a pedestal through his ballets, but the very act of him being choreographer meant he was in *total* and *complete*

control. After Balanchine, “the ballerina was no longer a real-time woman but a translucent cipher serving the vision of a hyper-possessive heterosexual male” (134).

Kirkland believes that Balanchine’s exploitation, manipulation, and authoritarian leadership fundamentally damaged his dancers to their core, herself included (Kirkland 1986). Kirkland suffered from anorexia for years – a result of the environment Balanchine had created at both NYCB and SAB – and underwent many years of therapy to help her cope with her years with Balanchine. Further, Kirkland became plagued by drug addiction, most likely due to Balanchine’s unethical practices. During a tour in the Soviet Union, Kirkland had become emaciated as a result of starving herself and being afflicted with an illness. After turning a sickly green and passing out from a fever, Balanchine insisted that it was absolutely necessary Kirkland perform that night, encouraging her to take a “vitamin” that he ensured would make her feel better. Kirkland did as she was told and miraculously got through the performance, but one of Balanchine’s assistants approached her afterward, warning her not to take more of the pills that Balanchine had given her. Kirkland became aware that the “vitamins” Balanchine forced her to take were undoubtedly amphetamines (1986). “Emaciation and enslavement to an ideal were the methods by which the ballerina would succeed under his watch” (Kelly 2012, 135), proving that Balanchine’s modern ballerina was no different from the “fragile heroine of *Giselle*” or the “fluttering Sylph in *La Sylphide*” (135).

Much of Balanchine’s choreography, widely regarded as artistic genius, highlighted the ballerina by having the male dancer manipulate and reconfigure her body in and out of impressive, acrobatic movements. In works like *The Four Temperaments* (1948) and *Agon* (1957), the female dancer is partnered by one, or sometimes more than one, man, who lifts her, turns her, moves her as if she were a puppet, and the male dancer her puppeteer, all the while emphasizing the capabilities of her body, as she is contorted and stretched into positions that perceive to be beyond the realm of human capacity. As Daly points out, “By arranging and rearranging the ballerina’s body, the man (first the choreographer, then the partner, and voyeuristically the male constructed spectator) creates the beauty he longs for” (1987, 14). The woman is simultaneously elevated to a position of otherworldly stature and diminished to the status

of a sexual object available for possession. Upon surface viewing, Balanchine's ballets appear female-centered, but in reality, they are responsible for "institutionalizing an image of the female dancer achievable only through the utmost deprivation, bordering on torture" (Kelly 2012, 137).

Balanchine's influence has changed the ballet world and the image of the ballerina irrevocably. The unrealistic, unfeminine bodily aesthetics he desired, the nature of male-female partnering in his choreography, how he controlled the lives of his female dancers through their appearance, careers, sexuality, relationships, and personal lives, and the sexual exploitation of his ballerinas as a means of advancing their careers, are directly antithetical to the the "Ballet is Woman" ideology that Balanchine is so often praised for.

Contemporary Issues in the Wake of Balanchine:

With an endemic of female dancers struggling with eating disorders and body dysmorphia, careers being threatened because of their bodies, the plethora of abuse – sexual, physical, and emotional – and the exploitation of women in the traditionally male-dominant hierarchy of the ballet company, ballet in today's society is still far from being a female-dominated art form. As long as classical ballet "prescribes Woman as a lightweight creature on pointe and men as her supporters/lifters, women will never represent themselves on the ballet stage" (Daly 1987, 17). Even though a woman inhabits her body, she does not possess it: "Within patriarchal relations man possesses it" (Adair 1992, 47). Balanchine's implemented aesthetics and practices have spread so vastly that generations of women who never danced for him or NYCB have suffered the consequences of the ideal body that has been forced upon them.

Heidi Guenther, a corps de ballet member of the Boston Ballet, struggled with anorexia due to the intense pressure placed on her body to conform to the Balanchine ideal. In 1997, Guenther went into cardiac arrest, believed to be caused by her eating disorder, ending her life at the staggeringly young age of twenty-two (Kelly 2012). In an article in which Wendy Oliver examines the career of Guenther, she notes that "Since the advent of George Balanchine's company...the American female ballet dancer has been slimmer than ever before" and that Balanchine's favored body has "since become the standard for ballerinas in most companies" (2005, 46–47).

Kathryn Morgan, a former soloist with NYCB and Miami City Ballet (MCB), posted a YouTube video entitled “Why I Left Miami City Ballet,” describing her experience with the company (2020). Morgan struggles with an autoimmune disease that caused her to leave NYCB early in her career. Eleven years later, when Morgan made her comeback, she was transparent with MCB about her illness, making it clear she would never be the smallest one on stage. But, once she arrived at MCB, her body was constantly scrutinized, and she was promised roles that were then taken away without explanation. Morgan was told by artistic staff that she was “not in shape” and that her body “wasn’t where it needed to be.” Falling back into old, unhealthy patterns while trying to get her weight down caused her health to regress dramatically. Morgan also recalls another dancer was told to take cocaine by artistic staff to help her lose weight. Morgan notes, “Yes, obviously you need to be fit and healthy to be a ballet dancer...But I think the problem is that the standard is this sinewy, almost prepubescent look. And for many of us, that is not doable” (McGuire 2020).

Similarly, Misty Copeland, a principal dancer for American Ballet Theatre (ABT), opened up about her struggles with her body, remembering artistic staff telling her: “Your body has changed. The lines you’re creating don’t look the way they used to. We’d like to see you lengthen” (Bried 2014) – a more “polite” way of telling her to lose weight. When Copeland started dancing with ABT at nineteen, she had never menstruated. But, after eight months with the company, Copeland fractured a vertebrae during a rehearsal and was put on the birth control pill to induce her menstrual cycle, as the increased hormones would help strengthen her bones. However, Copeland recalls: “Almost overnight, my body was transformed. In one month, I gained ten pounds...and my 30B breasts swelled to a double D” (2014). After the harmful comments from artistic staff, Copeland wore large t-shirts and shorts over her leotard and tights during classes and rehearsals. Ashamed of her body, Copeland fell into a cycle of over-exercising and other unhealthy behaviors to meet the artistic staff’s demands. In an interview, Copeland said, “I knew ABT saw my once ‘perfect’ body as a problem, so I resented them. And I hated myself for not being able to fix it” (2014).

Balanchine's leadership at NYCB "defined the company culture with ingenuity, ruthlessness, creativity, and cruelty" (Williamson 2022). In 1983, shortly before Balanchine's death, Jerome Robbins and Peter Martins became co-directors of NYCB until 1990, when Martins assumed sole leadership. Martins had been a principal dancer for Balanchine at NYCB. In 2017, NYCB and SAB announced that they had begun investigating Peter Martins' behavior after allegations of sexual harassment were made against him. Martins has a documented history of violence towards women: his wife Darci Kistler, another NYCB ballerina, reported that he had beaten her and thrown her into a wall, injuring her ankle; John Clifford, a NYCB principal dancer, reported seeing Martins slam his longtime girlfriend and fellow ballet dancer Heather Watts into a cement wall, and Kirkland witnessed Martins throw Watts down a flight of stairs. During the investigation, many other dancers came forward, shedding light on Martins' behavior in the ballet studio, including reports of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Dancers claimed that "Martins slept around among the female dancers, and that roles were often allotted accordingly," an all too familiar tale in ballet companies, and "Balanchine's career was marked, even shaped, by [his] serial infatuations" (Acocella 2019). Thus, it is not surprising that Peter Martins engaged in many of the same exploitative and abusive practices that his predecessor established as the company norm.

NYCB was an environment where tolerance of such behaviors has signaled to "male dancers 'that they could degrade, demean, mistreat and abuse, assault, and batter women without consequence'" (Acocella 2019). In 2019, NYCB ballerina Alexandra Waterbury spoke out against several male company members who had been "exchanging nude photos of her and other female dancers without consent [and] threatening sexual assault alongside the attached images" (Williamson 2022). Waterbury filed a lawsuit against NYCB, claiming they were well aware of misconduct within the company. There has been a longstanding history of sexual harassment and manipulation of NYCB's ballerinas by the men involved in the company, all of which began with NYCB's God – Balanchine. The ballet world, for years, has failed to "articulate the difference between appreciation of art and fetishization of a human being" (Yoak 2022). Inside the studio, this line has always been blurry.

Conclusion

Throughout ballet's history, the ballerina – and her body – has been controlled, restrained, and manipulated by the male gaze, whether that be choreographer, artistic director, ballet master, *danseur*, or patron. In an art form that is seemingly female-centric, “ballerinas have perhaps even *less* agency and autonomy than women in other industries,” as they are “coached in the art of silence and fear of authority” (Yoak 2022). The ballerina's *body* is her instrument; her voice is unvalued and unwelcome. Stories about exerting control over the female body make up the very core of ballet; with ballets like *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Coppelia*, ballerinas have always struggled to claim autonomy over their bodies. Ballet is a cultural form of dance; therefore, “The power relations of the society within which dance is produced affect the work” and “affect women adversely because the social construction of gender places women in a less powerful position than men” (Adair 1992, 23). The appearance of women's bodies has been so supervised by men in power that elements of the natural experience of feminine sexuality – like menstruation and childbirth – have been strongly discouraged within the professional ballet world. In other aspects of culture – paintings, films, beauty pageants, advertisements – women are “constructed as to-be-looked at; the men are the lookers, the voyeurs...the possessors” (Daly 1987, 10). Ballet is no different.

Daly suggests that the solution to this pervasive problem is not to abolish classical ballet, but rather, there must be a “concomitant change in the audience...[to look] past the chivalric rhetoric to the underlying ideology” (1987, 19). The oppressive gender hierarchies in ballet must become a more prevalent topic of discussion moving forward. Focusing on dancers' health, strength, and ability instead of promoting an unattainable, skeletal ideal that subjects women to injury and illness, and represses their natural femininity, needs to become the new normal. The intense pressures placed on the body's appearance have been passed down from generation to generation of ballerinas, becoming so deeply ingrained in the fabric of the art form that how the female body presents itself has become more important than the feats it is able to achieve while dancing.

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